

*Gillian Foster*

GOOD LOOKIN' GAL

Marlene Givans looked at herself in the mirror of her grandmother's three room house, and smiled. Yeah man, she was ready to shine at the Ecstasy Dance tonight! She'd just had her bob dyed jet black, with the bleached ends frosted a little more, so her hair looked like a black mushroom edged with gold. She knew some girls who had to put hair weaves in to achieve that look, and Marlene thought about Winsome. Winsome, tall, big an' fat, Winsome, who always gwaan like she nice . . . but Marlene didn't want to think about Winsome now—it was like the DeeJays said—is you own fault if you mek a woman tek 'wey you man. She smirked as she eyed herself—she never had to work to keep men. Her hair was naturally thick and straight, thanks to her mother's coolie Indian heritage. Her skin was naturally brown and smooth—even when she didn't go into the sun. In fact, everything about her was natural—she didn't even have false nails or contacts. At nineteen, her face, and her body—her thin lithe body—was enough to cause men to say “psst!” and call out “Hi sweetness” to her whenever she walked by.

Marlene adjusted her white bustier to show even more of her breasts and put her hands on her hips to adjust the white meshed pants that clearly showed her underwear underneath. She imagined the looks on mens' faces when she arrived in this. Men were ready to offer her money, places to live, their life's savings when they saw her in outfits like these. But she had learnt to be choosy—the man who approached her had to have the “right” look—no picky-picky head men, coming barefoot with no shirt. No scruffy ragamuffins. And no married businessmen either. She'd heard about Ann Marie's Mr. Gaines. Them men were a waste of time, Marlene thought. Them will gwaan like them big and bad, but them really don't know how fe handle the ghetto. What she liked—Marlene thought, were Don Men.

She liked men who had silk suits for every day of the week, with shoes to match. She liked men who had jewelry—rings on each finger and thick gold chains. She liked that they could come down to Jamaica, rent cars, and think nothing of the cost, who could pay CASH

at Max Brown's—that rass expensive store in New Kingston Mall, where even the uptown people balked at the idea of paying over two thousand Jamaican dollars for a linen suit. Men like that were what she wanted. And it seemed as if all she had to do was look good, because men like that had no use for dibbie-dibbie girls. Them man want them women looking good, rasta, Marlene thought. Good enough so deejay will sing song 'bout them.

Dressed now, Marlene applied the last of her make-up. This Escasty bash was to be an important one tonight. Several top deejays would be there for the deejay face-off. That meant nuff man. And maybe if she was lucky, she could catch the eye of some singer. She turned at the sound of her eighteen-month-old baby hiccuping.

“What happen, Mummy wake you up?” she crooned, gathering the small bundle from where it lay in the crib beside her bed. “Hush ya, darling,” she said, holding it to her chest and patting its back. The baby stopped, and she held it away from her, jiggling it from side to side. “Hmm, what's that? I smell something, hmm?” She sniffed at her baby boy's crotch of his Batman pyjamas. “Hnh. Stinky poo. Hnh.” She gently laid the baby onto her bed, and undid its diaper. She wiped him, put some baby powder on him, and reached for the bag of Pampers. Hmm, she thought as she pulled it up much higher than she'd expected to. The bag felt light. She was running out of Pampers. She would have to do something about that. This meant it was time to make a call.

She finished cleaning her child, and gathered him to her, covering his face with kisses. When she'd discovered she was pregnant, she'd prayed and prayed for a boy child and for once God had listened. It wasn't just for selfish reasons, she'd kept telling herself. Little boys were worth a lot more to their fathers. Every man wanted a “likkle yout” to dress up and carry out and pose off with. Nobody wanted them to pose in rags, not at this early stage anyway. Marlene didn't like to think what would happen to the boy once he reached six and stopped being a novelty to any of his fathers.

