

Gyasi S. Byng  
Saudade

"Hello, goodnight?" she said into the receiver.

"Stephie, it's Gloria."

"What is it?"

"Ama's dying."

Those two words had her breaking every promise she had made to herself. She had told Ama she wouldn't come back to the island, not after everything that had happened. It was too heart breaking to have to live like the dirt under a rancid nail. There had to be a life that didn't include apologies for the hasty hand of fate. Her pride wouldn't allow the bowing and scraping that the island folk demanded. Ama hated pride in every form, but still her calloused hands had stroked Stephie's face gently. Her parched lips scratched Stephie's furrowed brow and whispered, "Go."

She went as far as time would take her. Argentina; the Europe of South America. It was a place that was attached to history. There people could tie themselves to an ancestry and no one would dare question it. It was completely different from the island, where acceptance came with the ebb and flow of the tide. Ama would have balked at the gray water, but Stephie reveled in it. The water was slicker, cleaner, than island water. It washed away the sand baked into her skin. It took some time for her to learn the language, but when she did, the rest of the island was expelled from her body. She was a Latina now.

Argentina felt more like home than the island ever had. It was a place where people of all shades mingled. Life there was lived for coffee. Though some were mixed with more crême than others they still knew the richness of their beautiful brown skin, no matter how dark or light it was. At first, she was happy, ecstatic with her new identity, but eventually, instead of filling her with a sense of peace, it filled her with bitterness. It was as though someone had shoved a sour plum between her gum and cheek. She could feel it festering inside of her, eating away the flesh. It disgusted her and she longed to spit it out, but then she would think of all she had been through and it would stick fast again.

Most of her anger was directed towards herself. Part of her knew it wasn't fair and for that she wanted to fight, but then she wondered how Gloria had been able to deal with it. They were twins after all; they looked exactly alike, except for one freckle on Gloria's left cheek. They had suffered together, been spit on as one, and been called "Bastard!" in unison. Yet, Gloria never left. She stayed by Ama's side. She married and had children. Gloria endured all the shame that Stephie had been through and was still able to carve out a bit of happiness for herself. From the hunk of salt that life gave her, she was able to make sweetbread. There wasn't the stench of hatred on her skin. She didn't hunch from carrying a load of remorse. Gloria was the personification of love.

"Why don't you come home?" Gloria asked her one day. "It's not like it used to be. Things are better now."

"But I'm still what I used to be," she replied. "And I cannot forget."

For as long as she could remember it had been just the three of them: Ama, Gloria, and herself. They lived in a four room house on the side of a mountain, right by the road. Ama cooked in the early morning, before the sun had risen, every day. Then she would wake them and they would sell bread in the village. Ama's bread was the best. The crust cracked when you bit into it, but then the inside would melt the second it hit your tongue. The men and women

in the village would surround her, trying to get the first loaves for breakfast. Stephanie and Gloria would get pushed to the side after a few minutes. They would hold each other's hands tight because back then they thought they were two parts of the same person. It didn't help that Ama insisted on dressing them alike.

"Hold onto your sister," Ama would tell them. "Or you will lose yourself."

By the afternoon, most of Ama's bread was sold and this was when people started to notice them.

"Hey boy!" a man would say to his friend, "look at those girls over there!"

"Why are they so light?"

"You don't know who they are?"

"No."

"They're Inel's girls."

"Wasn't she the one who—"

"Yes."

It was at that point that Ama would use her backside to shield them and chase away whoever was talking. Stephanie didn't know when she found out that Ama wasn't her mother. In a way she had always known. Ama was broad like a ship and dark like the pitch used to cover them. Her eyes were small and round like chick peas. She wore many years on her skin, the product of hard labor. No man ever looked twice at Ama, but to Gloria and herself, Ama was a goddess.

When they were old enough to go to school, she started to wonder about her parents. She knew the other children would ask and she didn't want to be without an answer. When she heard Ama rise from their big bed, she waited a few minutes and rolled away from Gloria's side. Ama was shaping the dough with her hands. For all her thickness, Ama had the slimmest fingers. They were like reeds blowing in the wind they moved so gracefully across the dough. She would make big loaves for the mothers, medium rolls for the men, and small fried dumpplings for the school children.

