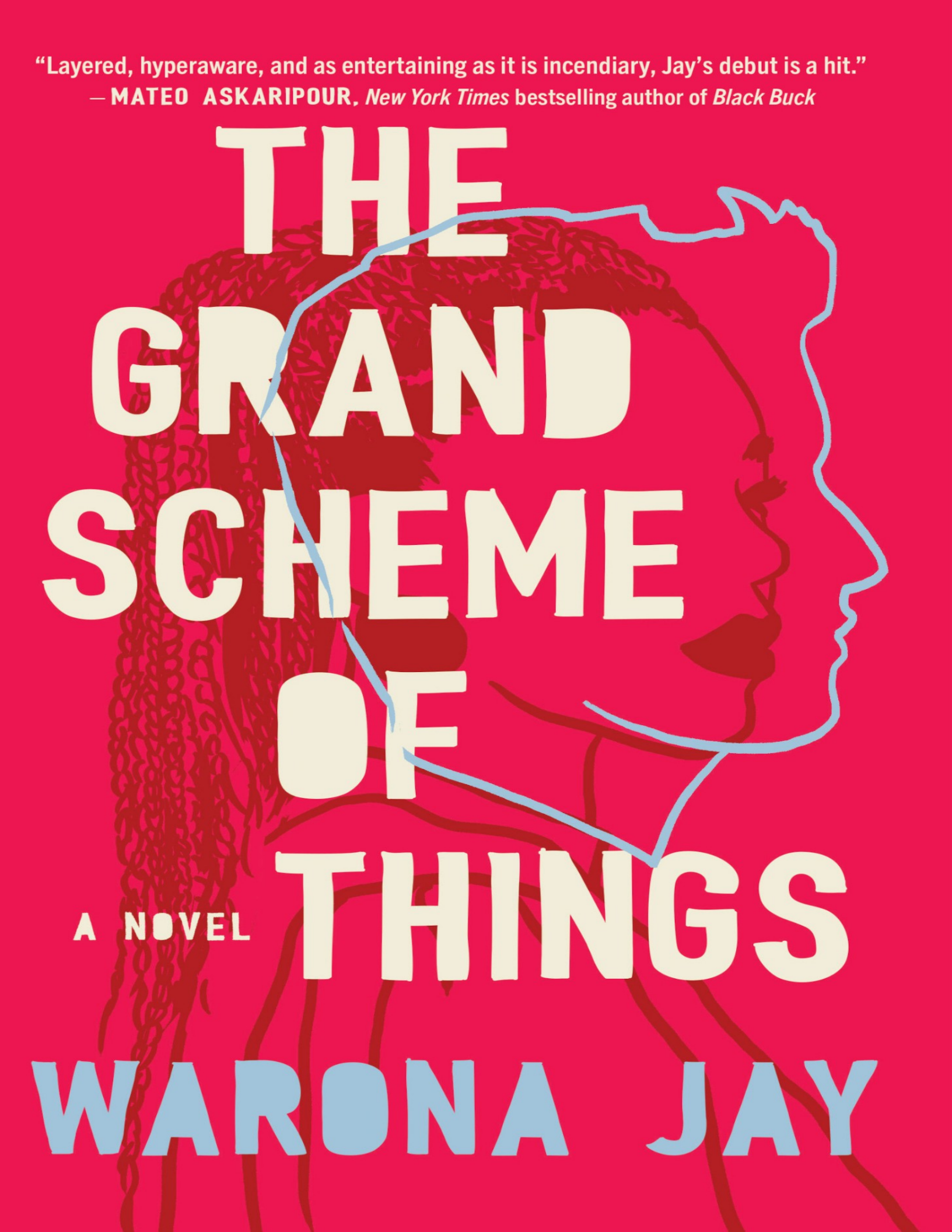
"Layered, hyperaware, and as entertaining as it is incendiary, Jay's debut is a hit."
—MATEO ASKARIPOUR, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Black Buck*

THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS



A NOVEL

WARONA JAY

THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS

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To Waz, circa 2013. Don't stress! You'll be just fine.