“Mi get money fe put yu in nice clothes, eeh, boobie?” Marlene said, shaking the baby's head as she wiped his nose a little harder than she intended to. “Dem sending money fi you nice clothes, and de Reebok bootie dem. Dem sending money fe de clothes, but me nuh see no money for food.” Sometimes she wondered how she managed, how

anybody managed. If it wasn't for Grannie Elsie . . . Her grandmother worked hard as a helper, usually coming home late, with only enough energy to give Marlene leftover food she'd brought with her from the Carpenters before falling fast asleep in her bedroom. Even now Marlene could hear the deep breaths Elsie took, the sound coming through the walls, rising and falling, a signal that it was safe to leave her son at home. Still, the likkle bit of money Granny work was only barely getting them by. One day money here, and the next thing, prrps, it gone, Marlene thought. You never know where you were from one day to the next. Like the men, dem, just as unpredictable. One day a man will look on you like you is the next best thing to gold, and the next day him looking on you like him doan' know you. Not that she had ever had that problem, Marlene thought. And yet, there was that feeling that she had not yet found the perfect man. She felt she was looking, always looking. And she was tired of the looking.

Marlene bundled her son to her. Held him and looked into his eyes. There was something about him that she liked, that she felt beyond the normal maternal attachment. Probably the fact that he didn't speak. No one had ever heard him utter a word. She knew he was happy when she saw a smile slowly creep across his face, starting first at the lips then pulling his face upward in a ripple effect. When he was upset, the opposite happened, slowly transforming his face into a frown. Plus, he wasn't a crying-crying baby, and Marlene liked that. What she liked especially was the way he would lie still in his bed, waiting for her. Usually, no matter what time she got in, she found him lying on his back, eyes open, as if he'd been simply waiting for her to return. He never laughed, or cooed, or did anything when she appeared, just stared at her in silence, as if to let her know he'd been waiting. While she looked, he waited. She felt as if they worked as a team.

"Dem just sending money fi clothes, how dem expect we fi live?" she said, straightening Junior's little pyjamas and suddenly aware that her thoughts had escalated into mumbles and now words, and that she was talking to her son who looked back at her with solemn eyes, as if he were listening. She looked at him and sighed. She'd named him Junior because she wasn't sure who the father was. It was one of three men. She'd told each man he was the father and saw to it that they gave her money for his upkeep. The men—none of whom lived on the

island—were only too ready to send down Pampers, clothes, feeding and money. The clothes and Pampers she used for Junior, but Marlene kept the money for outfits and to do her hair. She felt it was owed to her. She had borne the child and cared for it, with some help from her grandmother but mostly on her own. She gave it everything it needed: food, clothes, loving. She looked at the bottle. The baby feeding was almost finished. She'd make it stretch by adding water, until she got money for more food.

She picked up her son, hugged him, gave him a quick burp, and laid him in his crib once more. He'll need a bed soon, she thought, wonder who ah should ask for dat? Tony? Him in New York, and last ting she hear, him was laying low for awhile. How about Neil in Atlanta? No, Marlene thought. Alton in Miami was her best bet. He was the one who sent the most money, and out of the three was the one Marlene really liked. She would give him a call tomorrow. He wasn't as hardcore as the others—he juggled on a small scale, but he was the most reliable and always remembered to send a little something for her as well. The other men just sent things for the baby as if she didn't exist, and Marlene she wasn't the only one who watered down the baby feeding to make it stretch. The money just wasn't enough for she and the baby, and wasn't every weekend a dance fe trash out at, a stage show fe lick? Outside, the horn blew, and immediately, Marlene kissed Junior and put him back in the crib. She turned towards the mirror and checked herself out once more.

“Soon come, you hear, boobie,” she said, gently closing the door of her room and glanced briefly at the door of her grandmother's bedroom. She listened for the familiar snore then hurried outside where three men sat on Ninja bikes, two with women behind them. These were people that Marlene knew from the lane. Troy, the biker who sat alone, had offered to take her on the back of the bike. Marlene knew he liked her, but she couldn't afford to waste her time with him. She looked at the way he sat hunched over the handle bars of the bike in typical bad-man fashion. Just a “friars,” she thought, giving him the word for “small fry.” She knew he couldn't handle the big guys, they'd pump him full of holes in a second, but he was nice, and he really liked her, and she wasn't above letting him do little things for her, like carry her around, and slip her the occasional money. She just didn't want it

to seem they had more than they did, since it might ruin her chances of getting to know somebody really important. But, he filled a void, and Marlene had decided that in the meantime, he would do.

“Wha’ppen, Troy?” Marlene asked, smiling at him as she flicked her hair. She knew he liked that, and his face responded with an appreciative smile.