Stephie came up slowly behind Ama and tugged on her dress.

"Eh?" Ama said. "Stephie, what are you doing up?"

"Ama," she said. "Who was my mother?"

Ama took the loaves she was working with and put them in the oven. She wiped her hands on her apron and lifted Stephanie onto her hip. She was almost too big to fit there, but Ama would refuse to admit that.

"Do you remember the day we ate the stars?"

She shook her head no.

"Of course you wouldn't you weren't alive then," she said. "One day the sky turned black, black, black. You couldn't see the road, you couldn't see your nose, and you couldn't see a tree until you walked into it. I thought the pitch fields had risen into the air it was so dark! Maybe Raleigh had come back to the island and was sailing his ship in the sky!

"For many hours, your mother and I sat in the fields waiting for the day. We had been walking when the night fell, boom! Like a stone. We waited and waited but the day didn't come. Instead, we saw the moon squeeze out from the darkness. It was a tiny sliver of a thing, but it was enough to let us see. We were so happy that we ran to Toco and started bathing in the water. Your mother was so happy she didn't see when the stars began to fall. The moon had started to wash the air and the stars lost their grip.

"One by one they fell down, down, down, fast, fast, fast into the water. They were so

bright and beautiful and big too! They were the size of both my fists put together. Your mother and I came out of the water and a star landed right by her feet. I didn't like the way it looked, but she took it in her hands and before I could stop her, she swallowed it. She seemed all right at first, but then her belly swelled up big and she cried out loud, loud; so loud the men came down from the village to see. I held your mother's hand until there was a big flash of light. I covered my eyes and fell back. When I looked again your mother was gone and there were two babies lying where she had been: you and Gloria. I picked you up, strapped you to my back, and took you home.

That is the way it happened, Stephie, don't let anyone tell you different."

Even after she had discovered the truth, she had wanted to believe Ama's story.

After a three hour layover in Venezuela, she was in a dream when she stepped off the plane and onto the runway. The air on the island was still the same: thick with heat and sweat. With every breath she could feel the coolness being pushed out of her pores. Her muted, faux European sensibility clashed horribly with the flamboyant personalities around her. As the sun hit her face she could hear the sound of her natural curls springing forward. By the time she found a taxi, she had shed the nude heels, cropped pants, and stiff collared shirt for sandals and a linen dress.

The colors seemed brighter now that she had been away for so long. She could make out the differences between viridian and Kelly green as the taxi drove along the winding roads, past one-room huts and louvered houses. Her nose picked up the smoke from the bake and shark shop. The oil was sticking to the breeze, carrying the scent of thickly sliced shark fried to an inch of its life.

In more walls than she could count, she could see the bullet holes were still there, the constant reminders of instability and change.

Before she could prepare herself for it, she saw the house. Gloria's husband had added on bedrooms and closets with every pregnancy. There was a fresh coat of paint on the outside; a blank white, accented with bits of pink and yellow. It was more posh than Ama could have ever dreamed it to be.

"Glory? Is that you?" she asked, stepping gently into the house.

The last time she had seen her sister, they still looked alike, mirror images of each other. She had never seen Gloria pregnant before. Her body was still slim, except for her stomach which protruded from her body like a ripe cantaloupe.

"I look fat, don't I?" Gloria asked.

"No, just rounder," she said. "Do you have a name for baby number five?"

"Five and six."

"Girl, slow down! There isn't that much room on the island!"

"These are the last ones, I swear."

"Where are the rest of the children?" she asked.

"At school."

"When do they get home?"

"In an hour or so," she said. "I know you want to see Ama, go ahead, we can talk later."

"Thanks."

Ama never liked talking on the phone. She thought it was strange to talk to people who weren't there. Stephie wrote letters twice a week and Gloria read them. Ama was one of fifteen children. School simply wasn't an option for her. She started working when she was six

years old and never stopped. After leaving her father's house, she paid a local school boy ten cents a week to teach her basic arithmetic so she wouldn't get cheated at market. Stephie had tried to teach Ama her letters once, but Ama had swatted her away and said, "You remember what I tell you, why do I need to write it down?"

