

# THE LEGACY

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A NEW WORLD LEGAL THRILLER

MARJORIE FLORESTAL

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**DON'T**

**April 1, 1985**

**T**he smell of urine pressed in her nose. It was a human thing, angry, acidic, and biting. It stung her nostrils as she moved to push him away.

“Don’t.” The word came from deep in her throat, guttural and broken.

He trailed a finger down her cheek. “Why are you crying?”

She shifted away from him, wincing as a spring poked through the mattress to dig into her flesh. “How could you do this to me?”

“Why are you crying?” he repeated, the confusion in his eyes giving way to horror. He reached for her.

Something inside her split apart, unleashing a rage so white-hot it threatened her sanity. Hands balled into fists, she punched and kicked every inch of his vulnerable flesh. She wanted him to suffer even a fraction of her own pain.

It was impossible.

She stopped, stomach heaving, eyes searching frantically for escape.

MARJORIE FLORESTAL

“What have I done?” he choked out.  
She scrambled off the bed and fled the room.  
“Oh god, what have I done?”

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**NOTICE**

**December 14, 1995**

“**N**o.” The word echoed in Renee François’ mind as she struggled to find her way.  
“No.” Darkness overwhelmed her. She was drowning in a sea of shadows.

“Stop!” The piercing wail penetrated her sleep.

*This was no dream.*

She leaped out of bed and raced from the room. In the narrow, darkened hallway, her bare feet hit the cold tile in an urgent rhythm. Her breath hitched as she ran to the end of the hall and flung a door open.

A night-light illuminated a small figure writhing on the bed. Renee charged into the room. “Wake up,” she said, fighting to keep the panic out of her voice. “Marie-Therese, wake up.”

“No! No! Stop!”

Renee perched on the edge of the bed and gently smoothed the little girl’s brow. “It’s all right, *choupite*. Wake up.”

Two soft brown eyes opened to stare up at her. “Mommy? What are you doing in my room?”

“You were having a bad dream.” With a sigh of relief, she gathered her daughter in her arms. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Marie-Thérèse burrowed against her neck. “No,” she said.

Her answer wasn’t a surprise. Nightmares had chased the little girl every night for the last two weeks, but she refused to talk about them.

“Are you sure? It might help if you did.” Renee stroked her daughter’s hair. The small beads hanging on the ends of her cornrowed braids tinkled softly.

Marie-Thérèse looked at her with tear-soaked eyes. “You have bad dreams too, Mommy, and you never talk about them.”

It was the truth. She had battled nightmares for a decade, and talking about them was the last thing she wanted. Did that explain why her daughter was suffering? Had she caused her own child to have nightmares?

Swallowing a rising tide of guilt, Renee said, “It’s different for mummies, *choupite*. We are here to listen.”

Marie-Thérèse considered that for a moment. “It’s always the same dream,” she said, offering a small entrée into her world. “There’s a lady. She looks like Pocahontas.”

*Pocahontas* was her daughter’s favorite movie. They had already seen it at the movie theater three times, and Marie-Therese was begging for the VHS for Christmas.

“Tell me about her,” Renee said.

“She was swimming in the ocean *naked*,” Marie-Thérèse whispered.

Renee smiled despite herself. Like most kids her age, Marie-Therese considered nudity *icky*. “She was?”

The little girl nodded. “Mm-hmm. Then a bad man went after her. I tried to tell her, but she couldn’t hear me.” The words came in a hiccuping sob.

Renee slid a soothing hand up and down her daughter’s back. “It’s all right, *choupite*.”

“No, it isn’t, Mommy. The bad man hurt the lady. He . . .” Marie-Thérèse’s voice trailed off.

“He what?” Renee prompted.

“He touched her private parts.”

Renee’s heart skittered wildly. *Oh god, had someone hurt her little girl?* She was always so careful, so protective. Surely nothing bad could have happened to Marie-Thérèse? Surely not.

She lifted her daughter’s chin to gaze into her eyes. “*Choupite*, has anyone touched your private parts?”

Marie-Thérèse scrunched her nose and gave a little shrug. “Tantine Rose used to wash me down there. She doesn’t do that anymore cuz I’m a big girl. I can do it myself.”