It takes time to reject the most important lie: that black people can't do the same things that white people do unless a white person helps them.

—*BlacKkKlansman* (2018), dir. Spike Lee

EDDIE

i

The Man in the Café

October 2015

In your defense, it was really busy on the day we met.

You probably felt that you had no choice but to sit at the empty spot beside me. Nobody ever chooses the tables that face the windows, the ones with the stools too high off the ground, where if you place your belongings beneath you, it's a whole maneuver just to reach down and grab them. It's usually only if they have no other choice. Of course, I'm generalizing preferences, and I'm excluding myself from the generalization. I love window tables in cafés. This particular spot had been mine for weeks before the fateful day we met. I would sit right where the bustling street in Holborn worked as a foreground, hammering away at my laptop in either focused ferocity or erratic desperation, with a piping-hot mocha to the left of me, every weekday for a few hours, in the same chair, in the same café, like clockwork. I'd often have a chair left between me and the next stranger, so I would have preferred it if you had scanned the room for a little longer so you could find a free spot elsewhere, or anywhere to give me space for myself. But this one day, nobody was giving up space. The café was getting busier and busier, with activity climbing towards its lunchtime summit just as you came in. I wouldn't have given you a second glance if you had walked past, but you stopped after you entered, hesitated, and then walked to the seat right next to me. I moved my tote bag out of the way, and you smiled instinctively, harmlessly. I kept my eyes glued to my laptop screen as

you set up your things, but I was very much aware that you were there, floating, hovering, bobbing around in my periphery.

Art is a stressful game, Hugo. I know you know that now. But it was consuming me that day. I was trawling through the script for the play I was working on, so, so close to the end, yet so far away. I had the passion for it, but not the discipline. I had the dream, but not always the drive. I was excited, but I was also stressed. And to thwart the stress, I would take a smoke break every hour, to the hour. I'd start rolling up Golden Virginia tobacco into a Rizla paper, stick in a menthol filter, and then step outside, directly ahead of the window, where I could keep an eye on my things. I found myself turning to you after I licked the cigarette closed. I politely asked you to watch my belongings while I stepped out to degenerate my lungs, and you politely obliged. You were a faceless stranger. Sometimes I cherish that first hour we sat together, with no knowledge of one another. It was peace, for us to blend into the café, become a part of everything else, all consumed by our own lives and worries. It was peace before your life became mine, before mine became yours.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried, but I couldn't help but notice that you're working on something interesting," you said to me around five minutes after my return. I turned to look at you properly for the first time. I was slightly intimidated, wondering what on earth compelled this man to have an ounce of interest in me. I was self-conscious, knowing I smelled like a fresh ashtray, so I internally tensed at the sound of your introductory apology. I thought you were going to bring up my disgraceful habit. British people have a way of using an apology to convey opposing things; it represents 50 percent regret, and 50 percent inconvenience. I relaxed once I realized you were just being deferential. "Is that... a script for a play, or a show, or something?" you asked. Unlike me, you did not smell like a fresh ashtray. I remember thinking, *I bet his cologne is the most expensive recommended retail price Hugo Boss, or a limited-edition Abercrombie & Fitch fragrance or some shit like that*. Of course, I didn't know the retail prices of men's cologne, and you'd later come to tell me that those brands were on the modest end of the price scale: "Creed Aventus is my go-to, typically." But it wasn't really money I could smell. It was just whatever I couldn't afford.

"Umm, it's just a personal project. A play." I tried not to say too much. You nodded, still looking over at my laptop. I thought, *Should I have locked my screen when I went*

outside? Closed the laptop? But I didn't think you'd care. Strangers aren't usually that interested in other strangers.

"A play? That's amazing. Sorry, I just saw a page from the corner of my eye. I didn't touch anything, I promise. But the script, it sounds interesting. What's the play called?"

