Once upon a time, in a far-off land, I was kidnapped by a gang of fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope beating inside their bodies it burned their very skin and strengthened their will right through their bones.

They held me captive for thirteen days.
They wanted to break me.
It was not personal.
I was not broken.
This is what I tell myself.

It was hot, nearly a hundred degrees, the air so thick it felt like warm rain. I dressed my son, Christophe, in a pair of miniature red board shorts and a light blue T-shirt with a sailboat across the front. I covered his smooth brown arms and his beaming face with sunscreen. I kissed his nose and brushed his thick,
dirty-blond curls away from his face as he pressed his palms against my cheeks and shouted, “Mama! Mama! Mama!” My husband, Michael, the baby, and I said goodbye to my parents, told them we would be back in time for dinner.

Michael and I were taking Christophe to the ocean for the first time. We were going to hold him in the warm salt water as he wiggled his toes and kicked his chubby legs. We were going to throw him toward the sun and catch him safely in our arms.

My mother smiled from the balcony where she watered her plants, wearing a crisp linen outfit and high heels. She blew a kiss to her grandson. She reminded us to be safe.

We put our son into his car seat. We handed him his favorite stuffed animal, a little bulldog named Baba. He clenched his beloved toy tightly in his little fist, still smiling. He has his father’s temperament. He is usually happy. That is important to me. Before getting into the car, Michael double-checked that Christophe was strapped securely in his car seat. He put our beach bags into the trunk.

Michael held my door open. When he closed it, he pressed his face against the window, and blew air until his cheeks filled. I laughed and pressed my hand against his face through the glass. “I love you,” I mouthed. I don’t say those words often, but he knows. Michael ran around to his side of the car. After he slid behind the steering wheel and adjusted the rearview mirror so he could see the baby, he leaned into me and we kissed. He rested an arm on the armrest between us and I idly brushed the golden wisps of hair on his arms. I smiled and rested my head on his shoulder. We drove down the long steep hill of my parents’ driveway and waited quietly for the heavy steel gates, the gates keeping us safe, to open.

In the backseat, Christophe cooed softly, still smiling. As the gates closed behind us, three black Land Cruisers surrounded our car. The air filled with a high-pitched squealing and the smell of burning rubber. Michael’s tanned knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel and looked frantically for a way out. His body shook. The doors of all three trucks opened at the same time and men we did not know spilled out, all limbs and gunmetal. There was silence, the air thin, still hot. My breath caught painfully in my rib cage. There was shouting.

Two men stood behind our car, machine guns raised. Michael pressed his foot against the gas pedal to move forward but a tall man with a red bandana across the lower half of his face, a man holding a machine gun, pounded his fist on the hood of the car. He left a small dent in the shape of his closed hand. He glared at us, then raised his gun, pointed it directly at Michael’s chest. I threw my arm across Michael’s body. It was a silly, impotent gesture. Michael’s eyes were bright, and arcs of tears trembled along his lower eyelids. He grabbed my hand between both of his, held me so fiercely it felt like all those slender bones would be crushed.

Two men slammed the butts of their rifles against the car windows. Their bodies glowed with anger. The glass cracked, fractures spreading. Michael and I pulled apart, waited tensely, and then the windshield broke, the sound loud and echoing. We covered our faces as shards of glass shattered around us, refracting sharp prisms of light. Michael and I reached for Christophe at the same time. The baby was still smiling but his lips quivered, his eyes wide. My hands could not quite reach him. My child was so close my fingers thrummed. If I touched my child,
each of his knuckles. I broke free and pulled the rear door open, wrapped the seat belt around my hand as a strange pair of hands tried to pull me loose. The man on Michael’s side hit him in the face with a closed fist again and again. Michael slumped forward, his forehead pressed against the horn. The horn wailed, the whine of it filling the air. A thick, dark stream of blood slowly slid from my husband’s forehead, down between his eyes, along his nose and over his lips. In the backseat, Christophe started crying, his face burning a bright red.

