

## Remembering the Scents of Pastel

There was always the smell of something spoiled in the house. As if there were secrets that hadn't been scrubbed off of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. Guilt that hadn't received the long attention of a good scrubbing either. Neglected stench was everywhere in our pastel house. And there was no amount of elbow grease that could displace the morsels plastered to the walls of Mommy's favorite casserole dish. There was her favorite one: charred yellow—have you ever eaten a worthwhile lasagna out of anything that sparkles?—scattered with miniature moon craters that distorted any shine it once had, and then there was the one she would volunteer for potlucks.

That is, if our family ever cared enough to show face at those types of performances. We called it "Side Piece." Nothing original but of these times enough to make my siblings and I laugh while our parents succumbed to their confusion. Our subterranean humor was subversive, and our parents didn't care what nicknames we assigned their china.

Laughing aside, I had hobbies. I was an aspiring narcoleptic, and like all aspiring narcoleptics, not shy about my impulses. We all knew if Side Piece was out on the stovetop that sleeping, at least for me, was the least risky option for dinner.

I wasn't born into this world a fighter. When sleep came knocking, I dutifully answered its call. And if ever there was a meal that nauseated my imagination, I'd always choose my loyalties, respectfully, saying "goodnight" and "thank you anyway" before disappearing upstairs.

Nobody wanted to understand why I couldn't suffer the bulky discomfort of swallowing an unfragmented piece of food I didn't enjoy, but everyone minded the rudeness unintended by my choice. *Trifling-ass ungrateful-ass sorry-ass hungry-ass*. I had a pact with my tastebuds I couldn't betray. *Principled-ass (stubborn-ass)*.

When I'd go to sleep on an empty stomach, my dreams were always more picturesque. On hollow days, when I fiended for anything sublime, I'd fast on my meals so that I could travel somewhere beyond the dull and slow of my day-mind. Somewhere beyond the emptiness of a day altogether caught up with being an interminable catastrophe. *My dreamy-ass*.

I remember one particular meal, but that's all: Mommy *had to* coat the broccoli with a spread she found from round the way. I hadn't been to the grocery store with her since I could respectably fit inside the trolley. I racked my brain to even remember this, and in the process, still couldn't recall the name of the grocery store. It always felt more like a maze in my mind; and who remembers the name of the maze they made it a mission to get lost in as a trolley-sized child?

With my father's nonchalance and skepticism of things he knew the truth about, I asked Mommy about the contents of the spread. I always took her to court real good when she'd do something completely innocuous which displeased me. If there were ingredients I disliked in a dish she prepared, the offense was no less than treason; the punishment no less than my most severe. Anyway, I didn't feel capable of dreaming that night. I knew I'd have the brand of nightmare that induced paralysis into my waking hours. I wanted to appreciate the landscape of a non-memorable night's sleep.

Something was missing, and before I knew what it was it came in the form of Mommy's child-I-swear-to-goodness-you-better-be-grateful-for-this-meal scowl.

Mommy never cursed. My father neither, but he liked to throw words into conversation like *damn* and *hell* from when I turned 14. Otherwise, my parents piously disrespected our rites of passage. And I, of course, was disgusted by all of the freedoms getting older conferred. Each of these freedoms, though never said, were only appropriate for a different kind of child, any other child really. Each also had an indication regarding their hypothetical possibility. This determination varied. Drinking: never, no. Private transportation (pronounced: becoming a *top rida*): never, no. Sex: never,

never, no. And to make matters exactly what they were, these freedoms for my sisters: never, never, ever, no.

We pretended that on an island of functional alcoholics that my newly minted 18 years had qualities that could resist the warm embrace of *culcha*. We pretended that our national motto wasn't a call-and-response: *Quo fata ferunt? Where fate leads?* To de liquor, we say. My parents' commitment to ignorance didn't bother me as much as other things.

By the time I could suggest that I had tasted alcohol, I was older than I should've been, frustrated, and far. 22 and living three oceans away: I was FaceTiming my sister with my face almost a face's length underneath the camera. She told me to lift my head.

"Nigga, if I wanted to see half of you I would've called my father." We had the same father.

I didn't blame you for wanting to see me but I also couldn't help the resentment mounting, nor did I wish to; I knew it would leave soon.

The spoiled smell returned.

All my dishes were clean and I didn't know how to make a casserole.

I spiraled that night for letting myself unhinge on that anger. The smell was putrid again. You kept staring at what was left of my three-months-old outline and knotted hair. I could see you and hear Mommy,

"I know someone who could take care of that mess, Tareeq, just come home." She giggled at how she amused herself.