Renee shook her head. *Aunty Rose*, her daughter’s nanny, would give her life for the child. Rose Fleurie was no threat. “Anyone else?”

“Daddy used to help me take a bath sometimes, but that was a long, long time ago.” Marie-Thérèse’s lips trembled. “Before he moved out.”

Her little girl had already been through so much in her short life. No wonder she was having nightmares.

“Anyone else?” Renee asked, striving to keep the sadness from her voice.

“No, Mommy.”

“Are you sure?”

Marie-Therese nodded.

Was she telling the truth? Renee didn’t know how much to press. “Do you remember what to do if a bad man bothers you?”

“I should kick him where it hurts and run away,” her daughter replied dutifully. “Do you think that would help the lady in my dream too?”

“She’s not real, *choupite*,” Renee said gently. “It’s just your imagination.”

Marie-Thérèse squirmed out of her arms. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore, Mommy.”

“Honey, I need you to—”

The doorbell rang. Renee glanced at the clock on the nightstand with a frown. It was barely 6:00 a.m.

“I’ll get it.” Marie-Thérèse scrambled off the bed.

Renee caught her daughter's arm and forced a reassuring smile. "I'll see who it is. You go take your shower."

She left the room before Marie-Thérèse could protest. By the time she made it to the entryway and flipped on the hall light, her uninvited guest had abandoned the bell and was knocking insistently.

She paused long enough to stare out of the peephole. The porch light must have burned itself out, and sunrise was at least an hour away. She couldn't see much of the figure lurking in the shadows.

Her instincts clicked into overdrive. "Who is it?"

The muffled reply didn't help. She couldn't even tell if the voice was male or female. She hesitated, her brows furrowed. A part of her warned against opening that door. It was too early to be anything but bad news.

Then again, she wasn't the kind of woman who ran from trouble. Not anymore. If danger lurked outside her home, she would damn well protect her child.

She opened the door.

A blast of wind and snow greeted her. She shivered despite the long-sleeved T-shirt and jogging pants she wore as pajamas.

Nothing about the man who stood at her doorstep called for attention. He was of medium height and build, with dirty blond hair and faded brown eyes. His skin was pale, almost pallid, except for the red splotches on the tip of his nose. There was little to give away his age, no thinning hair or fine lines around the eyes or mouth, but he held himself with a certain world-weariness that spoke of experience.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Ms. François?" The man's thin wool coat was no match for a Boston winter, but he didn't seem to notice as he reached into his breast pocket.

She stiffened. "Who are you?"

"Dan Brown, ma'am. I'm delivering a message." Two fat snowflakes landed on the business-size envelope he thrust at her.

She reached for it, her gaze fixed on the return address. "Are you sure this is for me?"

"Are you Renee François?"

“Yes, but I have no business in New York.”

He shrugged. “I’m sure you’ll find your answers in there.” He took off before she could question him further.

She shut the door and turned the lock. All the while, the envelope fluttered in her hand like a trapped bird.

New York.

For years she had refused anything to do with her hometown, but this was a legal document—and she was a lawyer. She couldn’t just ignore it.

She slit the envelope open and pulled out a sheet of paper, quickly scanning its contents. It was a Notice of Hearing.

The phantom odor of urine invaded the hall. Darkness crowded her peripheral vision, and her chest tightened. She put her head between her legs, struggling to breathe.

The man of her nightmares was about to be set free.



OUTSIDE, THE MAN CALLING HIMSELF DAN BROWN SPOKE INTO HIS CELL phone. “It’s done.” He listened for a moment, then added, “I got this covered. It’s time to do your part.”

He hung up and disappeared into the storm.

An ocean away, the old man stared at his now dead receiver. Could this succeed? He was skeptical. The plan was too complex with too many moving parts. But it was his granddaughter who had urged this change from the old ways. If it worked, his family’s five-hundred-year-old problem would finally be solved.

*Could* this succeed? Probably not. Still, it was worth the effort to find out.

He dropped the phone in its cradle and went off in search of his granddaughter.

They had work to do.