The cold steel of a gun barrel dug into my skin. I froze. A voice said, “Go easy or we kill your family. We kill everything you’ve ever loved.” I did not move. The gun dug deeper and deeper. I unclenched my fingers and stood. I stared at my family. I do not love easy. I raised my hands over my head. My thighs trembled uncontrollably. I could not move. A hand grabbed my neck, pushing me toward a waiting vehicle. I turned to look back, a sudden calm filling me. Michael slowly raised his head. I looked at him hard, wanted him to know this was not how our story would end. He shouted my name. The desperation in his voice made me nauseous. I mouthed I love you and he nodded. He shouted, “I love you.” I heard him. I felt him. I watched as he tried to open his door but passed out again, his body slumping.

My captors put a burlap sack over my head and shoved me into the backseat. The delicate construction of bone in my cheeks throbbed angrily. My skin hurt. My captors told me, in broken English, to do as they said and I would be back with my family soon. I needed to hold the fragile hope that I could find my way back to my happily ever after. I didn’t know any better. That was the before.
I sat very still as two men flanked me. Their muscular legs pressed against mine. Each man held one of my wrists, so tightly they would leave dark red circles. The air was filled with the stench of sweaty young bodies and my blood and the sunscreen I had rubbed into my child’s skin. Before I passed out I heard cold laughter, my son crying and the desperate wail of the car horn.

I opened my eyes and couldn’t see anything but bright spots of light and gray shadow. My head hurt. I gasped and began thrashing wildly as I remembered where I was, my baby crying, my husband. The burlap sack made it difficult to breathe. I needed a breath of clean air. A strong hand grabbed my shoulder, shoved me back into the seat. I was warned to sit still. I began to hum. I hummed so loudly my teeth vibrated. I rocked back and forth. A hand grabbed the back of my neck. I rocked harder. Someone muttered, “She’s crazy.”

I was on the edge of crazy. I hadn’t fallen in yet.

I was scared, dizzy and nauseous, my mouth dry. As the car lurched I leaned forward and vomited, bile seeping through the burlap, the rest dripping down my shirt. I was repulsive, already. The man to my left started yelling, grabbed me by my
hair, slammed my head into the seat in front of me. My mouth soured as I tried to protect my face.

And then, inexplicably, I thought about my friends in Miami, where Michael and I live, and how they would talk when news of a kidnapping reached them. I am a curiosity to my American friends—a Haitian who is not from the slums or the countryside, a Haitian who has enjoyed a life of privilege. When I talk about my life in Haiti, they listen to my stories as if they are fairy tales, stories that could not possibly be true by nature of their goodness.

My husband and I love to entertain, dinner parties. We cook fancy meals from Gourmet and Bon Appétit and drink expensive wine and try to solve the world’s problems. At least we did this, in the before, when we were less aware of the spectacle we were and when we thought we had anything even remotely relevant to say about the things that tear the world apart.

At one such party, where we entertained his friends and my friends, some of whom we liked and many of whom we hated, everyone drank lots of wine and danced to a fine selection of music. We ate excellent food and engaged in pretentious but interesting conversation. Talk turned to Haiti, as it often does. We sat on our lanai, illuminated by paper lanterns and candles, all of us drunk on the happiness of too much money and too much food and too much freedom. I was on Michael’s lap, drawing small circles on the back of his neck with my fingernails, his arm around my waist. Everyone leaned forward, earnest in their desire to understand a place they would likely never visit. One of my friends mentioned a magazine article he read about how Haiti had surpassed Colombia as the kidnapping capital of the world. Another told us about a recent feature in a national magazine on the kidnapping epidemic—that was the word he used, as if kidnapping were a disease, a contagion that could not be controlled. There were comments about Vodou and that one movie with Lisa Bonet that made Bill Cosby mad at her. Soon everyone was offering their own desperate piece of information about my country, my people, about the violence and the poverty and the hopelessness, conjuring a place that does not exist anywhere but the American imagination.

That night, I buried my face against Michael’s neck, felt his pulse against my cheek. He held me closer. He understood. There are three Haitis—the country Americans know and the country Haitians know and the country I thought I knew.

In the back of the Land Cruiser the day I was kidnapped, I was in a new country altogether. I was not home or I was and did not know it yet. Someone turned up the radio. A song I recognized was playing. I began to sing along, wanted to be part of this one familiar thing. Someone told me to shut up. I sang louder. I sang so loud I couldn’t hear anything around me. A fist connected with my jaw. I slumped to the side, my head ringing. I didn’t stop singing though my words slowed, slurred.