"It's called *The Worthy*," I said. "It's this kind of... near-future dystopia."

"Oh wow. A dystopia. What's it about? If you don't mind me asking."

"It's about a lot of things, really. Mainly national identity, citizenship, capitalism, that sort of thing. I'm still working on it, so the specifics aren't all quite there yet."

"That's very impressive. When did you start it?" I quickly glanced over at your screen, where I could see an application form for something. The page had expired due to a lack of activity, so you would have had to refresh it. I guess getting swept into the sweet embrace of procrastination was at least one thing we had in common.

"I've been working on it since the late summer. I started it around August, and I'm nearly done. Hopefully by next month, or December. I think I'll spend the Christmas holiday tweaking it."

"That's great. I'm quite into theater myself." You took a sip of your coffee. "I love the West End. I love drama in general. Films, TV. Do you work for anybody? Should I expect to see this anywhere?"

"Uhhh, no." I shook my head. "It's just a personal project. I'll try and get it out there myself, but we'll see. It's a long road to stardom." I chuckled uneasily. I had completely lost my creative train of thought at this point; it was going to be a ball ache to try to get back into the script. "I graduated from Kingston University in drama and creative writing, which was not exactly in my parents' life plans for me."

"Really? Wow." You frowned in surprise, and then your expression softened as you stared through the window, out at the busy road ahead. "Chasing your dreams is always worth a shot every now and then, isn't it?"

"Sure. Well, what do *you* do, then?" I rallied a question back, somewhat intrigued by your response.

"Oh, uhhh, I'm a master's student. LSE. Law. Fun stuff."

"You don't sound too convinced."

"Like I said, I have a great love for theater. But law runs in the family, so the road has been somewhat paved for me," you said, shrugging lightly. You didn't need to expand on

that point. As I looked you up and down, it all made sense. What struck me, however, was that your assurance towards obtaining a career in what I thought must be an extremely competitive profession didn't necessarily read as enthusiasm or pride. I was quick to wonder whether most people with privilege felt resigned to it, or whether you were something of an outlier.

"I guess sometimes we know what our destinies have in store for us." I smiled, closed my laptop, and jumped off the stool to collect my bag. I had to leave; I was getting too stressed out, thinking about where my life was going, terrified at not knowing. But you were set for life. I knew that from the moment I saw you.

"What's your name, by the way?" you asked, once you realized I was making a run for it. "I'd love to see the finished product at some point. I'm sure it'll be out there in the world one day."

"My name's Eddie. You can add me on Facebook if you want," I found myself saying, taking my phone out of my pocket. "What's your name? I can add you now."

"My name's Hugo," you said. "Hugo Lawrence Smith. Lawrence with an *A-W*, not an *A-U*. But I'm just Hu to most."

"Nice. I'll see you around, Hu." I had no intention of seeing you around.

You nodded and smiled courteously as I turned away. I laughed internally at the revelation of your name. You weren't *wearing* Hugo, you *were* Hugo. You were a living, breathing embodiment of splendor. It was etched into your linen shirt, your crisp trousers, your charcoal-gray overcoat, your hazel eyes, your diplomatic smile, your attention-commanding posture. Even though you were a coward at heart, your outward form was a hiding place from that truth.

• • •

See, Relebogile Naledi Mpho Moruakgomo is quite a mouthful of a name if you've never heard it before, I'll admit. My mother couldn't decide which name she liked best, so she took all three she was considering, scooped them up into her hands in Gaborone's Princess Marina maternity ward, and stuck them onto my birth certificate without a second thought. My father had no say whatsoever; they had this idiosyncratic deal that if I

came out a boy, he could pick my name. My mother was elated that I was a girl. I had my father's surname, anyway—that should be enough, she'd huffed. When we moved to England, Naledi ended up winning the space where Relebogile stood, just to make things easier for everyone else, and that was the name I'd hold from there on. But even a name that was easier for everyone else wasn't going to be *easy* for *everyone*. I'd be lying through my teeth if I said I had always hated my name, because there was a time—a blissful moment—where I would assertively correct my peers on its pronunciation. No, it's not Nail-dee, it's not NAR-leh-dee, it's not Nah-leh-DIE, it doesn't rhyme with Malachi, it rhymes with Eddie, it's *Naledi*. You'd think the English language would be more accommodating to the arrangement of the letters, you'd think it would be easier, but it has its trials and tribulations on the British tongue. And don't even get me started on the rest of my names.