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**JUSTICE**

**T**he City of Boston groaned under the weight of its third consecutive blizzard. On the deserted streets of Braddock Park, Renee plowed through the storm. A gust of wind whipped the falling snow into tiny missiles that attacked with the force of a thousand pinpricks. Alone, each small stab would hardly register. Together, the pain was unbearable. She turned from the stinging wind, her mind a chaotic whirl.

It had been two hours since her life came tumbling down. In that time, she had managed to shower, dress, and prepare breakfast for her daughter—all on autopilot. The storm meant no school for Marie-Therese, but Renee would have gone stir-crazy at home. As soon as the babysitter had arrived, she'd set out for the office.

It was not a good day to brave the outdoors on foot, but her law firm was only a few blocks away. She usually enjoyed the walk through her South End neighborhood. Today, she was especially grateful for the distraction.

She cast an appreciative eye at the traditional redbrick Victorians that flanked both sides of the street. They vied for attention among the majestic Greek and Italianate row houses with their soaring columns and grand entryways. A forest of

skeletal trees stood guard like shivering sentinels. In the summer, they formed a leafy canopy, adding a touch of elegance to a neighborhood that once housed the city's wealthiest families.

The South End had undergone a radical transformation since the 19th century. The Panic of 1873 decimated more than a few used-to-be-rich families, banishing them to the suburbs. Their stately old homes were converted into boarding houses for the immigrants and Blacks who flocked to the neighborhood. The new arrivals drove the rest of Boston's blue bloods away. They fled to posh Beacon Hill or Back Bay to escape the strains of jazz floating out of tenement windows.

Renee turned on Columbus Avenue where a unique example of the French Second Empire style caught her attention. The house, with its sloping mansard roof and elaborate dormer windows, had been renovated over the years, and the mix of brick, limestone, slate, and wrought iron should have struck a discordant note. But the whole created a surprisingly harmonious unity.

The mishmash of styles was part of the South End's charm. It was a community that poured immigrants, artists, gays, and misfits of every stripe into a huge cauldron and stirred the pot. What emerged was one of the most vibrant neighborhoods in Boston. She felt more at home here than she ever had in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn.

She dug into her coat pocket. Each brush of her hand against the crumpled envelope was like plunging into a vat of hot oil. She needed the pain. Without it, she would drown in her memories.

*He was being released.*

No, she quickly corrected herself. He was being *considered* for release. There would be a hearing next week. She let out a small, bitter sound. At least he got a hearing. She had been imprisoned in her own private hell for a decade. No possibility of parole.

She should go back to New York. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to confront him.

Confront him? Who was she kidding? More like crush his throat

with the heel of her boot and watch the light fade slowly from his eyes.

It was a tempting image, but she could never go back to New York.

The storm intensified. By the time she arrived at the five story row house that served as her office, she was chilled to the bone.

Kelly, her secretary, sat at the front desk sorting mail. “You’re popular today,” she said with an eager smile.

Renee hung her gear on the coat rack and reached for her messages. “Clients?” she asked, flipping through an impressive stack of pink sheets.

“Some,” Kelly said, “but mostly people are calling about this.” She grabbed a magazine off her desk and handed it to Renee. “You’re on the cover of *Breeze!*”

Renee took the magazine, but her focus was on the messages. Her ex-husband had called. What did he want? She was afraid to guess.

“Aren’t you gonna look?” Kelly’s smile dimmed.

Renee glanced down and saw her own face staring back at her. It wasn’t a bad picture. The lighting accentuated her flawless brown skin and softened the shadows in her eyes. With her long black hair tamed and her arms crossed, she looked the part of a smart and capable thirty-something professional. Beneath the iconic *Breeze* logo, the headline read, *Lawyers Who Change The World*.

Change the world? Hardly.

“This should help increase billings,” she said.

“I wouldn’t worry about no billings if I was on the cover of a magazine,” Kelly said. “And my Ma would grab every last copy, she’d be so proud.”

Pain stabbed at Renee. Would her mother have been proud of her work with Haitian refugees? She doubted it. Although both of Renee’s parents had been Haitian, they severed all ties when they immigrated to the United States.

*You’re an American*, her mother had always insisted.

“I’ll be in my office.” Renee headed down the hall feeling the weight of Kelly’s disappointed stare at her back.