I was supposed to be at the beach with my husband. I was supposed to wrap my legs around Michael’s waist as he carried me into the ocean and away from the shore while our son napped. I would trace his jaw with my fingertips and my lips. I would taste the salt and sun and sea on his skin and he would hold me so tight it hurt to breathe. We would ignore everything around us and he would kiss me like he always kisses me—hard, with purpose, the soft of our lip flesh bruising, pulpy, his tongue in
my mouth, a hand twisting through my hair possessively. He always tries so hard to hold on to me because he does not realize I am with him always. We are a lock and key. We are nothing without each other. When the sun became too much, when our desire became too much for that moment, I would pull away and we would climb out of the water, our bodies heavy. We would lie on the hot white sand with our sleeping son between us. The salt from the sea would dry on our skin. We would drink something cold and bask in the perfection of our happily ever after.

But we weren’t there. I wasn’t there. I was alone in a country I did not know, one that did not belong to me or my father, one that belonged to men who obeyed no kind of law.

We drove for hours along winding, narrow roads. The men discussed financial matters, speculating as to the kind of ransom I would fetch. A hand grabbed at my breast, slowly swelling with milk, and I sat straight up, my spine locked. I whispered, “Do not touch me.” There was a laugh. A voice said, “Not yet,” but the hand squeezed harder. I tried to pull away from the violation but there was nowhere to go. I was in a cage, the first of many.

“You’re never going to get away with this,” I said, my voice already hoarsening.

There was laughter. “We already have.”

We stopped on a noisy street. My kidnappers pulled the burlap sack off my head and I swallowed as much air as I could. I squinted as my eyes adjusted to my surroundings. The sun was still out but fading into pink along the horizon. It was beautiful how the color stretched across the sky in sweeping arcs. I stared into that pink, wanted to remember everything about it, until a hand grabbed my elbow. I winced, stumbled forward.

A few people in the street stared but no one moved to help me. I shouted, “This is not right,” knowing my words were useless. There’s no room for such distinctions in a country where too many people have to claw for what they need and still have nothing to hold.

My captors walked me through a dark room with three couches and a large, flat-screen television. A woman sat on one of the couches in a red tank top, denim skirt, and flip-flops, the
kind with a high chunky heel. My eyes widened as I watched her
watching me. She didn’t look surprised. She shook her head and
resumed watching her program, some kind of talk show.

In another room, four men played cards. There were bottles
of Prestige beer on the table and an overflowing ashtray. One of
them licked his lips as we walked by. We passed through a child’s
bedroom. My breasts ached uncomfortably. I thought about
Christophe, my sweet baby boy, whom I hadn’t yet weaned, who
hungered for his mother’s breast and could not be satisfied.

Finally, we reached a room with a small bed along one wall
and a large bucket against the other. There was a small window
covered with bars looking out onto an alley, and below the win-
dow a faded poster for the Fanmi Lavalas political party, bear-
ing the likeness of a man I didn’t recognize. They threw me
in this room and closed the door. They left me in a new cage. I
immediately grabbed the doorknob, twisting it frantically. The
door was locked. It was impossible not to panic. I started beat-
ing the door. I was going to beat that door down but the door
was strong and my arms were less so.

When I was completely worn-out, I sank to the floor. The
heat overwhelmed me. Already, my clothes clung to my body. I
could smell myself. The edges of my face were damp with sweat.

Heat takes on a peculiar quality during the summer in Port-
aprince. The air is thick and inescapable. It wraps itself
around you and applies pressure relentlessly. The summer I was
kidnapped, the heat was relentless. That heat pressed up, so
close against my skin. That heat invaded my senses until I for-
got nearly everything, until I forgot the meaning of hope.

* * *

I waited and tried not to imagine what could happen to me. I
could not allow myself to think of such things or there would be
no reason to believe I would be saved. Instead, I tried to remem-
ber why my parents would ever return to the country they once
left, the country they once loved, the country I thought I loved.

