

From Time To Infinity

by J.R. Hughes

for Alex

She had a brother in New Jersey that we knew about. Two nieces and a nephew, the brother's kids, too. Kimya, Skittles and I were friends with them when they remembered to visit their wheelchair bound grandmother. Perhaps the wheelchair got too big or sickness without an end doesn't encourage the altruism we all wish to possess. Maybe sickness motivates us to disappear from our own lives. So, after awhile, those random visits of the grandchildren and the brother, were lost to vague memories of plans to build a little lodge in my backyard; a hand built, wooden lodge where we could host juice box parties.

It was just Leila and her wheelchair bound mother, in the house two doors down from mine, with the floors covered in empty promises, the conversations between mother and daughter always circling displacement and forgetting.

But who could really know? Leila, with a tight bun, with frosted white plastic frames people now wear for the purposes of ironic fashion, with a quick gait and bowing head, made a point to smile. To say hello. She kept to herself in the way some people do because they never learn there is a benefit to being unbound. She kept to herself but made sure to say hello if she passed by you. That is how I remember her.

On some evenings, when I would sneak out of my room, I'd sit on the verandah and count the streetlights. I'd count the stars in the sky and trace the moon with the tip of my finger and consider how anyone could make it through the night when there were so many lanterns creating innumerable paths for us to explore this half of life we'd grown accustomed to filling with dreams. 227TH street, after dark, is just as susceptible to suburban quietness as Westchester. It can get so quiet I forget I am there. Personhood is dependent upon being jostled by the unknowable forces of universe. Stillness and quietness can contain you. Can suspend time in amber.

Infrequently, I'd see Leila coming home close to midnight. She walked slowly but steadily and her head would bobble into full awareness like a seashell fighting to stay afloat in the ocean. She would weave her head up from the cement and into the space right in front of her. And, in an unexpected victory, she would hold her head, slicked black bun, squarely upright and settle into the heaviness of her body, the weight of being a person. Leila made no sound and I -- fascinated the composition of her loneliness -- didn't want to break the boundary of her well-cultivated space. I learned then: loneliness doesn't mean desperation for other people. It means we are struggling to find completion within ourselves and are met with disappointment. I wondered how she could carry so much of herself and still have the ability to smile. Her presence on the street, close to midnight, amidst the lanterns, was momentary. Leila must have kept her keys fitted in her hand because she opened the front two doors to her house without a sound and was enveloped by her home like a breath.

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One autumn Leila's mother died in the kitchen where her wheelchair was stationed and everyone on the block unfastened their lips with worry.

There was a brother, right?

I remember Leila having some nieces. Or were they nephews? She did have other family.

Her mother is gone to a better place. She was so sick and Leila was the one taking care of her. May God bless her. May God bless them both.

Who wants to live like that?

Who is going to be there for Leila?

Ashé.

What does descent look like? Mama told me no one is ever right after losing a parent. There is no age too old to feel like an orphan. No one ever wants to be both anchor and ship.

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No men came to the house. No women either. Leila cut her own hedges and shoveled her own snow and spoke with Mama sometimes which gave me access to the fact Leila had words to speak but preferred silence. Leila wore the same frames, and the same bun. Her jeans were the relaxed fit Wranglers of mid-waisted yesteryear; the jacket that carried her through the seasons was a muted Members Only knockoff with permanently bulging pockets. So dated, she never aged.

After her mother died, I gathered she took up more work. Night shifts. Her narrative began to intersect with mine or, I incorporated her into me because I was confident she was just as much of an anomaly to her coworkers, if there were any. I used the night to write Leila into any number of completely conceivable daydreams. In one, she was Leila The Brave: a lesser superhero with the power of disarming kindness -- a Mother Theresa sort without detractors. In another, Leila The Tortured Artist who was a modern imagining of Kafka without Max Brod and all of her art wallpapered her house. And given the quality of her haunting images, no one would live in the house after her because the art would bring all people to unstoppable tears. She was Leila The Alchemist, Leila The Spy, Leila The Myth, Leila The Exterminator, Leila The Cobbler, Leila The Astronaut, Leila The Alvin Ailey Dancer. Her most absorbing identity, though, was Leila The Woman. Leila The Woman wove so closely to reality, it was hard to determine if a person could wear womanhood. From what I'd constructed, womanhood was to sift through an everlasting collection of photographs and never see an image of yourself. Womanhood was isolating and protective by nature. For women, there is a sack within you waiting for something else. To be given only charcoal and a pad and being told to recreate a self you've never been allowed to see. Leila was not like any of the other women I'd met. She seemed, to me, to live without the stark, black lines that secure a person to their personality and thus to other people who always fasten you to what you've said before what you say. For that, Leila was ensconced by the rubber heaven of never having to ask another person to stay by virtue of allegiance.