She stepped into her office and closed the door before allowing

herself to sink into her chair. Normally, she'd welcome the national attention a spread in *Breeze* would bring to her work, but today was different. She practically had to force herself to open the magazine.

Four years ago, the Haitian military overthrew Jean Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's first democratically elected president. After serving only seven months in office, Aristide was thrown into exile. He fled to Venezuela then on to the United States.

The island plunged into chaos. Mobs cornered Aristide's supporters and strapped gasoline-drenched tires to their necks. With a single match, they watched their victims dance to death.

Thousands of terrified Haitians fled the country. They took to the ocean in vessels so rickety, they could not properly be called boats. The refugees didn't get very far. The US coast guard intercepted most of them at sea and detained them on the US naval base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Renee watched the crisis unfold with paralyzing helplessness. She wanted to do something, but she had a good job at a prestigious Boston law firm. She also had a daughter to raise.

It took her daughter to spur her to action.

Marie-Therese stumbled on a news broadcast she should never have seen. A little boy her age stood on a hollowed-out street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital city. He held a hand to his head, as though struck by an *aha* moment—the kind that made the inexplicable suddenly make sense. But nothing made sense to this little boy. He was only trying to staunch the flow of blood spurting out of his forehead.

He was scared and alone, screaming for his mother. No one came.

"Do something, Mommy," Marie-Therese pleaded.

Renee quit her prestigious job and headed down to Guantanamo's detention camps. What she saw there broke her heart. Women, children, men, corralled behind steel and barbed wire. They lived in tents on barren strips of land where flies feasted on their misery. But that wasn't the worst of it. Camp Bulkeley was the worst.

She sued the Federal Government all the way to the Supreme Court and won.

The *Breeze* article made Renee sound like a cross between Joan of Arc and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It was nice to be hailed a hero, but she knew the truth. She had lost far more battles than she'd won. The last few years had been a series of failures that left her bruised and broken.

So much for changing the world.

The blinking light on the console snapped her out of her dark thoughts. She reached for the phone with a sigh of relief.

"Your ex is calling," Kelly said. "Claims he tried your private line, but you wouldn't pick up."

She hadn't heard the phone ring. Her throat suddenly felt like sandpaper. "What does he want?"

Kelly snorted. "You know he doesn't explain himself to the help."

Paul was the pampered child of a prominent Haitian family—both of his parents were diplomats. He had the irritating habit of treating everyone like the help.

"I'm sorry," Renee said.

"The only thing you did wrong was to marry that guy. Want me to tell him to piss off?" Kelly's tone made clear she would relish the task.

*If only.* "Put him on, please."

When Paul came on the line, he wasted no time in idle chitchat. "I need to cancel dinner tonight."

Her ex-husband still had the power to inflict so much pain. "You canceled last week. Marie-Thérèse is really looking forward to this. Please don't disappoint her." She didn't allow herself to say *again*.

"I've got a client in crisis." His tone was clipped if not exactly cold.

"You're a lawyer. What kind of crisis can't wait a single night? Maybe it's your paralegal who needs your help?" The words sounded more bitter than she'd intended. She had stopped brooding over Paul's lovers when she walked out on the marriage.

"Jealous?" He sounded almost hopeful.

"I don't think so."

"You always did give up too easily."

She closed her eyes and silently counted to ten. "Could you come

for just an hour? Marie-Thérèse is having a tough time. She needs your support.”

Renee hated the pleading note in her voice, but her daughter would be devastated. Again.

“Perhaps we could help each other.”

He spoke amiably enough, but she wasn’t fooled. She knew what was coming.

“I saw the *Breeze* article,” he continued. “Great stuff. It should bring in more business than you can handle. How about sending some of that my way?”

“Sure, Paul. I’ll send all the *pro bono* asylum cases you can stand.” She didn’t bother to hide her sarcasm.

“Not those cases,” he said dismissively. “I’m talking about the lucrative clients you’ve gotten from your work with President Aristide.”

After winning her Supreme Court case, Renee received a call from Aristide’s legal team. She spent months helping to broker a deal with the Clinton Administration to return Haiti’s president to power.

On October 15, 1994, US troops escorted Aristide back into the National Palace after three years in exile. It was a bittersweet victory. Aristide would be allowed to serve just 16 months—the remainder of his five year term.

