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A Little Fire of No Consequence

Gisèle Pineau

Sonia put on one of her white mini-shorts and her pink tank top that had LOVE written in black block letters on it. She wasn't wearing a bra and her small, round, tight breasts and nipples protruded under the taut cotton, similar to unripe mangoes that gave the promise of maturing again and again, until they produced a smooth juice that you would never get tired of having in your mouth. She had squeezed herself into those shorts and – she was only too aware of it – her buttocks, which her tight shorts held up high under the denim, aspired to taunt people and tempt the devil. If her old aunt had something to say about her clothes, or her navel that looked scornfully at the world like an arrogant eye rooted in the midst of her belly, she would shorten her visit, free in no time from the burden that had been imposed on her.

Corinne had insisted on the phone: “Please Sonia! I’m asking you to go. You’ll be there for an hour or so, tops. Do this for your mommy, please. Go visit Tata Raymonde at the hospital. It’ll do her good. She will be so pleased to see you so grown-up after all this time. I’m begging you. God will reward you... Come on! Do this for me, don’t forget that she brought me up. I owe her so much! God will reward you a hundred times over, mark my words! If I could’ve come, I would have taken the plane to stay by her bedside. But you know the situation...”

On her way up the *morne* to the hospital in Pointe-à-Pitre, Sonia was dragging her feet under the lofty midday sun, cursing her mother who always adopted a childlike voice and used sickly pleading to make her cave in, before calling upon the Good Lord as a last resort.

Sonia had arrived at her father’s parents’ about two weeks before and had no time to lose, as her stay in Guadeloupe would end in less than a month. Her grandma, who was unbelievably permissive and jolly let her come and go as she pleased. Every morning at breakfast she would encourage Sonia to make the most of her holidays, just as she was making the most of her retirement, filling her days with the time-consuming activities of her Senior Citizens Club — aquafit, bridge, English, ikebana, quadrille, macramé, and scrabble...

In Sainte-Anne, Sonia had gotten back in touch with her family, especially her cousins. She had grown up under her mother’s supervision, far away from them, in Paris, the land of four seasons. Her relatives had welcomed her as if she had always been part of their world. They were delighted to act as her tour guide and took her out every day to discover the island with its unusual rites and its whimsical nature, its deceptively quiet landscapes, its spicy dishes and its creole dialect teeming with a thousand metaphors.

At the end of the first week, imitating her cousins and their friends, Sonia had muzzled the too reasonable teenager who, day and night, kept her thoughts in check. In less than no time, freed from the moral straightjacket in which her mother had confined her in Paris, she had metamorphosed into a carefree, feverish little creature, eager to taste life’s delights and in a hurry to succumb to the temptations of her flesh, which violently twitched under the ravenous gaze of men. She felt both light and tormented, determined and vulnerable. Yet, with a ferocious desire to go through the mirror, to give in to her body’s desires and dive at last into the deep end of carnal pleasures that made up most of girl talk.

Aged between fifteen and eighteen, they formed a fascinating little clique of rowdy, thoughtless girls who seemingly enjoyed a life of freedom. They spent their time filling the void of days

and nights with their boyfriends, throwing beach parties, setting up improvised barbecues and private parties, driving to nightclubs on the Riviera, skinny dipping in the calm waters of nearby beaches guarded by coconut trees that looked like dishevelled factotums and where furtive shadows would pass through. Such an abundance of activities only served as a pretext for just one aim: the exhilarating game of seduction. A single purpose: sex.

At sixteen, Sonia was the only virgin of the group and therefore highly preyed upon; yet she was granted a little respite that certainly would not last. Sometimes she felt as though she had some disability and wondered if, behind her back, she was not the laughing stock of the group, deemed useless, someone who watched the pleasure train pass by while ruminating over the fantasies of a retarded high-school girl.

Would the world be more beautiful once you'd taken the plunge?

Would life be more joyful right after you'd spread your legs?