It didn't help that as I sauntered into my teenage years, social standing and appearance became everything, and I had a name that was practically oral acrobatics, a name that had me growing tired of racking up three times the number of introductions to strangers than the average local, a name that received a predictable scroll of questions about the meaning. A suggestion that "Eddie" might be easier. It didn't help that in my weariness, by the time I started university, I gave in to that request.

So that was naturally how I introduced myself to you. I was Eddie. No, it wasn't short for anything, yes, my parents knew what they were doing giving me a boy's name, it just added to the flair, the zaniness of my character, it built me up for the judgmental world around me, they thought it would get me further in life, that's why they did it. I told you a year after we'd first met that it wasn't actually Eddie, it was short for Naledi. You looked at me funny and asked me why I went on that faux spiel about my name's origin, and I told you it's the same reason that when someone asks me where I'm *really* from, I'll have a different genesis, because they don't really care, it doesn't really matter. My name is Relebogile Naledi Mpho Moruakgomo, but my name is Eddie. You thought Naledi sounded cooler, more unique, but I could only translate that as it sounded more Other, and I was tired of that kind of attention.

I'll never truly know now if you genuinely understood where I was coming from, considering the sequence of events that have occurred thus far, but I think that was the beauty of it. You never truly understood, and you never really cared, and your name was

easy on the ears, your face was easy on the eyes, your smile was easy on the heartstrings, and that was why I chose you.

ii

She Comes with Rain

July 2015

My mother must have known I wasn't straight.

Of course, it can be difficult to discern one's sexuality, but there was a hint in the fact that I had never shown any interest in boys growing up, and the very first person I ever loved, who I would have died for, was female. I say my mother must have known because I didn't exactly try to hide it. I'd always mention Blue to her, and she had met her a handful of times. But the way the patriarchy is built, it can be easy to conclude that two girls kissing are just besties who love pillow fights and comparing each other's labia for the hell of it. It can be easy to conclude that two girls kissing are just openly sexual while being emotionally platonic. Unless one of us proposed to the other in broad daylight in front of the general public to witness, even just holding hands could harbor some heterosexual clarification. I hadn't officially told my mother I had a real-life, living, breathing girlfriend until the summer I completed my studies at Kingston. I came out to her a few weeks before my graduation, which was roughly three months before I met you.

• • •

The news wasn't exactly digestible to an African woman born and raised in a devout Christian African world (a colonial conundrum, in my eyes). I had to tell her eventually, and the fear and danger I felt, the bile that rose up my throat, the tremor I could feel in

the core of my being, making its way to my dewy palms, was always going to be a part of pushing that closet door open.

"You have a *girlfriend*? *Ao*. Since when?" She didn't break her gaze from the dinner she'd made us. I had just moved off of campus, and I was back at home. We'd take turns making dinner because it was basically just the two of us; my brother also lived here, but as a fresher, he spent most of his time crashing at his friends' uni accommodation. This evening, it was my mother's turn to cook. She scooped a madombi dumpling into her hand, dipped it into the vegetable gravy, and bit into it ferociously.

"It's Blue." My throat was incredibly dry, no matter how many times I took a sip of the drink beside me.

"Waitseee..." She shook her head, still chewing. "This is ridiculous. She is your friend, no? *Wa re* your *girlfriend*? *Wa tshameka*. You are pulling my leg. She is your friend."

"We've been together since last year, around Christmas. She's more than my friend, Mum. I'm not joking. *Ga ke tshameke.*" I could have thrown up, right there, right then. Instead, I swallowed. My food had turned cold at this point.