“You looking good, gal,” he said, letting his eyes roam freely over her. His friends on their bikes stared at her as she climbed onto Troy’s bike. Marlene saw this and smiled. She felt their admiration, and it warmed her as if she had been in the noon day sun. She felt her skin glow. They would have done anything to get her. She slipped her arms around Troy’s body.

“Chu, Marlene man,” he said. “How you gwaan so? Why you don’t let me tek care a you an’ ting? Me woulda treat you good, you nuh girl. Anyting me have—ah woulda gi’ you.”

Marlene smiled. He said the same thing everytime he saw her.

“Chu, Troy,” she said. “You come back wid that same tired argument?” Troy kissed his teeth.

“Is because mi nuh have nuh car,” he said. “A dat woman want, now nuh? A dat de deejay say de woman want.”

“You stay there listen to deejay,” Marlene replied. “Deejay nyam you suppa?” She readjusted herself on the seat, and the group rode off to Ecstasy. On the way they stopped at a red stoplight near two women pacing up and down the sidewalk. The men called out to them.

“Wha’ppen my girl?” Troy said. “What you charging tonight?” The woman kissed her teeth at him and kept pacing.

“Gwey! Yu ol’ AIDS-bait,” another man shouted, flicking his wrist at her, and amidst laughter, the men revved up their engines at the green light and rode off. Marlene tapped Troy on his shoulder.

“Troy, you woulda ever deal wid she?” she asked. Troy kissed his teeth.

“You mad? What me woulda do wid a dat ol’ whore? All she come in like a mosquito, jus’ a juk-juk man up wid AIDS. Me nuh know who she sleep with. Naw suh—Me? Me not going near none of dem prostitutes, yah.”

Marlene took a backward glance at the women, and briefly the thought entered her mind about what it would be like to be a prostitute. Imag-

ine sleeping with different men just for money. She could never do that. Sure, men gave her money, but not to sleep with her. They gave her money for her to be with them, and there was a difference, though in her thoughts Marlene couldn't spell out what that difference was. But she knew that she wanted more than money from her men. What she wanted was security—to be somebody's number one. It didn't matter how many numbers he had, as long as she was number one. And who better to provide security than a man that had nuff weapon, nuff money, nuff tings going on. Wid a man like that, who could trouble her? Even police 'fraid of people like that. Politicians give them money to keep on them good side. Businessmen hire them to carry out them dealings. Men like Troy, and even Alton, were in a different league, both nice men she was sure would treat her good. Even these other bike men, Marlene thought—they too were capable of treating her nice. But what she wanted, Marlene thought, was an Original Gangster. And men who were the Real Thing never looked at prostitutes. Marlene looked up and saw a billboard with a huge Coca-Cola bottle, with the caption "the Real Thing" underneath. She laughed. That's what I am, she thought, and that's what I want.

The group arrived at Ecstasy, where the thick crowd slowed the bikes to a crawl. Marlene tossed her hair and arched her back. She put her hand on each knee. Her body instinctively felt the motions of the bike and knew what direction to lean so as to balance herself against the bike's sway. That way she didn't have to hold onto Troy.

"Bwoy, look 'pon dat girl dey," she heard from a group of men that the bikes had just passed as they twisted and turned their way through the crowd.

"Hey sweetness, you nuh want come 'pon my bike? Mi will gi' you a good ride, you nuh." Marlene kissed her teeth, but smiled over at the men as one puckered his lips at her. She felt her adrenalin rise. Marlene felt like a Don herself.

Troy and his friends stopped in a little clearing where other bikes were parked, not right under a street light, but close enough that they and their bikes could be seen. They got off and stood leaning against their bikes. Troy went to buy the first case of Heineken. Marlene and the two other girls walked together towards the entrance to the arena. On the way they saw Winsome across the street. Marlene scowled—she

and Winsome had had confrontations before. Marlene thought Winsome was always watching her and talking behind her back. She chat 'bout how me come in like mattress, but she woulda love fe have man run her down too, Marlene thought. She woulda do anyting fe get de money whey dem gi' me. Marlene knew Winsome was just jealous, of her hair, of her clothes, and of her men.

"She just a watch-watch me, and den wan' go on like she betta than everybaddy else," Marlene said to the two girls beside her. She had seen Winsome cut her eye at her and had made up her mind to ignore the insult. She felt better than ever. Winsome had a reputation for beating down girls, but she could'n touch her. Nobody could'n touch her. All me would have to do is bawl out fe Troy or one of the other man dem, Marlene thought. And even if Winsome managed to beat me down one day, ah would mek sure dem man find her.