There is this truth. I know very little of my parents’ lives
as children. They are not prone to confession. My mother and
father are both from Port-au-Prince. They grew up poor. There
were too many children and not enough of anything. They were
often hungry. They walked to school barefoot and were teased
for having dirty feet. My fathers’ parents both died when he
was young, in ways that disgusted him, in ways, he once told
us, that showed him that the only way to survive this world is
by being strong. His mother, he said, was a weak woman and
his father was a weak man and it was their weakness that led to
their deaths, the father from liver failure due to a fondness for
rum and the mother from heart failure from loving the wrong
man too much. My father has lived his whole life determined to
be nothing like them, no matter what it cost the rest of us.

My mother’s father died when she was six. Her first step-
father died when she was eleven. Her second stepfather died
when she was fourteen and her third stepfather died when she
was eighteen. Her mother has been living with the same man
for more than twenty years, but refuses to marry him. Her con-
cern is understandable. My grandmother and the man I know
as my grandfather live in a small, two-bedroom apartment in
the Bronx where she has lived since she first came to the United
States. She worked as a housekeeper for a Jewish family in Man-
hattan and sent for her twelve children one by one. When the
youngest finally set foot on American soil she started taking
classes at a local community college, determined to do more with the remainder of her life than clean the messes of the lives of others.

My parents came to the States separately, my father, Sebastien, when he was nineteen by way of Montreal then Queens and my mother, Fabienne, by way of the Bronx. They flew here on Pan Am. They saved the airsick bags embossed with the Pan Am logo and marveled, when they shared these parts of their history, at how similar their stories were.

Once upon a time, my parents were strangers in a strange land but they found each other. They found love, meeting at a wedding where my father, taken by her strange smile and the careless way she moved on the dance floor, asked my mother if he could drive her home. She was accompanied by her sister, Veronique, who would later become my godmother. The sisters sat in the backseat of my father’s Chevelle, giggling the entire way because, as my mother would later tell me, Sebastien Duval was so very serious.

A week after that first meeting, my father told my maternal grandmother he was going to marry her daughter. He courted my mother, always visiting her at her mother’s apartment, where she lived with several of her twelve siblings. My father wore a neatly pressed suit and tie. He was often nervous and it charmed my mother that she created such uncertainty in a man otherwise brimming with confidence.

They mostly sat on a plastic-covered couch and talked, quietly, while the younger of my mother’s siblings ran around with too much energy in a too small apartment. Three of her brothers, older, glowered at my father anytime they walked through the room and sometimes made idle threats about the bones they would break if my father stepped out of line. My parents had little privacy. Their romance blossomed between shared breaths and touching thighs and unwavering glances while life in that cramped apartment raged around them.

It is a wonder they were able to fall in love. Falling in love, my mother says, requires its own private space. She and my father had no choice but to carve that private space for themselves where there was none.

Though my father made his intentions plain early on, he waited six months to propose. On the day he asked my mother to be his wife, my father took her to see The Towering Inferno. She loved Steve McQueen, thought he was a very handsome American. My parents held hands throughout the movie, my father brushing his fingers across my mother’s knuckles. This gesture made her heart race, my mother said, because it was the most intimate moment they had ever shared. As he walked my mother back to her apartment, my father began to talk of how someday, he was going to build towers, only his weren’t going to burn. No. His towers were going to soar into the sky and nothing, he said, nothing would make him happier than having my mother by his side. Though most people don’t realize it, my father is the wild and romantic partner in their relationship. My mother said nothing and they continued walking along empty New York streets.

Later they stood, quietly in the foyer of my mother’s building as my mother considered my father’s words. He waited, his forehead sweaty, his suit hanging loosely from his narrow frame, his body becoming smaller and smaller as his hope faltered. My mother enjoyed the quiet tension of the moment. She was not being cruel. She had spent so much of her life always surrounded
by too many people clamoring for someone's attention, clamoring for everything a person could need, never getting enough. All she truly longed for was quiet and space and she knew my father would provide those things for her. My father's hand shook as he slid a modest diamond on her finger. He held her wrist gently, his thumb resting against the slightly curved bone. He said, "I am an ambitious man," and my mother replied, "I believe you are."