My mother continued. "Do you know what job you are getting after you graduate?"

"I'm not sure yet, I'm still looking—"

"Was that degree worth it? The arty-farty dancing onstage pretending to be the next Shakespeare? Have you got job prospects? *That* is my main concern."

Shakespeare didn't dance onstage, I wanted to say. *He was a playwright. That's what I am. That's what I want to be.* "I'm still working on it, Mum. You can't expect me to have a job the second I leave university."

"If you had just done law, or business like Nicholas, we wouldn't be having this conversation. There are jobs everywhere for those professions. Theater? Unless you are a descendant of Shakespeare, forget about it."

"These things take time. And you're changing the subject. I told you, I'm in a relationship. Blue is my girlfriend."

"We are going to Botswana this summer, right after your graduation. The tickets have already been booked. Your family want to congratulate you on being the first of us to finish schooling In the UK. There will be a graduation party in Gaborone. Then you are going to visit your grandmother in Lobatse. Your father also wants to see you. The two of you can arrange something, you can visit him in Francistown for a week or so."

"Are you joking? I just told you I'm gay. Do you have nothing to say?"

"Don't mention that stupid word in this house again, Naledi," she said more assertively. I was crying silently, having lost my appetite. "And don't mention any of this when we get to Bots. *Se bue jalo. Tswee-tswee*. Especially not to your father. *Wa utlwa?* Am I clear?"

• • •

I stayed over at Blue's house the night before my graduation, as she was set to join me at the ceremony for support. With her was where I'd always felt most comfortable. I loved to fall asleep to her heartbeat at night, and her arms had always been the softest. It was the only thing that made me happy; a reminder that she was a living human being like me, that she felt just as happy with me too.

I knew my mother was going to see her the next day, which had me feeling stubborn and embarrassed at the same time. It had been a few weeks since our pointed conversation and she had since kept our talks minimal, only bringing up graduation plans and the like. I remember telling Blue everything the night I came out to my mother, crying over the phone and telling her that my relationship with my family was probably over and done with, and that the trip back to my home country was going to be more of a trial and tribulation than a wholesome return. I knew spending time with Blue and her family before my big day was something of a *fuck-you,* but it wasn't a welcome one. Although nothing could make me ever compromise my love for Blue, it didn't mean that it was a carefree decision and not a mortifying one in the face of my family's potential disdain. I just couldn't stand the judgment.

"You're so fucking beautiful, do you know that?" Blue said to me the next morning. My ceremony was in the early afternoon, and I had texted my mother and younger brother Nick to meet me near the venue an hour beforehand. Until then, I was getting myself prepped, hiding out with Blue in her bathroom—the only place we could find a semblance of privacy from her hovering, overenthusiastic parents. She kissed me and smiled with pride before I put my lipstick on.

"You always say I'm beautiful," I responded.

"I mean it. You're stunning."

I kissed her, sliding my fingers through her night-colored coils of hair. "Look at you. You put just as much effort into today as I have." I gazed at her outfit: an off-white ruched blouse paired with peach-colored cropped trousers. She was wearing the gold-plated amazonite chain necklace I had bought her for her birthday a few months prior. It sat so gloriously on her chest. I really, really did love her.

"You mean how you always put in so much effort when you turn up to any of my gigs, no matter how big or small?" she chuckled. "It means the world to me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." I smiled.

"I'll be in your position next year. Getting ready to put my graduation hat on and all that."

"You mean mortarboard?"

"Okay, I get it. You know fancy words. Let's have breakfast before we start running late." She kissed me on the cheek before opening the bathroom door, and we walked down into the kitchen, where her parents were making food for us. Her father was playing Alton Ellis's rendition of "Workin' on a Groovy Thing" while her mother bopped along, flipping pancakes. I remember how I felt that day: so happy. But I was also in so, so much pain. I never knew rejection could feel so visceral until this point. In an alternate universe, I was dancing around to music with my mother, but not in this one. This pain—the pain of rejection, the pain that came with being turned away for just being exactly who I was—holy shit, Hugo.