Sonia was particularly jealous of Candy, a friend of her cousin Jada's. That girl was the most exuberant, the most daring one. She took her time adorning herself to arouse boys and lent her body unconditionally. Her favorite pastime was abandoning her flesh to the ferocious appetite of those young, rabid dogs swollen with pride and testosterone. Submit her odorous crack to the hard-wood sticks between their legs. Candy was passed around, without any qualms. They penetrated her, free of charge. They rammed into her for their own pleasure and for the insane orgasm that surged up at the end of their male exertions that were impetuous, violent and so invigorating, yet always strangely unexpected, like the bite of a scolopendra, a streak of bad luck, a little death.

The girls walked around half naked — because of the sun and the heat, they said. Low-cut tank tops, see-through blouses, booty shorts, teeny-weeny mini-skirts and slinky dresses. The body parts that they exposed for everyone to see were both insidious invitations and odes to their raw beauty. Full thighs, slender legs, breasts of exotic Venuses and goddess-like bellies adorned with fake diamond piercings. They devoted hours to their hair, straightening, cutting and dyeing it. Some of them had acquired real expertise in this. They would dexterously sew in hair extensions and plait their hair in braids of all shapes and sizes. The day before, Sonia had observed how Mathilde had planted on her head a load of dreadlocks *made in china*, threaded in wooden pearls and plastic cowries that were vaguely reminiscent of the girls' African roots. You had to seem them. They strutted around with their cheap lure, enjoying the sensation of the synthetic hair extensions caressing their shoulders and cascading down their backs. Of course, they were all wearing outrageous make-up. Black-penciled eyes, eyelids streaked with green, blue or purple shades. They certainly made no spare on foundation, pressed powder and trendy reds. But their lips, painted over with lipsticks that shouted murder and ever so tender hues of pink, confessed that in the end, behind misleading colors, they were only little girls adorned to be sacrificed in the frenetic dance of their bodies to the first boy who came along — just so they could call themselves women. And then, the sidelong glances would tell others that they had done it.

Beyond the admiration she had for them, Sonia was confused. Coraline had brought up her first time in a hushed voice. She felt mild pride out of the soft, burning sensation that persisted between her legs. She had confessed a feeling of having been sullied remained nestled inside of her, stifled, stifling. But she had done it again, as if there had been no other road than this tortuous, demeaning one. As if her own pleasure had only been a bonus, an option, a measly tip, that her boyfriend had consented to give her. And, nice as she was, she kept on abandoning

her body to him, a body that he always straddled with haste and fury. To keep him on the hook - or so she thought – Coraline acted like a beauty queen, tottered on high heels that forced her to place one foot in front of the other, strolling like a drunken woman. She wore make-up in the fashion of Beyoncé’s clones. Swayed her hips before him, just to convince herself that he was doing her good, to assure him that he was her god and that she liked it.

Several boys were hovering around Sonia, but she didn’t fancy any of them.

One evening, Mike tried to kiss her furiously in the oppressing twilight of her grandparents' garden. He reeked of cold tobacco and beer. His intrusive tongue twisted around probing the deepest recesses of Sonia’s mouth, to the point that she felt queasy. Then, as if her mind had detached itself from her body, she positioned herself as an observer above the stage, waiting for a moment of pleasure - even a fleeting one - to arise from this thorough exploration. Alas, she could have kept on like this for a long time, letting her mouth be open to Mike’s saliva. Luckily, her grandmother had saved her by calling out her name from the kitchen window. It was dinner time.

Rosan had taken advantage of a zouk-love dance to hold her close on the dancefloor of a nightclub in Saint-François. While Patrick Saint-Eloi was singing at the top of his magnificent voice... *An ka rantré an somey aw Paskè lannuit an ka véyé asi 'w Pas an pa nip on dot jwa anko Ké dé viv de vou é mwen pou nou...* Sonia had suddenly felt her dance partner’s penis harden and rub against her thigh. As she realized that a frenetic urge was growing inside her and, along with it, the perilous desire to give in to this attraction, to surrender, to let herself get carried away, she pushed him back right away. With his big wolfish mouth and his square teeth, Yann had gently sucked and bitten her right breast, away from prying eyes, one afternoon on the beach of the Contrebandiers. At the same time, he had unhesitatingly slipped his hand into Sonia’s bikini. His fingers had been as impatient as the legs of a crab that has just seized a dead toad, about to relish it and not wanting to share it with any of his kind.

