

Lightning Kills

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Granmé came to visit in the summer of 1982 when I was eight years old, and she never left. She brought two suitcases with her. One held her clothes, her hats, her headwraps, and her Bible, and bundled inside the clothing was food, lots of it; pickled mango, tamarind balls and pepper sauce. The other suitcase was private.

When Granmé walked through the Arrivals door at the Winnipeg airport, everyone turned their heads in her direction. She was a tall, dark-skinned woman, and her head was topped with a bright-coloured piece of fabric knotted in the front. “Pitit mwen!” Granmé shouted, and she dropped her overstuffed purse on the ground and ran toward Mom. Both of them started crying and babbling in a language that sounded a bit like the French I was taking at school, but not really. Dad’s lips were pulled tightly together, and his eyes reflected the confusion I felt.

At last, Mom pulled Granmé towards us. “Oh, yon ti kras!” Granmé said to me, and opened her arms for a hug. In the air-conditioned environment, heat radiated from her bulk, as if from a great furnace within her. It crackled and flared, and I stepped back.

“Give her time,” said Mom. “She’ll warm up to you.” We waited at the baggage carousel for Granmé’s things, and Mom said to me, “Praise, why don’t you tell Granmé about school?”

School was almost a month into my rearview mirror by then, and it seemed absurd to speak to a woman like Granmé, who flickered with such roaring power, about the mundane details of soccer and subtraction.

“Praise gets good marks,” Mom said. “Her teacher says she’s very bright.”

“Hmmm,” said Granmé, followed by a string of words I didn’t understand. “Pli makak ka monté pié-bwa, pli ou ka wè bonda-li.”

“What did you say, Granmé?”

“You ain’t teach the child?” Granmé asked Mom, and then she said, “Higher monkey climb on tree, more of its backside you does see.”

“What language is that?”

“French,” said Granmé, and “Creole,” said Mom.

Granmé saw one of her suitcases and started toward it. “I’ll get it,” my father said, but when he reached out his hand, Granmé slapped it away. She lifted the suitcase off the carousel and lugged it across the floor.

“Manman,” my mother said. Her mouth, reddened with lipstick, wavered like a bleeding cut.

“You at least have not forgotten the old ways, have you, Sagesse?” asked Granmé.

“We’ll discuss that later,” my mother said, and I wondered, of the things I was not supposed to hear, if this was one of the boring ones, like the bickering my parents did over bills and home maintenance, or one of the exciting ones, like what my mother called Dad’s sister’s “wild lifestyle,” or stories about the crazy clients from Dad’s law office.

When we finally arrived at home, after an hour and a half drive from the Winnipeg airport to Morden, Granmé opened her first suitcase in the living room. She unwrapped her clothing to reveal the snacks she had brought for us. Then she dragged the second suitcase into the guest bedroom and said no one could come in until it was ready. Three days after she arrived, I lingered in the hallway outside the room. As if I had willed it, the door swung open and Granmé poked out her head, crowned with another wrap, this one in a metallic silver fabric. “Well, come in, child.”

Red and white candles dripped wax onto large mirrors that covered the dresser and the bedside table. In a corner of the room, several boxes were piled up and covered with cloth, and on them was an artfully arranged display of strings bright with beads, fruits, and various pots and containers.

“It how I feed Eshu,” Granmé said when I asked what it was.

“Who is Eshu?”

“He a god.”

“God?” I looked upward.

"No, no," Granmé said, "Eshu is who you see every day. Some say Eshu is evil, but who don't have some evil in them? Eshu is the self you hide."

"Then why do you feed him?"

"What you don't feed grow angry," Granmé said. "Tonné ka fè pè mé zéklè ka tjwé." Before I could ask, she said, "The thunder only frighten, but the lightning does kill."

"So how do you know if you see Eshu?"

"Bring me that Bible," she said, and I scampered to get it from its resting place on Eshu's altar. She opened it, and read, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." She stopped. "You know it?"

I tried to remember what I had learned in Sunday school. "The Sermon on the Mount?"

Granmé grinned, and her lips peeled away from puffy toothless gums. "That's right," she said. "The Gospel of Matthew."

On Sunday morning, as usual, my mother woke me early to get me ready for church. As usual, I wailed as she tussled with my loose but snarled curls. "Shh," Mom said, "don't wake Granmé."

"Isn't she coming with us?"