"I would mek dem beat her down so hard, only shovel woulda pick her up from de road," Marlene said, speaking her thoughts aloud. The deejay's voice came clear over the loudspeaker.

"Gal hol' onto you man, nuh mek you matey tek him 'wey," the deejay said. The girls burst into laughter. "That's what Winsome is," Marlene said. "A damn matey. See—the Deejay know how things go."

"Psst! Hey, good looking," a voice said. All three stopped. Marlene looked round and saw a figure leaning against the wall.

"Good-looking, you looking somebaddy?" the man asked.

"Me look like me looking somebaddy to you?" Marlene replied. She flicked her head and smiled.

"Nah," the man said. "A good looking gal like you. 'Numba one 'pon de look-good chart', like the Deejay dem sey."

"Eeh-eh?" Marlene replied. By this time her companions had walked on and now stopped a little away from her.

"Gwaan," she said, flicking the air with her wrist. "I will catch up wid you." They walked off without hesitation—they knew the situation—every woman for herself. Marlene stood still looking at the man. She took in everything—the gold watch, the gold nugget rings, the name bracelet. His complexion was dark and smooth, contrasting with the red linen suit which buttoned up to the neck. The thick gold chain fell flat across the second button of his shirt. The hair was cut low, and when he turned his head to the side, she saw that the symbol for Nike

had been shaved into his hair. She looked down at his shoes and nodded in satisfaction when she saw them. Shoes were always a good indication and she liked his, the strappy-strappy type that looked like leather, not plastic. She felt him looking at her and looked off in another direction, flashing her hair as she did so.

“So wha’ppen,” the man said. “A nice girl like you, you mus’ have a man tekking care a yu.” Marlene kissed her teeth.

“Mi nuh have nubaddy fi tek care a me,” she said. “Mi wuk fi me own singtings.”

“Enh, enh?” he came up behind her, and she smelled the aroma of his cologne. It smelled good and strong. “So what you need?” he asked, “good loving?” Marlene looked at him and kissed her teeth again.

“I don’t need dat,” she said. “I can get loving all the time. I have a son.” The man looked at her.

“How much pickney?”

“Just one,” Marlene said proudly. She could tell that that was in her favor, it proved she was capable of having boy children. She saw him smile.

“Eenh? Well, you have a number?” he asked. She shook her head.

“If you come de next dance show, me will see yu again,” she said. “Jus’ look for me.” She took several steps away from the man who moved as if to follow her until his friend came up behind him and whispered something in his ear. Then he turned to her and called out “Mi will see you again, y’hear?” before jumping into a heavily tinted Pathfinder that sped off. Marlene watched the vehicle disappear down the road. She nodded to herself. He seemed like someone she could get to know. Maybe he would be the one. She caught up with her friends and they went in together.

The Ecstasy Dance turned out to be good. Marlene and her companions found a clearing close to a speaker where they stood and moved to the beat the whole night. A few men she knew came up to say hi, some men she didn’t know, tried, and were ignored. She thought about the man she had met earlier tonight. Maybe she should have given him her address. But still, she thought, he looked like a dance-hall regular. She was sure she’d see him again. It was about seven o’clock in the morning when the music began to wind down. A mass exodus of people began moving towards the parking lot outside of the arena. By

this time the sun had come up, and the hills and trees that had been covered by the darkness were now visible, as the daylight rose upward like a curtain, revealing what had always been there.

As the women neared the place where Troy's bikes were, Marlene saw two familiar figures standing together, not too far from the place where the bikes were parked. She couldn't believe it. Alton in big-big discussion with Winsome. They were still a distance from the two, but she could hear the "heh heh heh" of Winsome's deep laughter. And Alton, who never even leave message with the McKenzie's next door 'bout coming to Jamaica like he usually did . . . She walked straight across the strip of driveway for the cars and barely missed being hit by a man backing out of his space onto the strip.

"Wha'ppen, true you look good, you tink you can beat out and duco over?" the man shouted. Marlene barely glanced his way, just kept walking, the anger rising in her, making her warm despite the cool morning breeze.