Lying in her hospital bed, her old aunt looked poorly. She was nearly eighty-five and must have weighed no more than forty kilos. Reluctantly, Sonia bent over her to lay a kiss on her wrinkled cheek. Her eyes were glazed over and her complexion sepia. The big veins running along her arms formed an intricate network of rivers under her withered skin. Her grey hair was thinning and tied up in four pathetic buns. She smelled of urine and cheap perfume. Death seemed to be embracing her already.

The old woman lightened up a little when she saw her appear.

“You look so much like your Manman... I remember when she was your age. You’ve become quite a young woman...”

And then, haltingly, they began chatting about life in France, the harsh winters there and about Guadeloupe caught in the tangle of modern times, the rain seasons that gushed out its load of cyclones...

Sonia, with a fixed smile, her hands tightly gripping her cell phone, had not even been there for ten minutes but was already thinking of leaving. All of a sudden, Raymonde went quiet, shut her eyes. Sonia tried to find something cheerful to talk about. But the only words that came to her were about sickness, pain and old age... She looked at her watch, anxious with boredom, assuming that the old lady was falling asleep. At such an old age, every little effort made one

feel tired. That's it! Ten more minutes of being patient and she'd be out of that room. She had done her good deed of the day and her mother wouldn't be able to say anything.

"Do you have a fiancé?" Tata Raymonde suddenly whispered. Her voice was slower, quavering. It felt as if she had come back from the Outer World.

Sonia emerged from the boredom that was crushing her.

"Do you have a fiancé yet?" the old woman repeated. Her eyes glistening now.

Sonia lifted her eyebrows.

A fiancé! That was an old-fashioned concept... All that she knew was that it was time for her to have sex. Whatever it would cost her. She was tired of satisfying herself, of trying to reach orgasm on her own. Alone in her bed, with the joy of her body hidden under the sheets, her mind guilty and her senses acute. Alone with her dexterous fingers, her legs open, her short breathing. Alone, caressing herself slowly and imagining faces of men grimacing in the act of possession and pleasure. Images of truncated bodies: muscular male chests, outstretched arms and legs, disproportionate phalluses. Negroes looking like statues of Apollo chiselled in bronze, ebony or ebonite. Powerful young black men who, by means of constraining her, immobilised her under the weight of their bodies, their implacable brutality and their spiteful, pressing need to penetrate her.

Sonia had sacrificed a lunch on the beach to keep the promise made to her mother. She tried to look friendly and cast another glance at her watch on the sly. The old aunt was not delirious... She really seemed to be expecting a reply, and by the looks of it, the conversation had only just begun.

"No, I don't have a fiancé," Sonia blurted out.

Raymonde smiled and heaved a little sigh that was difficult to interpret, because it might mean a thousand and one things or their exact opposite. She seemed to be scanning through her past, recollecting whole chapters of her life, recovering long-forgotten sensations and joys. Then, she turned on her side with great effort. Sonia glimpsed her saggy breasts through the neckline of her nightdress. They had once been full, heavy and probably voluptuous. Now they looked like two old whales stranded on the beach, at the end of life.

"Do you want to hear a story? A story that deserves to be told, at least once. I don't want to take it with me to the grave..."

"Nonsense, Tata! You're not going to die any time soon!" Sonia protested.

"You know, my dear girl, a long time ago, I was young, fresh and beautiful like you... Imagine that! I don't know why, but I wanted to get married. I had this stuck in my head, a fixation, a disease. Having a ring on my finger and changing my name, that was all I was asking for in all my prayers to God Almighty. To have myself be called Mrs. So-and-So! To me, it was some sort of crowned achievement, you know, an accomplishment, a blessing. I was a complete idiot and not even sixteen..."