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Mama said, "We've got new neighbors?"

"Who?"

"Leila took a tenant. A mother and child staying in the extra bedroom upstairs."

"Three bedrooms is a lot of space for one person," I said.

"Leila should use the rental space below the house. I wouldn't want people I don't know living in the main part of the house with me. I told her that."

"You told her to not take on tenants?"

"I told her to keep some space."

The tenant and child were mostly shrouded by routines: school and work, those kinds of things. Leila was less present in the evenings. Once, I saw the tenant sitting on the stoop speaking loudly with a man whose gravelly voice could easily be mistaken for anger. But he was angry and seemed capable of erasing another's voice by only opening his mouth. The root of his anger was unclear but he boomed out words like a cannon and all that was left was smoke.

Soon, the man was coming back more often, trails of smoke behind him. Sneaking in during the evening, tiptoeing out before the sunrise. After awhile, the man took up permanent residence in Leila's house and the foreign spirit took up space Leila didn't know she had. Leila began speaking to Mama more often about how she wanted the tenant to pay more rent, how she wanted the man to sign a lease, how to get rid of them. Mama was judicious with her responses; reciting whatever legal recourse she could remember.

"But what about the child," Leila asked.

"What about you," Mama said.

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It happened on a Friday in June, if that means anything. Leila was in her front garden tending to some newly planted flowers. She was gracious and quiet to everyone she confronted, as always. I went outside to collect the mail then returned to the house. I know, for fact, I heard Leila's door slam when she eventually went inside.

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Leila The Newspaper Article expressed her screams as inaudible motions of the mouth. If sound precedes action, silence should precede death. The man, smoke around him, bludgeoned her with a blunt object -- her blood flowed into and dyed the grey grout of the tiled kitchen floor. The family living in the house between Leila's and mine called the authorities because of an unusual banging sound. When the ambulance came, all of 227th street neatly lined up on the sidewalk, leading to Leila's house, and interlaced fingers. Leila The Sideshow Spectacle was without a face and when the paramedics laid a white sheet over her mostly concave head, some people whispered *Abracadabra* and pulled wishes out other their hearts like an illusionist pulling a rabbit out of a top hat.

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The wake, quickly organized and held two days later, was a quiet one. 227th street looked for words and tears but collectively was only able to produce silence. Reverend Doctor Heard, a southern man so ordained by God "even my hair grows to Him", administered the service with an incorrectly jovial voice, a voice containing the life of a person who had been swept to the universe by the uncertain hands of time instead of a life extinguished by soot and flesh. The sermon was entrusted from the mouth of Reverend Doctor Heard to the eyes of the nieces and nephew and brother that we knew about.

Reverend Doctor Heard said, "We only get to stay on this little rock for awhile. And we try to do good while we are here. We live in the name of God until He calls us and then we are once again reunited with He who made us. What a blessing that is to exist within the eternity of heaven. See, Leila has made that trip back home. No longer is she sharing time with the rest of us. No, no, time is temporary. Time is a condition we have to endure to make it to infinity. Time changes as we change. We can remark on this time or that time. That time when things were bad. That time when I couldn't pay my rent. That time when I was dead broke and hungry. That time I lost my faith. That time I fell in love. But no human love can stay intact forever. The love of God, the infinite, all surrounding love of God is the only love that can keep up swaddling in

comforting arms forever. Our Leila endured her one last condition of time, the only condition of time that really matters, and has traded in her time card for the graciousness of God's love."

Amen.

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The barely two inch long *New York Post* report read:

Leila M-----, Bronx woman

found dead in Edenwald

apartment. Neighbors say

victim was reclusive.

Suspect believed to be man

staying in her home and has

yet to be apprehended.

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It should have read: one less. It should have read: there is more room to stay. It should have just read: stay, four letters and only one syllable, is just long enough to express the perpetuity of loss.