There was more to come.

• • •

When Queen Elizabeth made a visit to Botswana in 1995, it was raining. The locals saw it as a sign; the rain was something the queen brought on. They nicknamed her Motlalepula, which means "she comes with rain." On my first visit to the country in nearly three years, the rain was torrential, which was quite an eyebrow raiser for a semidesert in the winter. An uncommon occurrence. I'm not leaping to any conclusions,

but one could assume that I brought the rain on. Of course, nobody would think that. I'm not British royalty.

We were greeted by my aunty Yarona and my cousin Tshiamo outside Sir Seretse Khama Airport, before hurrying into their car under the shelter of semi-functioning umbrellas we clutched tightly with our free hands. We were lucky our suitcases weren't more soaked through by the time we thrust them into the boot and slid into the backseats.

I had felt so uneasy on the whole journey from England, knowing that my mother was sitting on a Pandora's box of information that she was either ready to open up to chaos and familial scrutiny, or keep sealed shut. I'd had no time to delve into searching for theater work between leaving university and flying to Botswana, so I wasn't sure what I was going to tell my relatives when they hounded me with questions. I definitely wasn't sure what I was going to say when they asked me if I was any closer to walking down the aisle. Nosy aunts always think they have a stake in the workings of your private life, like a listener's commitment to a podcast conversation. I didn't need a dissection of my life, a poking and prodding at my goals and aspirations. Being the first child in my mother's family to be raised outside the country meant that every return was like Neil Armstrong bringing remnants of the moon back with him, with everyone clambering for a piece. Only, I wasn't so sure they'd be as impressed with the remnants of my truth.

"So how is London treating you?" Tshiamo asked as we took a long walk around the block after the rain had passed in the late evening. We had stopped at a tuckshop, where she bought us some Fizz-Pop sweets and bartered for some cheap cigarettes for us to smoke on our walk. She had perfume in her handbag to cover ourselves with once we'd finished smoking. It brought me back to the summers I used to spend with her, when she took me under her wing once she noticed I was the outcast cousin who others were reluctant to interact with. Naturally, I started sharing less and less in common with my distant family as time went on, but she'd make sure to bring me along to house parties and car-park functions so I could get a piece of the fun. We'd stagger home exhausted, sneaking into the yard in a mask of body spray to cover the smells of debauchery that clung to our skin and hair.

"London's okay," I sighed. "I'm sure you know I've just graduated."

"Arts, right?" She sucked in the nicotine. "Congrats."

"Playwriting. Thanks."

"Nicholas has just finished his freshman year, *akere*? I forgot what he studies. Why didn't he come with you guys?"

"He's Interrailing around Europe with his friends. And yeah, he finished his first year. Business and management at Queen Mary."

"Queen this, Queen that." She laughed. "Who even is that? I didn't know there was a Queen Mary."

"She was King George V's wife, so she wasn't an actual queen."

"*Eish*, it's too complicated, man. Anyways. Are you looking forward to your grad party next week?"

"No," I answered honestly. "I'd rather be anywhere but here." She was oddly silent after my admission. I sensed she knew something she wasn't supposed to disclose, so I elbowed her lightly, asking her what was up. *"Ke eng*?"

"I overheard my mother on the phone a week ago. I think she was talking to your mother. *Wa re*, something about... I don't know, I couldn't fully make out everything they were saying. But I think they were talking about you."

My heart stopped. "What could you hear?"

"*Ba re*, they expected you to marry a *lekgoa* at the most, but they weren't expecting you to be with a *kgarebe*."

"They thought I'd marry an English man before I got with a girl?" I repeated, breaking out into a nervous chuckle.

"*Eeh.* My mother said it's just a phase. Maybe you'll snap out of it."

"Do you know the girl I always post on my Instagram? That's the *kgarebe*."

"The yellowbone? *Ke a itse*. I thought she was just your best friend."