Paul must have assumed her silence was a rejection of his proposal. Like any sleazy salesman, he couldn’t take no for an answer.

“The partners are on me to bring in some new cases,” he said, “but the more time I spend rainmaking the less I can spend with Marie.”

“Her name is Marie-Therese,” Renee snapped.

Paul ignored her correction, as he always did. “Come to dinner with me and the client tonight. You can see how I operate.”

She already knew how he operated. “Thanks, but I’ll be eating with my disappointed child.”

She hung up and massaged the pain at her temples. What had she ever seen in him? He was a lousy husband and an even worse father, but when they’d met at Harvard Law School he had seemed

the answer to her prayers. He was smart, handsome, and rich—even more, he had been loved and protected his entire life. She'd wanted a little part of that for herself. It explained why she had been dumb enough to marry him just six weeks after they'd met.

She was paying for her mistake. Worse yet, so was her daughter.

The phone rang once more. She picked it up with a flick of her wrist. "Paul, if you think—"

"Ms. François?" a woman interrupted. "This is Nadine Reed. I'm a lawyer for the New York Health and Hospitals Corporation."

The blood drained from her face. "How did you get this number?"

If Nadine was put off by the chilly reception, she did not let on. She also didn't answer the question.

"I'm sorry to call you at work, but I'm afraid I have some difficult news—"

"I know why you're calling," Renee said impatiently.

"You do?" The woman sounded surprised. "In that case, you understand why you must attend the hearing."

"I can't help you."

"I know this is a delicate situation, Ms. François, but it's also about justice."

"Justice?" Renee nearly spat out the word.

"Mr. Colon is a danger to society," Nadine said. "He hurt you. If released, he's likely to hurt others. Is that what you want?"

"What I want is for you to leave me alone."

"Ms. François—"

"Please don't call me again." She slammed the phone down on its cradle.

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## CAN YOU TEACH ME?

**R**enee stood outside her front door fighting for composure. Tiny ice crystals clung to her lashes as tears streamed down her cheeks. She was a wreck. For several hours, she had tried to throw herself into her work. It was a wasted effort. Finally, she had left the office and headed straight home. She needed to be with her daughter.

But she couldn't let Marie-Therese see her like this. She dug into her coat pocket, searching for tissue. Her fingers grazed the envelope like a moth singeing its wings on an irrationally tempting flame. She snatched her hand away and wiped her tears on the sleeve of her coat before opening the door.

A tinkle of laughter emerged from the back of the house, joyful and innocent. It was the best sound she'd heard all day. She shed her coat and scarf and kicked off her boots. With each layer gone, she felt lighter, less constricted. She could breathe again.

The tip of the envelope peaked out of her coat pocket. She pulled out the now hopelessly crumpled mess and glared at it.

*The past was dead. Let the dead bury their own dead.* She wouldn't allow her old life to contaminate the new. She tore the envelope in half and shoved it back in her pocket.

“Anybody home?” she called out as she headed for the kitchen.

“Mommy!” Marie-Thérèse came charging at her with upraised arms.

Renee knelt to pull the little girl into a bear hug, showering her with kisses. “What are you up to?”

“We’re making *ak . . . ak*—”

“*Akasan*,” a softly accented voice offered.

Renee glanced up to find her nanny, Rose Fleurie, standing in the kitchen doorway. She was an imposing figure. In her late fifties, and nearly six feet tall, she had the body of a dancer—rail thin and full of grace. It was wrapped around a steel core. You did not want to get on the wrong side of this woman.

“You’re home.” Renee launched herself at Rose while still holding on to her daughter.

They stayed like that for a few seconds, which was about as long as Marie-Therese could manage without squirming.

“Mommy, let me go,” the little girl demanded. “I have to get everything ready for the *ak . . . ak*—”

“*Akasan*,” Rose repeated patiently.

“Yes, that!” Marie-Thérèse tugged free of Renee’s grasp and ran to the counter to fuss over the ingredients for Haitian porridge.

Renee laughed for the first time that day. It felt good. “You’re back early,” she said to Rose. “Your vacation isn’t over until next week.”