"Help!" a little voice shouted in Sonia's mind. "You're going to have to stay here and listen to Tata Raymonde rambling on and on, whether you like it or not."

“Well, my prayers were answered on the eve of my seventeenth birthday. Douglas Benoît proposed without even taking time to court me. I did not hesitate, you know. I told my mother ‘yes!’, I had thought it through, he was the one I wanted and it was God himself who had sent him to me. In double-quick time, I found myself at the Registry Office and before the priest... And I had won: I had become a ‘Madame’, Madame Douglas Benoît.”

At these words, the old woman started laughing wickedly at herself. And her bursts of laughter that sounded like jarring jingle-bells came up from her belly to fill her throat and her mouth before they rolled out in the small hospital room, reaching Sonia’s ears as a crackle.

“Tell her that you have to go! Make something up! An appointment at the dentist’s... Tell her you have a toothache..., the little voice inside her whined, while Sonia sank in her chair, suddenly taking the bait on the story of that rushed wedding. She wanted to know how it ended.”

“Lord! Do you want to hear about the wedding night?”

Sonia nodded.

“We went to bed. Next to each other. I had got myself ready. I’d covered myself with perfume from head to toes and had put on my white brushed cotton nightdress, all new, well ironed, all embroidered down the front. Monsieur was wearing blue and green striped pyjamas. He turned off the light and I waited in the darkness. I was not without knowing that something big was about to happen. Maman had warned me... Something huge was about to pop out from my young husband’s crotch. Something stupendous was about to enter my body and turn me first into a woman, and then into a mother...”

At that point, a nursing auxiliary pushed the door and put a tray on the small wheeled table.

“It’s time for your meal, Madame Benoît! Good to see you have a visitor!” the woman cheered. “And a young one at that! This will lift your spirits! You have to eat today, okay?”

She turned to Sonia:

“How nice of you to visit her! You’ll give her a hand, won’t you? Are you family? The poor woman doesn’t see anybody apart from us.”

“She comes from France. She is my niece, Corinne’s daughter, the one who lives in Paris...”

“Ooh, lucky you, Madame Benoît! Alright then, enjoy your meal!”

Sonia uncovered the dishes. Grated carrots out of a tin. Steak hâché with giraumon squash. A vanilla flan.

“Let’s eat, Tata.”

“Wait! Let me tell you the end of my story. Just give me a little drop of water to freshen my memories, will you? ...”

So, we are lying there like two lumps of wood. Time goes by. Nothing happens. I am starting to fall asleep as the waiting persists. Suddenly, he takes my hand and lays it on his underbelly. Aha! I search for something to hold on to. Alas! I come across some sort of slug that slithers out of my fingers. Nothing! No vigour. A helpless thing, as if cursed! Will you believe me if I tell you that I had to get used to it? All my life, trying to make it become erect, encouraging it to become hard, to straighten up. Hours I spent sweet-talking it, coaxing it, taming it.

Exhausting and despairing nights flattering it with my hands, my mouth, my thighs, hoping for a jolt, a bounce, a miracle.

Alas!

But what a nice man he was, Monsieur Benoît! He was a handsome, tall negro and had one of those big smiles. A lot of women were jealous of me, not knowing the truth of the matter. They said that I was lucky to have found a faithful husband. Poor man! Nature had endowed him with a little, flabby plastic toy gun. He could not even fire it once, can you imagine? And he never gave me the least bit of pleasure. No... all he had were his smile, his arms and his courage. He was no lazy man, certainly not. He worked all his life. Built us a beautiful concrete house, with his own two hands and some strong friends.

Yes, he had some good friends...

“Friends who wanted to sleep with you? Did they make a move on you?” Sonia asked as if chatting with Jada or Coraline.