"No. She's the girl I love. She's not a 'phase.' She's the only person in this world who I can be around and be myself." I stubbed out the butt of my cigarette, suddenly feeling nauseous. A stray dog trotted along the red sand, blanketed in night, on the side of the road.

"*O seka wa bolelela ope* that I told you. You haven't heard anything from me, okay?"

"I won't tell anyone."

Tshiamo turned to me. "My mother said that England must have corrupted you. Your family went there for a better life, and this is how you respond, by falling into the wrong

circles."

"*Bathong*! I'm not exactly moving blow around the boroughs. I'm not part of a gang. Why do people think they know me? Nobody knows me. Nobody gets me."

"*Ga gona mathata*, Naledi. Don't worry. It's just elders being elders. Parents being parents. Speaking of parents, when are you seeing Uncle Karabo?"

"Ideally, never. Realistically, in a few days. I'm absolutely dreading it, though. Especially with all this... newfound information."

I knew that visiting my father would be a stressful ordeal. He moved back to Botswana when I was ten and had since been running his own trucking company there. To my dismay, he was still a devoted member of a religious sect called God's Living Angels (a cult, to put it frankly). He'd ended up falling into it during our annual trips to Botswana, and my parents divorced shortly after, having different ideas about where Nick and I should be raised. My father had wished to return to his roots and live out his life as a committed man of God, away from the corruption of secular society. But my mother had been reluctant to follow suit. *It will hinder Naledi's and Nicholas's studies,* she had told him. *It will stunt their chances for better opportunities.* So she'd decided to stay in England with me and my brother, fraying the tethers that held her to my father. At the time, I had a vague understanding that there had been a gradual clash of religious beliefs, but I knew now it had been more than that.

Before my father left the UK for good, he had been made redundant from his third job, and he was struggling to find a new one. A better one. My mother's jobs as a nurse and hairdresser were comfortable enough, but my father wanted to be hired into a position of authority, or at the very least a job in an office. He was tired of working as a taxi driver, a bus driver, a warehouse worker. He wanted to wear a white collar. But no matter how many applications he put in, no matter how much education and work experience he had, he got nothing back. It was Radio Silence. Mr. Karabo Moruakgomo was stumped. From the bottom of my heart, I believe that was the real reason he'd moved back to Botswana, although he would never admit it.

Tshiamo took out her perfume and gave us both a spritz. "Can I come back to London with you? Life is too simple here. *Ke batla go* live my best life."

"I'm not even sure I'm living mine." I huffed. "Seriously, though... an English man? They really thought that? I'll be dead before I even associate with *any* kind of man. End

of story."

I think back a lot to that statement I made, Hugo. I'm sure you can see the irony in it now.

• • •

When I eventually went to visit my father in Francistown, I wasn't shocked to find out he was still steadfast in his belief that my mother had made the wrong decision by keeping us in the UK. He ranted on about how Nick was the saving grace, the one who could prove her right. He'd become the potential moneymaker, the one worthy of the citizenship we held. My father made this loud and clear, harping on about how I'd abused my chances in a better world. I'd followed the corrupted, the hippies, the artists, the kind of lifestyle that only a *lekgoa* could afford to live. I had sabotaged my citizenship, according to him. I didn't deserve the opportunities I had been given abroad. I was not worthy of them.

But this time, I didn't feel as dejected as I usually would during his degrading, irrational, holier-than-thou, condescending lecture. Instead, it actually gave me a second wind. Then and there, the accumulating pressure to make my family less ashamed of me became the inspiration for a new script idea. I was going to write a play, and I knew exactly what it was going to be about. I was going to title it *The Worthy*, and it was going to be a near-future dystopia that explored national identity, citizenship, and capitalism. I needn't say any more because you know the play very well. But that was where the idea stemmed from, how the script blossomed. It was birthed from a rant my father showered over me, two months before I met you. A rant that concerned my supposed lack of belonging, my lack of worth, in the only place I called home.