And it was true; Stephie never forgot a word Ama said to her.

She opened the door to Ama's bedroom and slipped inside as quietly as she could. The window was open, but the curtains had been drawn. A mosquito net hung from the ceiling over the bed where Ama lay. Her breathing was deep and full, not at all the breathing of someone who was walking with death.

Stephie pulled the mosquito net back and sat on the edge of the bed. Ama stirred a little bit, shifting the thin sheet that covered her. She could see how much weight Ama had lost. The skin was loose around her legs and arms. But the color was still the supplest black she had ever seen. And Ama hadn't lost a hair that was on her head. Gloria had braided it and rested the heavy plait beside her on the bed. It looked like a thick black snake ready to strike. Stephie moved the hair and lay beside Ama, cradling her body with her own.

"Stephie?" Ama asked.

"Yes, Ama," she said. "I'm here."

"Where is the rest of you?"

"In the kitchen."

"Hold onto your sister," Ama said. "Or you will lose yourself."

"I know, Ama."

"I can feel it in my chest, girl," Ama said. "He's moving fast. He's almost ready to take me. I'm going to meet Jesus."

"Tell him hello for me when you go."

"Eh? That's it?"

"I don't want to give you too much to remember."

"I remember everything," Ama said. "Do you remember the day we ate the stars?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

The story was never different when Ama told it. It had been years since Stephie'd heard the story and it was still the same. She had tried to tell it once, but the outcome wasn't what she expected.

It was after school, when Gloria was sitting in the grass with a book and Stephie was hovering over a game of marbles with her skirt tied up between her legs. A little girl came walking up the road. She belonged to a rich family that made their money by running fancy hotels where tourists could experience the island without experiencing the island. Stephie looked up when the girl told her she had beautiful hair. The girl had smooth hair like hers, the type of hair people called "good." It was tied back with a white ribbon. Back then Stephie assumed people with "good" hair were just like her, and so felt this girl came from the stars too. Looking into the girl's gold eyes Stephie began her story certain that this girl would understand. When Stephie finished her tale, the girl's face screwed up in anger and she yelled, "That's not what my father told me! He said you're the rich man's bastard!"

Besides pride, Ama hated the word 'bastard' most of all. She and Gloria received two blows across the head a piece when they repeated that word to Ama. It was the first and last time Ama ever struck them. Stephie had seen other children being slapped in the village, but had never before experience the sting of that five fingered shame from Ama's hand. The teach-

ers were different. It was expected of them to lay a switch across the back of your legs when you missed an answer on a test. Coming from them the lash never felt like anything more than a mosquito bite, an irritation. Gloria had taught her how to detach herself when she was being beaten by their teacher.

"Think of all the nice things Ama gives us," she said. "Think of her bread and the dresses she made us for our birthday."

But when it was Ama causing the pain, there was nowhere to go. Stephie stayed inside herself feeling the edges of Ama's nails dig into her skin. That night she and Gloria curled around each other to sleep on the far side of the bed, away from Ama. They were too bruised to rest and when Ama came in, they began to tremble.

"Come here," Ama said softly to them. She picked them up, sheets and all, and rocked them like children. "I will never do that again. Please forgive me. I'm sorry."

Stephie put her memories aside and listened carefully to Ama as she finished the tale of when they ate the stars.

"That is the way it happened, Stephie," Ama said. "Don't let anyone tell you different."

"I know," she said. "Ama, why did you leave home?"

"To take care of you."

"Why did you have to take care of us?" she asked. "Why were we special?"

She knew the answer, but she needed to hear Ama say it. She needed Ama to acknowledge the truth before it was too late.

"Because you were born from the stars."

"Ama, I want to tell you a story," she said. "Will you listen to it?"

Ama curled her arms around her. "We still have time."

"Did you know that sometimes little girls are born without fathers?" she asked.

"God is our father."