“The Spirits told me it was time to come home.”

When they’d met four years earlier, Renee had found such comments evidence of Rose’s mental illness. These days, her views were not so rigid.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she said.

Rose gave her an appraising look. “You too are home early.”

Renee only shrugged. She wasn’t ready to talk, not even to Rose. “How was Miami?”

The older woman’s dark eyes missed nothing, but she didn’t press. “Miami was full of sunshine, *meci Papa Bondye*. Winter is too hard on these old bones.”

Renee snorted. Nothing was too hard for Rose. She had been

President Aristide's chef and was in the National Palace on the night of the coup. A mob stormed the building, threatening to "necklace" her with an old tire and a gallon of gasoline. She fled Haiti and found herself stranded in a leaky boat on the high seas surrounded by 18 dead bodies.

The US coast guard rescued Rose only to warehouse her on Guantanamo. She fought for her life and her freedom, and she won. The woman was practically invincible. No Boston winter would get the best of her.

"How's Lucie?" Renee asked.

"She is getting used to life in America," Rose said with a sympathetic smile. She knew how painful this was for Renee.

Lucie was a little girl with ancient eyes who had landed with her parents in Guantanamo's notorious Camp Bulkeley. Renee had fallen in love with her at first sight. She had fought for Lucie and her family for over two years before the US Government finally granted them asylum. It came too late for Lucie's mother. She died in the camp.

Lucie's father blamed Renee for what happened to his family. He refused to let her visit his daughter—but he dared not deny Rose.

"Thank you for checking in on her," Renee said.

Rose's eyes suddenly lit up. "I have pictures. I will get them for you." She ran out of the kitchen, putting to rest any claim of having *old bones*.

Renee smiled, grateful to have her small family reunited. A flash of movement caught her eye, and she turned to her daughter. A kerchief hid the little girl's long braids, and her face, a sun-kissed golden yellow, was streaked with sugar. Her brows were furrowed, but her eyes sparkled with delight. The nightmares seemed to have vanished without a trace.

Renee watched Marie-Thérèse measure out each of her ingredients with military precision: cinnamon, star anise, milk, sugar, vanilla extract, and cornmeal ground to a fine powder.

"Very good, *choupite*."

The little girl threw her a proud smile. "Tantine Rose taught me.

She said before you can create anything, you have to be prepared. It's called *mise en place*."

"*Mise en place*?" Renee couldn't help but grin at her daughter's oh-so-serious tone. "Is Tantine Rose teaching you French?"

Marie-Thérèse shook her head. "Not yet. She says I should learn Kreyòl first cause it's the language of my ancestors."

Her daughter dropped five tablespoons of sugar in a mixing bowl and sang, "*Youn-de-twa-kat-senk*." She turned to Renee with another gleeful smile. "See? I speak Kreyòl."

Renee clapped. "Excellent. Can you teach me?"

"Don't be silly, Mommy." Marie-Thérèse giggled. "I'm just a kid. I can't teach you anything."

Renee's insides melted. This little girl, with her gap-toothed smile and amber eyes, had taught her everything about love.

She cleared the lump in her throat. "What happened to the mac-and-cheese you were going to make?" It was her daughter's favorite dish.

Marie-Thérèse added milk to her bowl and stirred. "Tantine Rose said Haitians love *akasan*, so I thought Daddy might like this better."

The lump in her throat was back. "He's not coming, *choupite*. He has to work late tonight. I'm sorry."

Marie-Thérèse glanced up with tears in her eyes. She quickly blinked them away. "That's okay, Mommy. We can save some for him."

"That's a good idea, honey." She wanted to fold the little girl in her arms, kiss the boo-boo and make it all better—the way she had when her daughter was much younger. But this was not the kind of pain a kiss and a band-aid could heal.

It was her daughter who broke the hurt-filled silence. "Tantine Rose said *akasan* is a part of my heritage because the Tainos invented it." She wrinkled her nose. "What's a Taino?"

"They were Haiti's first people. They lived in the Caribbean before Columbus arrived."

"What happened to them?"

"They died, *choupite*."

“All of them? Why?”

Renee searched for an answer. How did you explain colonialism and genocide to a child?