"I don't think she'd like our church."

"I wouldn't, eh?" Granmé stood in the doorway in her housecoat, holding her Bible. "You know I never miss church on a Sunday, Sagesse."

"This church is different." Mom tugged at a tangle. "Sit still, Praise."

"Different how? Because they're those Mennonites or whatever it is you call them?"

Mom said, "They're strict. They—"

"Me not gonna start sacrificing animals in the place," said Granmé. The change in her accent matched the flash in her eyes. I could feel those flames licking my cheeks from feet away. "And what are you doing to the child's hair? Give me that brush."

After my hair was suitably calmed and braided, Granmé put on a flowery dress and a purple hat with a wide brim, a cluster of plastic fruit and a big bow. "Where's your hat, Sagesse?" she asked.

"I don't wear one," said Mom.

"What kind of church is it where women don't wear hats?" Granmé complained. She continued to whisper her criticism to Mom throughout

the service. The music was so dreary. Where were the drums? Why was Pastor Penner talking so much about alcohol? Her hat bobbed up and down, and Dad tapped his foot and blew out his cheeks.

After church was Sunday school. Jacob Penner, the last of Pastor's six sons, sat behind me. While the teacher wrote on the chalkboard, he yanked one of my braids and asked, "Who's that darkie you brought to church?"

"That's my Granmé," I said.

"What?"

"It's French for grandmother."

"No it isn't," piped up Jacob's friend Toby, whose mother was French-Canadian but, like Mom, had been baptized as a Mennonite. "Mémère is French for grandmother."

"That's a different kind of French," I said. "Granmé told me. Our French is from Trinidad. It's mixed with English and African."

"So she's African?" said Jacob. "If she's African, then you're African too."

I hadn't considered that. African, I knew, was bad. "I'm not African," I said. "My mom is from Trinidad."

"All of you are African," Jacob said. "You're Black. You're children of Cain. That means you're cursed."

"Praise Epp, Jacob Penner, Tobias Unger, pay attention," said our teacher.

"Mom," I asked on the ride home, "who are the children of Cain?"

She swivelled in her seat and her eyes grew darker and narrower. "Where did you hear about that?"

"Jacob Penner. He said we're cursed because we're African."

Mom breathed in loudly and said, "That little—"

Dad squeezed Mom's shoulder and she fell silent. Dad said, "Cain was Adam's son. He murdered his brother."

"But what does that have to do with me?"

Granmé said, "Nothing. That boy trying to say that Cain was Black, but that don't make no sense, because if he was Black, so was his mother and father, which means the first people is Black and then everyone else is Black too."

"But then why are we cursed?"

"We not cursed," Granmé said. "They only saying that because they does love to curse us. They doing evil to us that they doesn't want to face, so they blame us."

“You mean they’re like Eshu?”

My mother’s breath came out in a hiss. She pressed her fingers to her mouth and shook her head at me as her eyes darted sideways towards my father.

Granmé put her hand on my knee and said, “I’ll show you a real curse, pitit mwen. Later.”

The light from the red candles flickered against the walls of Granmé’s room as she pulled the second suitcase out from under the bed. I craned my neck to see inside, but she shooed me away and shielded what she was doing with the formidable mass of her body. When she let me look, she had some twine in her hand. She wrapped, pulled and folded it until a little figure took shape in her palm. She put a triangle of red cloth over it and began stuffing something inside.

“Spanish moss,” she said, showing me a handful. She held the figure up. “This is called a pwen. We does use it for healing and not for harming. Harming is a very strong power, you understand? You don’t harm if you can heal.”

She set the pwen on Eshu’s altar. “We doesn’t harm,” she said, “but we bring people to Eshu who already does do his work.” She took my hand in hers. “What’s the name of that boy, the one who say we cursed?”

“Jacob Penner.”

“Eshu,” Granmé said, “If you be in Jacob Penner, show us.” I sensed a great space opening up inside Granmé, a space big enough for Eshu to crawl into. A place for him to hide, or a place where he could unfurl his wings and grow. Granmé sang, “Si m fè mal, Bondje va vire do ban mwen.”

I did not want to shatter the moment by asking, but then she sang in English, “If I do evil, God will turn against me.” Then she sang the French slowly, over and over until I learned the words and began singing with her.

The next day, I had a softball game, and Dad came home early from the office.