There was no mirror near me. I saw my reflection in the small self-display screen on FaceTime. When you said these things, I appreciated just how big an ocean could be, and how much bigger three were, but when I saw my face, I saw your scowl looking back. I never wanted home—you—more, with my face a face's length underneath yours, tucked between your chin and conditional loving.

I refused Christmases at home for reasons still in the dark to me. I liked the feeling of being gone, I liked writing with a different spoiled smell around. Mommy and I had had a bone to pick over my appearance ever since I could raise my voice without it ascending an octave higher than hers, which coincided with the time I decided to ditch my basic, opt radically for a fade, and choose a shape for my slowly-turning peach fuzz on, proudly and only, my top lip. She was a fan of labels and called it my *rebel phase*—in my head I was just a certified rudebwoi—, characterized by, if anything concrete, her suspicion of my tired approach to her discipline. I think that's when my anxiety started to gnaw on the parts of me I loved and didn't know I loved until I had to give a damn about being honest with how I deflect everything in this world that pinches my spirit. At some point far from then and even further from now, our family prohibition on honoring pain changed states.

My first rite of passage was sent to me as an informal invitation by my father. It was a bouquet of my favorite flowers, pastel they were, sitting pretty outside my apartment door one day in November. I used to be good with dates, but I've since long lost the ability to remember that which isn't life or death. Days in November were indistinguishable mush, all except for the 23rd. (Happy birthday, Mommy, Auntie, and my first love: Life, life, death.)

My memory was worse now than it had ever been, but smells still triggered my recollection. The smell of the flowers linger.

It wasn't raining that day. Rain makes things wet. That day, all of the world's puddles became adrenaline junkies, ascended, and hurled their masses from the sky and into my neighbor's kitchen sink pipes. Of course, we burst. It wasn't raining: rain makes things wet. And things were sodden irreparably in that ruined apartment.

I lived in an impossibly small place with Charm. Charm was my neighbor's cat who I reluctantly babysat that November while she was off enjoying humidity in places closer to home.

Three oceans away. Her family was also from the Islands. She was the islandgyal to my rubebwoi persona, but nothing more. Nothing more.

And I was the neighbor who panicked and used her cat as an impromptu mop when I couldn't think straight. When that worked miserably, I mobilized my brigade of dirty socks which, despite all valiant efforts, couldn't force the flood into retreat. Everything in that apartment tried to suspend disaster momentarily; they absorbed all they could. Isn't that all we can ever do before our pipes burst? I wasn't born into this world a fighter; Mama raised a lover.

When I brought the flowers in, I giggled to myself Mommy's giggle. My imagination felt so clumsy when confronted with my father's unexpected care.

Only one person knew my favorite flower, a friend you had never met. I imagined you rummaging through your memory for an answer, sweating over how you could show up for me. *Maan*, you'd say anytime you got close to what you were searching for. You kept trying and then eventually you arrived at a name. You knew it was the right name because it felt like the right name. You never needed more confirmation than a good feeling to go ahead and make someone happy. That was the first similarity I ever realized between you and I, then it was our golf game. We looked nothing alike but our swing, God damn identical. I imagined you searching her name up on Facebook, trying to solicit answers from someone about my favorite chocolate. You went wrong there, you knew I was indifferent about dairy. But the universe was kind to your intentions and set you back on course.

You rubbed your belly as your way of offering gratitude to that which didn't have a hand to shake. You were your own man in this regard. You gave hugs to women, handshakes to men, and belly rubs when you couldn't figure out who or what you were thanking. You recognized me in her profile picture and chortled. You knew I had a life outside of our home but this picture confirmed that it wasn't fiction.

We were touching in the picture. You wondered if I had kissed her, then you wondered if I had kissed anyone. *Had you gone wrong somewhere? Had you raised a son, dare you think it, that doesn't kiss girls?* The thought of asking me crawled about awkwardly in your head. I hadn't kissed her, but I had babysat her cat named Charm, and was working on the courage to get lucky.

There I was, holding flowers, smiling. You were a man who liked clues. Never respected an answer outright, not without some toil to show for it. You got your proof of toil eventually, and that's why I received my favorite flowers, my November gift—I imagined.

I opened the card you attached to the bouquet, and all it read was that I could cry. I had never seen as much water as that day in November. I had never seen your handwriting either.

The smell of the bouquet distracted me from disaster momentarily. The smell of disaster, though, was deafening.