

Protection Spell

Ning:

Tonight, I will see our father.

Light two Road Openers—
blaze branches of cardamom spiced
cypress, rub wrists with crushed
sage, and purified oil.

Root my vision. Untangle
my remembrance,
his thorns seeking the soft, pink
of my open palm.

I will listen with hyssop drained
ears for the Boogie Man's lament.
Listen—

beyond the melody. Carve his
double-edged tongue. I am there, small
and shivering, regal and bellicose, kneeling
at his feet, waiting to recoil.

When the camphor dissolves,
the moon will be oil—too strong,
they say, to wear on naked skin.
But, I will anoint my forehead, arc

two halos into machetes above my eyes
dress the column of my throat
with a glistening thumb.
I have never feared strength.

My weakness: knowing
coriander blooms must die
to yield serviceable seeds.
I have never feared strength,
I chant,

imagining how he prepares for me.

Ning:

I used to lie awake, a pen clutched tight in my fingers, waiting for the moment when Papa's face would hover over mine.

In the dark, I'd whisper Ma Patty's tea cake recipe. She never wrote down any of her spells. The recipe was left folded in her sewing tin.

Every story I heard of her had a different ending. So, I was always left to imagine how she escaped. Perhaps she slipped here the way Houdini emerged triumphantly from his water towers.

I simply knew that she was free.

Though, she had to give up her name. Ma Petite became Ma Patty--a miniscule price.

Lullaby

Ma Petite: Mémère threw all of her weight into the process of grinding. The pockets of loose skin under her arms swayed with the thwim-thwam-thwim-thwam rhythm of her rock. Back bent, mimicking the arc of a cherry hunter's moon, she reached into the bowl, coaxing each root to surrender its last blood until it laid useless, limply tossed aside. She cupped her fingers, dipped them into a sack of meal and carefully rolled root liquor into the meal until a grainy, yellow paste formed.

Mémère: Ma petite, your hips have curved into question marks. Your body will dangle as your obvious fruit. But you have other traits to harvest. Reap and store them carefully. They will try to shame you.

Ma Petite: The paste clumped over her calloused palms. It prickled on my tongue, coating it like wax. The bitterness was too strong to be swallowed.

Mémère: Eat, Cherie. You have to eat.

Ma Petite: She scooped more, earthy arthritic fingers twisted dry like gnarled branched. My lips tingled, vibrated as if I had swallowed a humming fire. My throat threatened to crack, erupt beneath the heat of the flame snapping against my chest. **(beat)** No, Mémère. Please.

Mémère: Ma petite, eat.

Ma Petite: My churning stomach heated, trying to expel the paste. I doubled over, each lump felt like a lit cannon tunneling up my throat.

Mémère: *(A command not a plea.)* You must not! Now be a good girl, and lay back.

Ma Petite: Her voice was weighted beneath a bittersweet alto that I had never heard. I could feel the tension in her arms, like rubber pulled too tight, as she laid me down.

V1: *You must master bitter seeds.*

V2: *Learn to close your mind around the throb of an ache.*

V3: *Swallow it into the marrow of your spine.*

Ma Petite: This agony is small-nothing.

Mémère: Now, eat.

Ma Petite: I opened my eyes. My eyes watered. I was embarrassed and hoped that she would not mistake my moans for cowardice lack of marrow. She pounded her palms against mossy earth...

(stomping the rhythm onto the stage *thwum-thwum-da-da-thwum*)

V1: thwum-thwum-da-da-thwum

V2: thwum-thwum-da-da-thwum

All: *thwum-thwum-da-da-thwum*

Mémère: *(singing/chanting)* Damballah, lord, let the sweep of your forked tongue protect my baby! Yes, Damballah, serpent lord, let your forked tongue save my baby!

V1,2,3: *Pounding thwum-thwum-da-da-thwum/thwum-thwum-da-da-thwum,*

Mémère: Damballah, swallow her for me.

(She finished signing the cross. Dry paste rubbed over her cheeks she whispered)

Mémère: Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Please. Ma petite, open one more time.