“How was work?” Mom asked, as she served up chicken pot pie.

Dad pulled off his tie and placed it beside his plate. “Busy,” he said. “Lots of bankruptcies, lots of land sales. Got to go into the city on Thursday to meet with the judge.”

“God is the only judge,” said Granmé.

“Eat up!” Mom said, her eyes bright and her mouth a taut line.

I was first to bat, and Jacob Penner was the pitcher. He hurled the ball toward my face and I ducked. “Strike!” called the umpire, Noah Penner. Jacob’s older brother.

“It was a ball!” I yelled.

“Strike one!” Noah yelled back at me.

Jacob threw the ball again, even higher than the last. But this time, I swung at it. My bat met the ball with a crack that resonated down to my bones. The next sound was the smack of the leather against Jacob’s mouth. He sank to the ground, blood spurting between his fingers, as I rounded the bases. The crowd in the bleachers groaned and stared down at Jacob, but Granmé was on her feet, cheering for me. An arc of sizzling air stretched across the field, connecting Granmé and me.

“The Penner boy went to the dentist and they think they can replace the teeth,” Dad said at dinner the next day. “Pastor says they forgive Praise.”

Mom’s fork clattered against her plate. “Praise didn’t do anything wrong! There’s nothing to forgive.”

“She shouldn’t have swung at that ball,” said Dad. “But we all make mistakes. It’s okay, honey.”

Something slimy crept up the inside of my stomach. “He was trying to hurt me.”

“Oh, come on.” Dad’s forehead folded up like an accordion. “He’s Pastor’s son. He knows better.”

“Pli makak...” Granmé started, but the telephone rang, and Mom jumped up to answer it.

“Oh no,” she said, in a sigh that brought a flood of grief surging through the windows to extinguish the sun. Mom covered the phone with her hand and said, “Manman, Essie died.” She added, “That’s your aunt, Praise.”

Granmé got up from the table. “We must get everything ready.” She shuffled toward her bedroom. Mom and I followed. “Did you remind them to move the furniture in her room?” she asked.

“Why?” I asked.

Granmé said, “To ask the dead person to leave. She will linger for nine days, and on the ninth day, she will leave, but only if we convince her that this not the place for her no more.”

“What if we don’t do that?”

Granmé bent down so that her face was close to mine. “Then she will never leave.”

Dad had followed us too, and he said, “Enough! I will not have this pagan blasphemy in my home. This is God’s house.”

Mom said, “They are our customs, John. We will pray and read the Bible too.”

“Sagesse,” said Dad, “you gave me your word.” A lifetime stretched between them, pale and cool.

“Can we discuss this later?” asked Mom.

“I want her to go home,” said Dad. “She’s a bad influence on Praise.”

“She just got here!” said Mom. “I haven’t seen my mother in almost fifteen years, and you want her to leave?” I lay on my belly in the hall outside my parents’ room and my mother’s pain wrapped around me like the linen bandages that encased Egyptian mummies.

“You told me she was a Christian.”

“She is a Christian. She’s never missed a day of church in her life. She knows the Bible better than you, John.”

“But all these superstitions!” My father’s voice grew louder. “Bondje this, Bondje that—I don’t want it under my roof.”

“Bondje means God. It’s how we speak French. Bon Dieu. Don’t your parents worship in German?”

“Plautdietsch,” said Dad. “That’s different.”

I remembered something my mother had told me once. My dad didn’t want her to name me Praise. But when she nearly died giving birth to me, he relented. “Your name gives praise to the ancestors,” she told me. “The ancestors and the Most High.”

“Who is the Most High?” I asked.

“God. There are many different names for God.”

There were many different names for God, but Dad only wanted to use one. I had known Dad a lot longer than Granmé, but as I lay with my face pressed into the shag carpet, I hated him and I loved her.

Granmé’s flight home was booked for the afternoon on August 13. In the days leading up to her departure, Mom was quiet and her eyes were pink. Granmé however was cheerful. She taught me songs and chants and told me family stories. She handed me a world in those few days, one that still dwells within me.

On August 13, Granmé went out for her usual morning walk. When she hadn’t returned after an hour, Mom grew anxious, and by the second hour, she was frantic. She called Dad at the law office and he came

rushing home. “How inconsiderate!” he said. “She’s gone wandering off, no respect for other people’s time, and she’ll come waltzing back in like nothing happened. Just you wait.”