"Alton!" She shouted, coming upon the two. She walked up and pushed herself between them, facing Alton and digging a finger into his chest. "You mean you come yard, and could'n even bodder fi call mi?" The man's face registered surprise then pleasure when he recognized her. He put out his hands to hug her, but she batted them away.

"Chu, baby," he said. "Mi just come a yard, still. Mi did go by you place and bang 'pon de gate, an' you granny sey you gone a dance."

"Oi," Winsome said. "A who she fe come bus into big people conversation?" Her voice boomed out, and she shifted her weight onto one leg and stretched out the other, her hands on her hips and her eyeballs rolled up and down at Marlene. Marlene rolled her own eyes at her and turned back round to Alton.

"Oh. A dis ya ol' cow you come dance fi come chat to," Marlene said. "Gwaan chat to her, nuh. Tink sey mi business? Mi nuh business, yu nuh." She stepped from between them and walked towards Troy and his friends.

"Chu, baby, how you a gwaan so?" Alton asked, stepping after her. "Is jus' chat me a chat to Winsome. Look how long mi know her. Come nuh, mi will give yu a ride home." Marlene stopped and smiled. A ride was good. The bike had been fun in the darkness of night, but now it was daylight, she didn't feel like having everybody looking at

her in the outfit. Besides, Alton had a criss rental, and she liked being driven in the front seat of a car.

“Alright, me soon come, hear.” Marlene went over to Troy. She knew there was no need for too much explanantion. Like everyone else Troy would see how things go.

“Troy—mi a go wid Alton, hear?” she said. “See you later. T’anks.”

Troy scowled. “True sey you man come from foreign, you gwaan like you doan know me.” Marlene smiled.

“Chu, you know how it go,” she said. “Chu, boobie, I will talk to you later.” She returned to Alton who was still standing beside Winsome. The car was parked beside them, and Marlene got in, without so much as batting an eye after Winsome, who she had to step close to to enter the car. It was only when she was inside and the car door was properly closed that Marlene felt better, for despite her attitude, she was a little afraid of Winsome. She was lucky Winsome hadn’t thrown acid on her.

But as she sat in the seat, with Alton beside her, Marlene realized that the fear she’d felt wasn’t from Winsome, but from seeing Alton chatting up another woman. Marlene’s real fear was that her hold on Alton had begun to loosen. The thought of losing the affection, and all that came with it, of even one man, cut deeper than anything else she knew. That Winsome had been the one only made the feeling worse. She crossed her arms in front of her, squeezing herself tightly.

“So, de dance did nice?” Alton asked.

“It was alright, still,” she said with a shrug. “Nutten big. So, how come you come down?” she asked.

“Likkle business and ting,” he replied. Marlene nodded. She knew enough not to ask what type of business. The less she knew the better.

“Fi how long?” she asked.

“Bout two weeks,” he said. He looked over at her and smiled. “But you keeping alright,” he said. “Phat and healthy as usual. You get the money me send?” Marlene smiled back at him.

“Yeah man,” she said. “Thanks, hear? It really help me fe buy some baby clothes fi Junior. You know what ah need now?” she asked. He shrugged.

“Pampers and some money for baby feeding.” He nodded. “No problem,” he said. “How de baby?”

“Fine, you nuh,” Marlene replied. “Him small still, but I feel sey him will soon grow. Granny sey ah mus’ tek him go a clinic, but ah cyan mek it a mawning time. But tek us later, nuh. Come in an look ’pon him.”

Alton did. They found Junior in his great-grandmother’s bedroom, on her lap as she sat up in bed and held him to her. He was awake when they came in, his eyes like the day, fully open, the deep brown pupils taking in everything there was to see.

“I stopped in to look ’pon him and him just lying down looking back at me,” her grandmother said. Marlene stepped over to her and took him from her, snuggling him to her breast. Her grandmother cut her eye at her.

“A dem time a mawning you coming home?” she asked. “You have baby now, you nuh, you tink pickney can dash wey just so? You mussi tink sey a one of you man dem.”

“Chu Granny, man,” Marlene said, picking her son up from her grandmother’s arms. “Junior betta dan man. You doan see how him is always here for me, eeeh? Him know I always coming back for him.”

“You gwine tek him go a clinic today?” her grandmother asked.

“Yes Granny,” Marlene replied. “As soon as I get up, I gwine tek him.”

