

Brea Creel

“Mercy”

I’ve been having nightmares, as of late.

I don’t hasten to share them with my husband, of course; these are no ordinary nightmares. They aren’t made of shadows and clouds, saber-toothed animals and cleverly hidden traps. My nightmares are made of the brightest colors: scorching blue sky and sunlight streaming through windows to tint everything yellow as, with Gaspar by my side, I reach out to hug my *mãe*.

“Hello, Isabel,” she says every time, because nightmares never change their misery.

I smile back at her, baring all of my teeth. “Hello, Missah,” I answer, without a second thought.

This is how my world cracks open.

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Usually it’s Maria who wakes me from the nightmares (but can I really use the plural, when they’re all one in the same?).

“Here, Missah,” Maria will say, much too kindly, and bring me fresh water and fruits while I try to slow my heart. “Just the baby making you worry. Go to sleep again, Missah, get some good rest.”

I wonder if she knows that three years ago, she would have been calling me Banju.

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When Gaspar is home, he touches my belly as though it’s made up of crystals, sapphires, diamonds. I’ve seen all of them, now. I have a diamond ring, sapphire pendants for my neck, crystal dishes for Maria to put food on— but of course I could never share the excitement with Gaspar.

How do you tell the husband so certain that you’ve been off at school in Portugal that ever since you were born, you’ve been sleeping in a shack?

You don’t, of course. You push his hands away from your stomach and laugh. You try not to let him see the way your hair curls so sharply in the dampest heat.

You press your tongue hard against your teeth when you want to bend and help Maria put away the dishes, want to call her Macamba, the name she was born with.

In short, you lie.

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I haven't gotten used to being Missah yet. I'm sure that I will. Hope that I will. But Maria has gotten used to always having to call me twice, sometimes thrice, whenever she needs my instructions. Gaspar teases me for being hard of hearing.

It's getting to where I can't bend down anymore. My belly gets in the way.

When Maria hands me a silver spoon to eat with, I watch my blue eyes widen and narrow on its warped surface.

Babies are funny things. They don't ever look like you think they will.

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The baby will be born soon. Maria predicts, at my inquiry, three days at the most.

I don't dare tell her I've predicted myself, in the dark of the night, with Gaspar gone away to meet the slave ships. But her baba is known as the most powerful one amongst the slaves, so I can't help trusting her judgment more than my own, steeped in the way of the Portuguese for so long.

Three days.

Before I sleep, I pray for mercy from a god my mama and baba have never believed in.

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It *hurts*.

I can remember Missah— *Mãe*— Catalina— someone, I remember her screaming and crying as Jorge forced his way into the world but *surely* it can't be as bad as this because this is white hot blinding *hurt*. Maria wipes my face with a cool cloth, whispers soothing things I think only because I have never raised a hand to her and haven't I done that to someone I called *Missah* once before? Maybe, maybe not but *oh* it's like a cobra wrapping itself around my insides and sinking its fangs into the heart of me. My hands clench the bed sheets until I'm sure the fabric has to tear.

“Missah,” Maria murmurs, and I scream. Blood wets my legs, Maria’s dark hands. The pressure suffocates me, binds me in place even as I thrash, arch, cry *Mama*, even as I wing prayers for *mercy mercy mercy* not to Gaspar’s god, but to my spirits, prayers for a baby born light as I somehow was.

*Please please please please –*

Maria’s terrified face is the last thing I see before the blackness tingeing the edges of my eyes caves in on me.

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Nightmares are always worse when they happen in real life.

I decide to name her Armenah. Maria thinks it’s pretty. I think she looks a lot like Mama.

Of course Gaspar will ask questions when he returns home. But I can answer them. Me and Maria’s baba, we practice for this.

“Maria tried to help, but it was just too late.” Tears welling.

“Her face was all purple and blotted. It was terrible.” Streaking down my pale cheeks.

“I couldn’t bear to sit there and look at my poor baby. We *had* to go ahead bury her.” Wipe them bravely.

“Of course we’ll have more. Maybe a boy, next time. We can name him after you.” Watery smile.

At the end of my recitation, I watch our daughter slumber in Maria’s darkened arms.

Maria promises to tell Armenah, one day. When she’s all grown up. But I don’t point out that by then, it won’t matter what her blood is. She’ll always call Maria her mama.

Looks are such strange things.

I wonder how many babies Maria will have to have before I get mine.