Half an hour later, he decided that Granmé was doing it on purpose. “She doesn’t want to go back, and she’s hiding somewhere.”

“Be reasonable, John!” said Mom. “Where could she go?”

After another half hour, there was a knock on the door. Mom opened it to reveal two RCMP officers. “Ma’am,” they said, “is Salomé Saint-Amour your mother?”

Mom was already on her knees, wailing as I had never heard her wail before. The cry of a newborn and the last howl of an old woman twisted together from her lips. All the tears Mom would ever shed fell in that moment, and I later realized it was not just her mother she mourned, but her country, her language, her identity.

It was Dad who asked, “What happened?”

“It was a car accident.”

“Granmé wasn’t driving a car,” I said.

The police officer blinked and cleared his throat. “She was struck while walking,” he said. “We don’t know who hit her.” He turned to Dad. “Should the little girl hear this?”

“She’s my grandmother,” I said. A great tree had planted its roots at my centre and the branches unfurled upwards. “And how could she get hit and you don’t know who did it? That means someone did it on purpose and they drove away.”

Dad came towards me, disapproval plowed into his face. “That’s enough, young lady. Go to your room.” I stood my ground, long enough to hear the police talk about the tire marks on the highway, the witnesses who heard an engine rev and saw a blue truck speeding away. “Praise. Now,” said Dad. He tried to grasp my shoulders, but I ducked around him and ran into Granmé’s room. I locked the door and threw myself onto her bed. It smelled like cinnamon, like ginger, like coconut oil. There was a faint hint of the sea. A wavering line of light seeped under the window.

I was still in Granmé’s room when Pastor’s wife and the other ladies arrived with the casseroles and the condolences, and Mom insisted I come out.

“The church will take up a collection to send your mother’s body home,” Pastor’s wife said to Mom.

You don't want her remains polluting the soil you walk on, I thought. I beamed Eshu's strength at her. There was only me now, only me to heal and harm.

Mom sniffled. "Why are you being so nice?"

When the ladies left, I crept up to Mom. "We have to move the furniture," I whispered. "In her room."

Mom wiped her eyes. "Of course," she said.

The bed was an old one, with an iron frame, and it would not budge. We left it, and began turning the dresser.

"What are you doing?" My father's voice splintered the calm that had overcome me as we worked.

"Just cleaning." My mother's body shook. Each tremor opened a fresh crack in the ground.

"Sagesse, don't lie to me. I will not have these voodoo rituals in my house. I told you."

"It's just, we have to." Mom had left it too late to explain who she was, but now she tried. "We have to pray for nine days, and on the ninth day, we watch to see which way her spirit goes, and we mark an X on the spot."

"Blasphemy! Paganism! I order you to stop it now," said my dad. "If I have to call Pastor, I will." That meant a shunning. I had heard how when you were shunned, you had to sit at a separate table to eat, and no one could talk to you, not even to ask you to pass the milk.

My mother stepped away from the dresser and covered her hand with her mouth. More tears formed in her eyes, glistening like shards of glass. "Then she will never leave," she whispered.

Later that night, I returned to Granmé's room. I pulled the second suitcase from under the bed. I sifted through chicken feathers, a goat-skin drum, bundles of herbs and grasses, bottles of rum, to find the twine she had used. I fashioned the first pwen, lumpy and misshapen though it was. I knew there was more than one person in the truck. I knew that it was not only those in the truck who had done harm. I wrapped and bundled and sang to myself, "Si m fè mal, Bondje va vire do ban mwen."

"Those are the worst pwens I've ever seen." My mother stood in the doorway, her hair secured in the curlers she wore to bed every night. Even in her grief, she had groomed herself for my father. "Look, you have to twist it this way." I handed her the twine and she sang with me,

“Si m fè mal.” Together, we made five pwens. Then we held hands and I thought of Eshu. Of Jacob Penner calling me cursed and then throwing that ball at my face, and Noah Penner letting him. An image of Dad floated into my brain along with theirs. I willed it away. He was still my father. Mom loved him. He had nothing to do with Granmé’s death. And yet, Eshu was in him, in those pale hands that had bathed me, tucked me into bed, clasped themselves in prayer in the pew beside me, and then had curled into fists when he forbade our ceremonies.