"But even Jesus had Joseph," she said. "When I was little, I knew a girl who didn't have a father. Part of her kept saying she didn't need one, that her life was fine without him, but she still kept wondering what kind of man her father was like. Did he eat cassava mashed with milk like her? Did he like to chew on ice when it was hot?"

"She was curious," Ama said.

"She was very curious," she continued. "The little girl heard rumors that he was the richest man on the island. He had more money than anyone. There were rumors that he was European, the son of a king. The men said that he had run away during a revolution to save his head. He had lived there for years, but no one ever saw him leave his house, so one day the little girl started running up the hill to find him herself. There was a big wall around his house. No one had ever seen beyond it."

"Walls keep things out that don't belong," Ama said, her face burning hot as asphalt.

Though it nearly suffocated her to do so, Stephie buried herself deeper into Ama's embrace and whispered, "Walls hold things in that should be let out."

"Tell me more about this man."

"There is no more to tell, Ama," she said. "We have to go back to the little girl. We left her running up the hill."

"Make her go home."

"She's too stubborn."

"It will come to no good."

"The little girl ran, ran, ran up the hill as fast as her legs would carry her," she continued, "and when she reached the wall she kicked off her shoes, climbed a tree, and jumped over it. She landed hard, hard and her feet bled. She left little footprints on the rich man's marble driveway. Before she could reach the door to knock one of the guards caught her. He pulled her by her hair and started to drag her back to the gate. She screamed and screamed, praying the rich man would hear her. Her prayers were answered and he came out of the front door with his eyes staring blue, blue. She saw him and yelled, 'Papa, Papa, I'm here!' The guard pulled harder, harder on her hair to make her leave, ripping the hair out by the root. The girl wrenched herself free from his grasp and went running towards her father's arms."

"What did he do then?"

"Don't you know?"

Ama shook her head no.

"He slapped her before she could touch him and then went back into his house. The guard picked her up, carried her to the gate, and left her outside."

"Did she die there?"

"No, but she didn't live either."

Stephie clung tighter to Ama, rocking her until she fell asleep.

"She doesn't know the truth herself, Stephie," Gloria said, as they sat on the porch.

"When you tell a story like that for so long, the truth becomes a lie."

"But everyone knows," she said. "Why is she trying to save face by lying?"

"She doesn't care about herself, you know that," Gloria said. "She doesn't care what the people here think about her. She's protecting Inel."

"You think she loved her that much?"

"Hold on to your sister or you will lose yourself."

"She'll never tell us herself, will she?"

"What is there to tell?"

"Do you know how twins are born?" she asked. "When there is too much soul for God to fit in one body, He makes two. This happened to Him a few years back and two little girls were born. They were called Ama and Inel. They were twins, exactly alike in every way. No one could tell them apart, not even their own parents. The girls did everything together. They ate together, walked to market together, and slept in the same bed every night. One day, Inel fell in love with a foreigner from France. He had come to the island with his parents to buy land near the tar lake. This was the first time the sister's disagreed. Ama did not think it was a good idea for Inel to see the boy. 'He will break us apart' she said. Her sister hugged her and told her that would never happen. Inel was very wrong. When her father found out she was pregnant with the boy's child, he threw her out of the house. Ama left with her. They lived in the underbrush, stealing what they could to feed Inel's appetite. An old man took pity on them and gave them his left over bread from lunch every day. When Inel went into labor, Ama took her to the beach to wash in the water. The birth was too much for Inel and she died."

"So her sister, the other half of her soul, took her two girls and raised them as her own," Gloria finished. "She named one Gloria Amalthea for herself and Stephanie Inel for her sister. That way they could still be together. And Ama lived. Not quite knowing how to be happy after Inel."

They sat there for hours letting the story sink in. The sun went down to sleep, but a misty fog made it difficult to see the stars. The street lamps burned in vain, trying to be seen.

Blues and purples floated above them in the atmosphere like bruises under a veil of skin. The deep, innocent nights they had been raised on no longer existed. Gloria rubbed soft circles across her stomach, while Stephanie listened to the cicadas chirping in the trees.

“I hope I have boys,” Gloria said.

“You won’t.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly and thoughtfully.

“I like her story better.”

“Then consider it truth.”