“Hnh,” her grandmother said. Marlene walked the baby around.

“Wha’ppen boobie—you neva tink mummy would come back?” she said. “Is you me a go always come back to, you nuh.” The baby looked back at her with unblinking eyes. And Marlene brought her face close to his own. She knew he understood her. He always understood. With Alton following, she carried him back into her room. She handed him to Alton who lifted him up.

“Wha’ppen ragamuffin?” he asked. A small smile started on Junior’s face, but then he started to frown, and his face made as if to cry, but no sound came.

“A mus’ hungry him hungry,” Marlene said, taking him from Alton. She was down to her last bottle of Gerber. No need to stretch them, since Alton was here. She held Junior on her knee and gently fed him small spoonfuls which he licked and sucked on, but after a few mouthfuls he refused to eat anymore.

“Look like him wan’ go clinic, yes,” Alton said. “Him get him shots yet?”

“I know him get one fi polio, and one fi diptheria, an’ a tink him get de smallpox vaccination,” Marlene said. “Granny say him not eating properly. I will try tek him to doctor today.” She held Junior up in front of Alton, letting his legs dangle in the air.

“You see him getting a little bigger,” she said. “Him soon need a bed.”

“Chu, dat can wait, man,” Alton said, as he plopped himself down on her bed. “Look how him legs bow like. Him gwine be a baller.” Alton yawned, lay back and held out his hand to her. Marlene smiled, gave Junior a quick kiss, and laid him on his back in the crib. She noticed how indeed his curved legs did not quite reach the board. Then she reached for Alton’s hand and let him pull her down on the bed along side him.

By the time Marlene woke up, it was too late to take Junior to the clinic. She hadn’t even noticed when her grandmother left. She decided she would take Junior to the clinic first thing Monday. She shook Alton, who immediately jumped up, saying he had business to take care of. She didn’t mind. He’d left some money, and she could go and get Junior’s feeding. First though, she had to stop at the tailor down the road who was making a sequined dress for her. She’d promised him the second half of the money. She bathed Junior and took him next door to Ms. McKenzie. She kissed Junior and told him she’d soon be back and he was to be good and wait. Usually Ms. McKenzie charged people, but Junior was so quiet, she looked after him for free, which only deepened Marlene’s sense that they worked as a team. She hurried back over to her house and got dressed, this time more conservatively in black leggings and a black midriff top. She hastily checked herself in the mirror before she left. It was three o’clock. She almost ran into her grandmother who was coming back from her work early because her employers had left for the North Coast for the long weekend. The old lady tottered a little at the force that went by.

“Granny!” Marlene said amidst heavy breaths. “Mi cyan stop now—mi haffi go pick up mi dress from tailor and go get some feeding fi Junior. Him over Ms. McKenzie.”

“You tek im go a doctor yet?” she asked.

“No, granny!” Marlene was screaming now. “Mi will tek him Monday.”

“Lawd Gad, chile!” her grandmother shouted, for that time Marlene was too far away to hear her voice. Her grandmother looked over in the direction of the house where Junior was. Her bones ached, but she willed herself to walk next door to get her great-grandson.

Before she got to the tailor, Marlene had stopped at Lurline’s Beautiful You Shoppe to chat to the hairdresser who was busy with a client. The three discussed last night’s dance. Marlene asked if anyone had seen a dark-skinned man in a linen suit, with a Nike symbol etched into his hair.

“An im drive a tinted Pathfinda?” Lurline asked as she swabbed creme onto her client’s roots.

“Yes, im same one. Mi meet im at the dance last night. Him did full a lyrics.”

“Yeah man, dem call him ‘Top Cat’,” Lurline said. “Ah hear im in nuff dealings. A him de police go when dem want get rid a smaddy. I hear him doan joke.” Marlene leaned forward at this information.

“Eeh, ehh?” she said. Well, maybe I will buck im up tonight still. Im look nice.”

“Bwoy, you just have man all ’bout, eeh?” Lurline said, smiling.

Marlene smiled back. “You know how it go. A just looking mi looking for Mr. Right, still.”

“True yah, nuh badder waste yu time wid no likkle likkle fool-fool boy,” the hairdresser replied. “A real man, dat’s what. A real man.”

“Ai, Lurline,” the client called out. “The creme a bun mi!” Lurline combed through her hair a few more times. “Chu man, mek it straighten it out a likkle more.”