Luckily, Rose returned in that moment. The kitchen was soon filled with laughter and the spicy-sweet aroma of porridge.



“NO! NO! STOP!”

Renee launched out of bed and raced down the hall before she was fully awake. She nearly crashed into Rose, who had just stepped out of her own room.

“What is happening?” Rose demanded, belting her robe and running a hand through her wild hair.

“It’s Marie-Therese. She’s having a nightmare.”

Rose didn’t waste time with more questions. “I will make tea,” she said as she headed for the kitchen.

Renee ran to her daughter’s room and flung the door open. Marie-Therese hurled herself into her mother’s arms. The little girl’s heart was pounding so hard, Renee could feel the reverberation in her own body. She sank down on the bed with her daughter in her arms.

“Was it the bad dream again, *choupite*?” she asked.

Marie-Therese nodded.

“Talk to me, honey. Let me help you.”

Marie-Therese pressed into her as though searching for a place to hide. “I tried to tell her she’s not real. She won’t listen.” The little girl burst into tears.

Renee smoothed her daughter’s hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “What happened?”

“She wants me to help her, but I don’t know how.”

“Help her with what? The bad man?”

“I don’t know. I just want her to leave me alone!” Marie-Therese wailed.

Renee rocked the child in her arms as she tried to make sense of

what was happening. She no longer believed someone was hurting Marie-Therese, her daughter would have told her by now. So what next?

Damn it. How could she feel so helpless when she was an expert in nightmares? She had even seen a therapist, for all the good that had done. The woman had prattled on about “confronting the dream image,” which, as far as Renee was concerned, meant giving these imaginary figures a piece of her mind.

Maybe it was time for Marie-Thérèse to do the same.

“*Choupite*, have you ever had a friend you didn’t want to play with anymore?” Renee asked.

Marie-Therese paused in mid-sob. “Miguel Parker,” she said, rubbing the tears from her eyes. “We used to play together at recess, then he started pulling my hair and calling me names. I told the teacher, but she said he was only doing it cause he *liked* me.”

Her expression turned mutinous. “That’s silly. People who like you don’t hurt you like that.”

Renee pressed a kiss to her daughter’s nose. How had she gotten so lucky to be the mother of this child? “So what did you do?”

“I told Miguel to leave me alone. I told him I didn’t want to be his friend.”

“The woman in your dream sounds a lot like Miguel,” Renee pointed out. “Maybe if you stand up to her, you won’t be scared anymore.”

Marie-Therese stared at her wide-eyed. “Is that what you do when you have a bad dream, Mommy?”

“Well, I . . .” Renee fell silent, absorbing the impact of her daughter’s words.

Out of the mouths of babes. How could she ask Marie-Thérèse to do something she wasn’t willing to do herself?

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## THE BEAUTIFUL CITY

**T**he train barreled from the station like a wild horse bucking its rider. Renee stumbled against the passenger beside her—an old woman who instantly shot her a murderous glare.

*Welcome to New York City.*

“Sorry,” Renee said, tightening her grip on the handrail. Overheated bodies pressed against her own. A sea of grasping hands pushed and shoved, searching for stability in a constantly shifting world. The subway car was packed so tight, even the air had trouble circulating. It hung tantalizingly above her head, forcing her to rise on tiptoe to catch a whiff, like a drowning victim gulping her last breath.

She could have taken a taxi, but it would have crawled in the morning rush hour. The train at least managed to sprint through the underworld. It had the added benefit of being familiar. She had been taking this route since she was five years old.

The train stopped, and like a finely-tuned swarm, the crowd made its exit in a single wave, leaving only a handful of stragglers behind. She took a seat and breathed a sigh of relief at the sudden expansion of air in her lungs. As the train chugged through the tunnel to emerge

under open sky, she leaned against the window to feel the play of light and shadow on her skin.

Long before she was ready, the conductor announced: “Flatbush Avenue. Last stop.”

She followed the stragglers out of the subway station, pulling her coat and scarf close to ward off the chill. Clouds hung low and dense in the sky, and the morning gloom warned of a coming snowstorm. She headed south, moving briskly down the street.