A year later, they married, and a year after that, my father graduated from City College of New York with his degree in civil engineering, took a job at a large construction firm in Nebraska. He took my mother away from everything she knew but even though she didn't believe in fairy tales, he was her Prince Charming.

Where he went, she followed.

The first thing Michael heard was a terrible, high-pitched whine—a car horn, maybe, though something was off about the sound. His head ached dully and there was something wet on his forehead, streaming along the left side of his nose and down his face. He sat up, tried to focus but all he could see was bright light, splintered. There was crying, the sound of a child crying, his child crying, he realized. Broken glass on his legs, one piece, buried in his knee. It didn't hurt but it looked strange, almost beautiful as it refracted a narrow beam of light.

He closed his eyes then slowly opened them again. He looked at his hands and noticed his wedding ring and tried to remember who he was wearing the ring for and then it all came back—his son, smiling in the backseat, his wife, Mireille, her small hand on his forearm, her wide smile, how she bit her lower lip when she was nervous, the glint in her eye when they argued and then the
armed men, a rifle butt aimed at his head, his screaming child in the backseat, but most of all, the look of terror in Mireille’s eyes as she was taken away by two armed men.

Michael opened his car door, hands shaking, and stumbled out, couldn’t balance, fell to his knees. There was a gnawing in his chest, a sharp pain just beneath the breastbone. “Christophe,” he whispered. Michael fumbled with the back door, quickly unstrapping Christophe, touching him everywhere, trying to make sure the boy wasn’t hurt. When he was sure Christophe was fine, Michael held the screaming child to his chest. He tried to form words that would make sense to a baby. Christophe could not be consoled. The car horn began to fade away as Christophe’s shrieks pitched higher, his little body shuddering as he tried to breathe and cry at the same time. Michael started walking into the mass of people who had gathered. “Help me,” he said hoarsely, and then he took a deep breath, covered Christophe’s head with his hand and shouted in a voice he could not recognize as his own, “Help me. Help us. My wife has been taken.”

The gathered crowd just stared, some shaking their heads. His hands shook the entire time he was typing the code, blood and sweat in his eyes, but the gates slowly opened once more and Michael ran up the steep incline toward his in-laws’ house. He pounded his fists against the door—as large and imposing as ever, ornate mahogany, this detail clearer than others for some reason. He was wild with panic, didn’t know what to do, didn’t understand any of it, didn’t understand why he and Mireille weren’t still on their way to the beach for a perfect afternoon.

One of the housekeepers, Nadine, answered the door with a smile that quickly drifted into a hard line as Michael ran past her and found Mireille’s father, Sebastien, in his study. Michael tightened his grip around his son. He fell to his knees, blood, sweat, even tears dripping from his face onto the immaculate marble. “They took her,” he wailed, rocking back and forth. “They took her,” he said again, this time the last of his words falling silent.

Sebastien paled for a moment but quickly composed himself. He was Sebastien Duval. Composure was his only choice. He had learned that long ago. Sebastien cleared his throat and immediately picked up the phone, began dialing. He was calm, had always believed in the benefit of behaving rationally regardless of the circumstance. He looked at the crying man in front of him, the man with a thick body and blond hair and easy smile. Sebastien Duval stood, holding the phone, and pointed down at Michael. “Pull yourself together,” he said. “This matter will be handled.” He said these words as if they could possibly be true.

Michael wiped his face with his T-shirt and stood, carefully. The ache in his head was sharper now. His whole face hurt. “Handled? My wife, your daughter, was just kidnapped. We have to call the police, the American embassy, the president, every goddamned body. We have to do something more than handle this.”

Sebastien held up his hand, spoke a few, clipped words in French to whoever was on the phone, then hung up. “The negotiators are on their way,” he said. “The police have been notified. We must remain calm or the kidnappers will take advantage of our weakness.”

Until that moment, Michael had not understood the vastness of the world and how small a place he held in it, in a country where he barely spoke the language, where women could be
stolen from their families in broad daylight. Michael shook his head. “This isn’t happening,” he said, clenching his jaw. Michael tried not to think of Mireille’s petite frame, of what could be happening to her. His wife was strong. Her will was iron. He knew that. He held on to that.

Christophe had stopped crying but he breathed in stuttered gasps, his eyes pink around the edges. “Mama mama mama,” he said.