Ma Petite: I could no longer control the

V1: *shiver shiverrrrrrrrr*

V3: *Shaking shiver shhhhhhhh*

V2: *shiver shaking shaking*

Ma Petite: *my shoulders. My gut felt like God's hands were wringing it. Damballah was crawling, devouring me from the inside.*

Mémère: Ma petite, open! **(beat)** Swallow, ma petite.

V1,2,3: Swallow, ma petite.

(There is a struggle then a beat)

Mémère: Now, sleep.

V1: sleep.

V2: sleep, sleeeeeeeep.
V3: sleep. sleep.

Ma Petite: Each night she mixed a new batch of bitterness, decreasing the amount of meal, using more and more root. When I was twelve, I drank the extract from the bowl. This was the way Mémère controlled her masters.

VI: *Mémère controlled her masters.*

V3: *controlled her masters.*

V2: *MASTERS.*

V1,2,3: *They believed the rumors to be legend born of wagging tongues loosened by a day's work in the sun.*

(Shadow appears on the scrim, it is Father approaching with the children)

Paul: Good night

Ginny: Good night, Night papa!

(Father hugs the children good night, they run and get settled in for storytime, his shadow stands alone looking at Ma Petite viciously as a beast would its prey.) (Father's shadow melts away. Ma Petite settles into to the edge of the bed to tell the story.)

Ma Petite: The boogeyman (*Father's shadow appears again on the scrim*) is tall, pale, dressed in summer linen, rolled tobacco cigars. He creeps between cabins, (*A slave woman's shadow appears and goes to rest*) disturbing the dreams of the slaves, hiding under their beds to wait until they fall asleep. When they are in their deepest slumber, he slides from beneath their mattresses. (*beat*) He is nothing but a cloud-at first, until his steely blue eyes become clear. His pink mouth forms next and the smoke wisps into hair that looks like scraggly sun-dried straw. There is no use running from the boogey man.

Paul, Ginny: He never chases you.

Ma Petite: (*To the kids*) He doesn't have to. He laughs and whoosh- he sends his arms flying, (*Father's shadow on the wall raises his whip like arms*) Those arms slice so quickly that they whistle before they sear into you. There is nowhere to hide. He is everywhere, wrapping long fingers around the delicate balls of your ankle, snapping the bones like twigs as he pulls you back into him.

Ginny: He only visits the slaves?

Ma Petite: *Non*, but he prefers captives.

Paul: Good

Ma Petite: They were wrong not to believe in *Mémère*.

V1,2: *shiver (Ginny shivers)*

(Ginny climbs into Ma Petite's lap and burrows her head into her chest)

Ginny: I believe in *Mémère*. *(whispered, sagely nodding)*

Paul: Ginny, she is only telling us stories.

Ma Petite: *(To the audience)* The middle one, Paul looked like his father, indigo eyes darkening with his moods. He prided himself in practicality.

Paul: Besides, if your *Mémère* was Voudoun, where are your powers? Didn't she teach you?"

Ma Petite: *(smile)* Of course, *M'sieu* Paul.

Paul: Then show me. Let's see you drink blood.

Ginny: No Paul! *(shrieks)*

Ma Petite: *M'sieu* Paul, there is much more to Voudoun than spells and blood. Our magik nurtures roots and veins.

Paul: And you don't know any spells, or else you would not be a slave. Plus, you are scared of snakes!

Ma Petite: *Oui, M'sieu* Paul.

V1&2: *Quiver (Ginny quivers)*

(Ma Petite reaches over and tickles Ginny's arm.)

Ginny: But if you had powers, would you leave us?

Paul: Do you believe in Jesus or Damballah?

Ma Petite: Whichever answers first. *(smiles - beat)* Now, that's enough stories for tonight. *(Paul, Ginny groans)*

Paul: One more?

Ma Petite: I had heard of the boogey man. But, he never visited me until I went to France. I was there to attend to your mother while she attended her lessons. Your father followed her at a courting distance.

In the quarters it was rumored that the boogey man crept between beds, a slave to his appetite for mysterious spices. I stayed on the outskirts of the circle, ignoring their stories, until one lifted her skirt to show us a long wound winding down her thigh.