An ocean steamed at my feet, rose to my ankles, my knees, my hips. I bathed in Granmé’s strong soul, still with me. One drop of it was enough to sustain me. This great sea of song and blessing was more than I could ever contain.

Granmé’s body was flown back to Trinidad on August 21st, on the ninth day after her death. Mom wanted to go with her, and take me as well, but Dad said no. Later that afternoon, sirens shrieked down Main Street. The news flew from doorstep to doorstep, in whispers of horror, or suppressed glee. Noah Penner had run his truck into a ditch. The Jaws of Life attended, but there was no life for them to extricate. Just a crumpled pile of blue metal, and several empty cans of beer.

“You should take a casserole over to Pastor’s,” Dad said at dinner.

“Mm-hmm,” said Mom. “If I have time.”

Ten years later, on August 21st, 1992, I had just turned eighteen, and I was about to leave home. As I packed my bags, I thought I imagined the sirens. Until Mom pounded on my bedroom door to tell me that Abraham Penner had drowned in the creek.

On August 21st, 2002, I was visiting my parents. I had just received my doctorate in cultural anthropology. I had spent a year in Trinidad doing research into my thesis on French-Caribbean voodoo rituals, and I brought a suitcase back with me stuffed with candles, masks and potions. That was the year that my advisor proclaimed that voodoo traditions in Trinidad were dead. I was twenty-eight years old, still young enough to hammer nails of certainty into my own views on the world, but old enough now to see my mother’s life with an outsider’s perspective. Her trade of a country for a marriage, a career for a family, grief for resignation.

The sirens that day were for Pastor Penner, who had clung to his pulpit through a strong will and the support of a few elders. On the

anniversary of Granmé's ninth day, he walked into the sanctuary of the church, put a hunting rifle against his head and pulled the trigger.

I got married on August 13th, 2012, the anniversary of Granmé's death. Adan and I had planned to have the wedding in his home city of Jacmel, but Haiti was still hurting from the earthquake, and both the lack of infrastructure and the insensitivity of having a party persuaded us to switch the venue to Trinidad. It was Adan who talked me into a trip to Morden after that.

This time, I expected the sirens. Adan and I were praying in front of our altar to Eshu when they began. In due course, the news filtered down to me. Zachary Penner had overdosed.

"Do you think that's all of them?" my mother asked me that night, as I helped her in the kitchen. It was the first time we had spoken of the pwens.

"It is for now."

On August 13th, 2014, my daughter Salomé was born, and eight years later, I brought her to Morden. There were no sirens on the 21st, but my mother banged on my bedroom door in the middle of the night, during a storm. When we called 911, we told them not to hurry. My father was already gone.

"She let me keep him for a while," Mom said as we turned the dresser to face the wall, then picked up the rug and moved it to a different corner of the room. "She knew I was in two minds about him. She knew I needed him."

I had become used to the rush of the wind, the booming echoes that consumed me at times like this. I unhooked the mirror and rehung it with the glass against the wall.

Mom reached under her pillow. "He was this one," she said. The pwen was flattened, the colour rubbed from the twine after years of repose beneath my mother's head. "The last one." Her voice fractured into a plaintive sob. "I hope he makes it to heaven, like he wanted."

I took the pwen from her. It fit into the cup of my palm. "Not everyone who saith unto me Lord, Lord."

Mom placed the pillows at the foot of the bed. "He said Bondje right before he died."

"What?"

"I woke up and heard him struggling to breathe. I turned on the light and he looked at me and said, Bondje."

“Maybe there’s a Plautdietsch word that sounds like Bondje.”

“No, Praise. I know what I heard.” My mother’s jaw jutted out in a defiance I wished she had shown more often.

The wind pressed against my chest, almost knocking me off my feet. I put the pwen down on the relocated bedside table and went next door to check on Salomé. At eight, she was all motion and chatter during the day, but she still slept the way she had as a baby—with her arms flung above her head, her lips slack, her knees parted so that the space between her legs was a diamond. I placed my hand against her face, noting the darker brown of her skin. Granmé’s essence was there, pulsing under her great-granddaughter’s warm skin.

I crept out of the room, closed the door, and went out to the back yard. The prairie grasses sang in the wind beyond the fence. Tongues of lightning split the sky and rain lashed my shoulders. I turned to look back at the house and wondered which way my father’s spirit would fly in nine days. I would not try to catch it when it left.