“Yes, they did... You’ve got it. One day, one of them cornered me in the courtyard. Monsieur Benoît had gone to Basse-Terre. A bit of the terrace still had to be finished. That one friend offered his help. He was a man of his word... I had been feeling him staring at me for weeks. He had the eyes of a very soft, innocent sheep that you wanted to stroke and who promised to offer tenderness in return, simply by the look in his eyes. Every time he was around, I felt a little fire starting between my legs. A harmless little fire, yet that could not be extinguished, that burned on, persisted and fought against the headwinds until even after the said friend left. A little fire that kept burning, low and gently in the bed as I lay awake at night next to Monsieur Benoît, sound asleep, certain as he was of having a woman with no desire by his side. You see, what was bound to happen happened.”

“You cheated on him?” Sonia interrupted, wide-eyed.

“Never in my life! No, I could not do that...”

“Oh, you didn’t?”

Sonia’s voice showed her disappointment.

“Wait! The friend cornered me in the courtyard. He tried to get to my mouth and stick his tongue in it. His concrete mixer was making a hellish din. With the little fire between my legs, I told him to follow me in the kitchen. And he started to —”

“What?!”

“He kneeled before me. I remained standing by the side of the sink where I could keep an eye through the window on the people passing by in the street... He took my panties down, his face disappeared between my legs. It was as if he’d known that that little fire that kept burning there had to be attended to. And he started playing with his tongue, sticking it inside like a child in a pot of jam, licking all the recesses and hidden folds. Moving in and out of the quivering crack with alternating rhythm, speeding up and slowing down. At first, I stayed there with my arms dangling in the air, when I suddenly came out of my inertia. I let the little fire set me ablaze. I then grabbed his head, as if I wanted the whole of it to come inside my body, up that narrow path uncharted by Monsieur Benoît’s little, lifeless gun. And I felt that *it* was coming, all of a

sudden, like a big wave that comes towards you full speed, about to break on the beach, that nobody will be able to stop... Even better! A hurricane able to rip up the sky and wreak havoc on the earth in an instant. I felt that it was coming with fury from the innermost parts of my being. And I didn't care if Monsieur Benoît came out unexpected from the end of the street, at the kitchen door. Nothing could prevent me from fulfilling myself, from living this big explosion that poured out this over-brimming sense of myself into a joy that you cannot control and that shows you that you are alive, that you are on this earth to experience this very joy. And that it is within your reach... That it is not reserved to a privileged few... That it is not a sin to take this joy fully in and get pleasure from your body... That it isn't cheating on your husband to offer that crack of yours to the mouth of a Good Samaritan who asks nothing in return, and certainly doesn't want to stir up trouble in your household."

Raymonde heaved a long sigh of contentment.

"I stayed married forty-eight years to my husband. The day he died, he thanked me for having been a good wife. I was the one who closed his eyes. He left in peace, I believe... and unaware of my little fire of no consequence..."

A drizzle started to tap on the window pane.

"Are you hungry, Tata? It's getting cold..."

"I had my pleasure, that way... All my life, I had men at my feet. They stuffed their head between my legs and took care of my little fire. They gently sucked me, with such kindness, such patience and such ardour! Up until I could no longer contain my joy and let it flow into their mouths. Not one of them forced me to do anything I did not want to do..."

"Do you want to eat a few carrots?" Sonia whispered.

Now the old woman's crude confessions were almost unbearable to hear.

"You have to eat! You have to recharge your batteries, Tata..."

"What for? I've had my time, you know. I don't have anyone anymore. Don't you worry, I am fine with my memories. I have no regrets. Please, give a kiss to your mother for me. Don't you forget!"

When Sonia went down the *morne* of the hospital that afternoon, she felt that her old Tata's confessions had made her grow up all at once. The rain had stopped. Along the pot-holed pavements, pools of water had formed like shapeless mirrors that reflected shattered suns and, at times, her fragmented shape. She knew she would take her share of joy. She knew she would not be a toy, an obedient doll in the hands of her boyfriends. She knew that deep down inside of her there too burned a little fire of no consequence.