It was hard to believe that just a few blocks away, Flatbush Avenue teemed with life. The north end was full of the quirky shops and dodgy neighborhoods that kept Brooklyn gritty even as Manhattan transformed itself into a Disney theme park. The south end was another world.

She paused to gaze at the site of her nightmares. A Neo-Gothic redbrick building sprawled across thirty acres of barren land. Over the years, additional wings had been added to the central structure in a v-shape, giving the building the look of a bat in flight.

The Flatbush Psychiatric Hospital was built in 1854 to house the city’s “lunatics.” Almost immediately, the hospital became known as *Belleville*—the Beautiful City. The name allegedly came from one of its earliest inhabitants, a Frenchman who was committed to the asylum for murdering his wife.

“*Quelle belle ville,*” he mocked as hospital attendants tightened his chains and pumped him full of morphine.

“First day on the job?” A young woman in blue scrubs shivered behind the chain link fence surrounding the complex. She was smoking a cigarette, blowing smoke and fog in the same breath.

“Excuse me?” Renee said.

“I been here two years, and it’s as bad as they say. Don’t nobody tell you different. These people are animals. I’m just making time ’til—”

“I don’t work here,” Renee interrupted.

The woman dropped her cigarette, crushing it beneath her heel. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “You don’t look nothing like the kinda people that got folks up in here.”

Renee trudged to the main entrance, each step heavier than the last, until she practically had to drag herself to the security gate. The guard glanced at her ID, and with a wave of a hand ushered her inside.

It was worse than her nightmares.

The lobby sported peeling paint, dirty floors, and old furniture full of suspicious-looking stains. The French residents of Belleville had long since departed, leaving behind a clientele of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants in various stages of psychological distress. One woman beat her head like a drum, another held a long and complicated discussion with her imaginary lover. Several patients sat on a dirty couch staring into the void.

The smell of urine was everywhere.

She took a shallow breath hoping to slow the passage of rancid air into her lungs.

“Can I help you?” The receptionist, a woman wearing a Brooklyn College sweatshirt, pulled absently at one of her long micro braids.

“The Colon hearing?” Her own voice surprised her. It sounded like the young, frightened girl she had once been.

“Director’s Office. Room 23.” The receptionist pointed vaguely to her left. Her tone made clear she had no intention of showing the way.

Unfortunately, Renee didn’t need directions. She walked down a narrow corridor toward the administrative wing of the building. An old woman shuffled passed, her eyes vague, her gait slow and labored—victim of the Thorazine shuffle.

Room 23 was at the end of the hall. Renee stood at the door for what felt like hours, her sweaty palm resting on the doorknob, her heart sounding a wild, syncopated beat. She forced herself to breathe deeply once, then again. Finally, she turned the knob and stepped inside.

“Ms. François?” A woman in a navy blue pinstripe suit approached, her shock of red hair an exclamation point in an otherwise drab room. “I’m Nadine Reed. We spoke on the phone.”

“Where—” Renee’s voice emerged as a hoarse croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Where would you like me to sit?”

The Director’s Office had been transformed into a makeshift courtroom with plastic tables and metal folding chairs. Nadine pointed to a seat. Renee took it before her legs gave out.

“Are you all right?” Nadine asked, eyeing the beads of sweat that clung to Renee’s brow and the slight quiver to her lips. “Would you like some water?”

“Please.”

Nadine gestured to the guard standing a few feet away. A moment later, the young man handed Renee a bottle of water. He hovered over her until she had swallowed half its contents.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice soft and tremulous. He nodded and walked back to his post.

“Better?” Nadine asked.

Renee tried to smile, but her lips wouldn’t cooperate. “I was feeling a bit lightheaded.”

“This place has a way of doing that to you,” Nadine said wryly.

“How long will this take?” It felt strange to be in a courtroom—even one this rudimentary—as a witness rather than a lawyer.

“A few hours. We’re calling some of the medical staff, but you’re the only civilian. We’re lucky to have you.”

*Lucky? Nothing about this situation is lucky!* she wanted to shout, but all she said was: “I’ll do my best.”

Nadine smiled earnestly before taking her own seat. Only then did Renee allow herself to turn to the pair of eyes that had been staring at her since she’d walked in the room.

She expected to find a monster. What she saw was the face of the man she had once loved.