Shaken, I chewed on my root thoughtfully and quickened my pace through my chores. I reached beneath my mattress and pulled out the box of roots. I fell asleep chewing. **(beat)** He was on me before my throat could unwind itself, wrapping his long arms around my head until my gasps tingled in my throat. His teeth tore the buttons from my bodice before he dipped his head and began to feast, gnawing, raveling himself around me.

My blood dripped from his mouth, becoming brown where it was smeared on his cheeks, his stubbled chin. He opened his jaw to reveal thick stringy ropes of spit. I swallowed my horror.

Remembering Mémère, my quivering fingers reached out to touch his torso, to dig into the space between his ribs. Staring deeply into the blizzard brewing behind his eyes, I opened my mouth.

His mouth tasted like the rusted handle of a shovel. Swirling my tongue away from his, I gathered the root nested in the soft space between my gums and my cheek and thrust it into his mouth. Cobalt eyes widened white with surprise. With a gulp he swallowed, staggered back and descended into a melting vapor.

Paul: You killed the boogey man!?

Ma Petite: He just disappeared.

Paul: Did he ever come back?

Ma Petite: Not for a while.

V1,V3: *Quiver (Ginny quivers)*

Ginny: Has he ever come here?

Ma Petite: Oui.
(Ginny tucked herself into Ma Petite's side.)

Ma Petite: There will be more stories later. Now it is time to sleep.

Paul: Noooooo.

Ginny: Please...One more...

Ma Petite: This is the last one...

I awoke to a hissing sound. Heat bubbled through me. I sat up to see smoke collecting near the foot of the bed. It wafted creating a fog.

In the vapor, two cold, steely blue eyes appeared--eyes almost as deep as yours, Paul. His nose was as sharp as hooks that hang cured hogs and thin lips looked like the gaping slice across a

sacrificed hen's throat. An ash colored mist gave way to a shirt, crisp as blankets of Christmas snow. A curl of smoke unfolded to reveal a long finger. It traced a line down my nose and pulled back. Rust lips appeared...

“Shhhh.....”

Paul: No! The boogeyman is not the way you describe him. He is big and dark, hunched like this. (*He curved his back, locked his arms into disfigured arcs and stomped across the bed.*)

Ma Petite: (*with a smile*) Maybe next time you should tell the story.

Paul: No. You like to lullaby and goodnight us. (*His voice dripped with a sing-song charm*) But before you leave, we should tuck the root under our pillows.

Ma Petite: When the moon whispers to me that you need it. For now, it is time for bed.

Ginny: Can I have a drink before we go to bed?

Ma Petite: Can you? Or, may you?

Ginny: May I have a drink before I go to bed?”

Ma Petite: This once. (*Exits to get the cocoa. We see Ma Petite go through the same process as Memere only quicker.*)

Ginny: Do you think there really is a Boogie Man?

Paul: I think she just wants to see how much she can scare us. And, I'm not scared.

Ma Petite: Who wants cocoa? *Mad'mselle* Ginny, how many cubes of sugar will you take?”

Ginny: Three!

Ma Petite: Only three? I am surprised. I would think that you would want more.

Paul: We can have more?

Ma Petite: This once.

(The children eagerly dropped cubes into their cup, sweetness to lighten the chocolate. Ginny blew, cooling her cocoa until she could drop her spoon and stir it with her fingers, splashing it until it swirled like swamp water.)

Ma Petite: Ginny, *ma petite*, you have to drink. (*picks up her spoon and fills it with cocoa.*)

Ginny: It's bitter.

Ma Petite: One more lump of sugar. Now, open your mouth, *Cherie*.
(*Ma Petite places the spoon between Ginny's lips and she slurps.*)

Ma Petite: Good, ma petite. Now drink one more time. You must drink. Now be a good girl and lay back. It is time for bed.

Ginny: (*Pleadingly*) One more sip?

Ma Petite: I tipped the cocoa to her lips. I was pleased to see that Paul had drained his cup, his breath losing pace like a slow rocking chair, Ginny's heart was a comet slowing in my palm.
(*beat*)

Swallow, mes petites. Now it is time to sleep.