“So wait, what happen wid you and Alton?” the client said with a sly smile.

“Nuttin,” Marlene said.

“Oh, just because I see him and Winsome tight-tight last night,” the customer replied.

“Winsome!” Marlene almost spat. “Her kaya head and knock knees—she so black and ugly. Whey im woulda want wid she?”

“Hnh,” the client said. “All I know is dem was tight.” She settled her head back into the basin for a rinse. Marlene wanted to slit her neck.

She decided not to stay, but before she left she bought a shampoo and conditioner from Lurline. She hadn't realized it would cost so much. Her dress was ready and she paid the tailor the rest of what she owed which left her with practically nothing. She walked back, realizing her son was waiting, and she had to hurry back to him. She stopped to ask a passerby for the time. Lawd God, she thought, she had to hurry to feed Junior and take a nap. She saw someone running towards her, as if she was escaping something and moved to give her pass, until the woman came closer and she saw that it was Winsome, and her body stiffened. She thought Winsome would run her over, but the girl stopped right in front of her, and Marlene saw tears streaming down her face.

"Alton!" Winsome screamed. "Dem shoot Alton. Lawd God, dem kill im!" She stepped towards Marlene as if to take her in an embrace, then fell to her knees moaning with her head in her hands. Marlene could only stand and look at her. Her first thought was the money, she hadn't yet gotten all the money from him, and Junior's going hungry, but it began to dawn on her that Alton was dead. She looked down at this girl crouching before her. And then felt a coldness come over her.

"But is what you an Alton had so?" she asked.

Winsome looked up, the tears streaming down her face.

"He was my baby's father," she said. Marlene wanted to strike out at her, but she found she had no reason to—there was nothing smug in the way Winsome had said that, and deep within her Marlene knew she was telling the truth. She badly wanted to say that he was her baby's father too, but she couldn't. She was confused—she'd thought she had so much, that Junior had so much, but all of a sudden, it seemed as if they both had nothing. She'd thought she'd given her child everything—but, Marlene thought, with a sadness that ripped her stomach in two, she hadn't even given him a name.

She thought Winsome would question her, probe into the relationship, but instead the girl got up, brushed herself off, as if she suddenly remembered something. "Colin," she said. "My baby. Mi haffi go get him. Mi haffi go get him." She ran off. Marlene watched her get farther down the street and then remembered Junior. She hadn't fed him yet, at least she could give him food. She suddenly realized how hungry he must be, how his little insides must be tearing him apart, and thinking that, she felt a pang so deep inside her own stomach that she had to

bend over. Her little boy, alone with his grandmother, needing her right now. She had to go home right now, to hug him, to feed him. They were a team. She felt a fear, far deeper than what she'd felt at the dance, that something was wrong with her baby, and set off in the opposite direction from Winsome, her mind a blur, her heart thumping.

A familiar vehicle stopped beside her, and the tinted windows rolled down to reveal the man from last night's dance leaning across the seat to the passenger window to look at her.

"Hey good-looking, you need a ride?" he asked. She felt the hard beats of her heart. She knew that accepting his offer meant she could get home faster, and she needed that, and yet something felt wrong with accepting his offer. No, she wanted to say—Ah can walk. She felt a small voice in her head telling her of the danger of getting into this man's car, suppose he didn't want to carry her where she wanted to go? But she needed to go home to her son, and if he carried her there, she would get home faster. She looked at the man and noticed the gold tooth, and vaguely wondered how come she missed seeing it last night. No! she wanted to shout. Ah can walk! Ah can get there! But inside she knew she had waited too long and she needed the ride.

She had lost Alton, totally lost him, but she thought, at least she had her baby. Her baby boy, her little man, the important part of the team, her number one. Alton might not have been the father, but he was the most responsible one of the three, and now he was gone. For the first time, Marlene thought, it was really just the two of them in this world, and suddenly the world felt really big. She had to get home to her baby. Marlene climbed inside the vehicle, high with tinted windows, the kind of car she'd always dreamed about being driven in.

"Hurry up, please, I need to get home to my son," she said to the man beside her who smiled and said, "no problem," and promptly put his foot on the gas. She pointed the way, and then looked up and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the sun visor, and instinctively turned her head this way and that, checking herself out in the mirror.