“I know,” Michael said, kissing Christophe’s cheek. “I want Mama too.”

When the negotiator arrived, American, dressed in a dark, perfectly tailored suit, a doctor had already been to the house to see to Michael’s injuries. Mireille’s mother, Fabienne, sat with Michael and Christophe while Sebastien stalked back and forth across the room. The negotiator, who introduced himself as Mr. Evans, sat and opened a large black briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of paper, and what they later explained was a recording device to use on the telephone.

“We have to get ahead of the threat,” Evans said. “If we have a better sense of who is behind this, we’ll have a better chance of retrieving the victim quickly.”

“The victim has a name,” Michael said, tersely. “Her name is Mireille, and she needs to be retrieved today.”

The negotiator nodded. “Of course that’s what you want, sir, but that’s not quite how things work down here. Negotiation is a process and you should be prepared for this to take time.”

“How much time?” Michael asked, loudly. “Quantify time.”

“Sir, please, stay calm,” the negotiator said. “I know what I am doing.”

Sebastien stopped pacing and stood quietly, rubbing his chin. “I am loath to negotiate with these animals. I pay one set of kidnappers and soon they’ll be coming for my entire family—my wife, my other daughter, my nieces and nephews. There is a great deal at stake here.”

Michael stood, his entire body vibrating with frustration. “I’ll pay. Whatever it takes. I will pay now. I don’t care about any of that bullshit. I want my wife back.”

“We have to wait for the ransom demand,” the negotiator said, “before we can do anything. At that time I will ask for proof of life and we will begin to negotiate. You have to be patient, Mr. Jameson. I am very good at my job. I will get your wife back.”

Michael looked at his father-in-law, refused to look away. “I want to make the decisions on this matter.”

“You know nothing of this country,” Sebastien said. “There is little you can do to help.”

Michael fixed Sebastien with a hard stare. “I know my wife,” he said. “I will not be ignored.”

Sebastien waved his hand in the air and resumed his pacing. “Let us not argue,” he said. “We must wait and we must be prepared.”

He sounded confident, and looked at Michael without blinking. Michael swore he wouldn’t blink first.
It was not personal. That is what I told myself as I waited for something to happen, for someone to come find me, save me, set me free.

Kidnapping was a business transaction, one requiring intense negotiation and, eventually, compromise, but I would be safe. I would be returned to those I love, relatively unharmed. There was ample precedent for hope.

One of the accountants who worked for my father, Gilbert, was kidnapped the previous year. His kidnappers originally asked for $125,000, but everyone knew it was simply a starting number, an initial conversation. Eventually, with professional assistance and proof of life, his family paid $53,850 for Gilbert.

My parents’ friend, Corinne LeBlanche, was kidnapped not long before I was taken. She and her husband and five children lived in Haiti year-round. She always swore, to anyone who would listen, that were she ever kidnapped, her husband, Simon, best meet her at the airport with her passport and children once she was returned because she would never spend another night in the country. Simon was a fat, happy, prominent businessman who owned a chain of restaurants and gas stations that did quite well. He laughed when Corinne made such declarations. He didn’t yet understand how these things went differently for women. She and the children now live in Miami. She called me when Michael and I returned to the States. Even though we said very little, we spoke for a long time.

Two years ago, the matriarch of the Gilles family was kidnapped. She was eighty-one. The kidnappers knew the family had more money than God. They failed to realize that she was frail and diabetic. She died soon after she was abducted. Everyone who knew her was thankful her suffering was brief, until the kidnappers, having learned the lesson that the elderly are bad for business, kidnapped her grandson, who at thirty-seven promised to be a far more lucrative investment.

When my cousin Gabby was kidnapped, her family paid and she was released in less than two days. We marveled for weeks at what a mercy that was. She had always been a frail girl, prone to fits of crying and long depressive spells where she took to her bed and kept her room shrouded in darkness. After the kidnapping, though, Gabby never cried and she seemed happier, somehow. It was a miracle, her mother said. The rest of us did not know what to think.

My negotiations would be somewhat more complex and far more costly. A good family name and a prominent father, they come at a high price even if, in those early days of my kidnapping, we had no idea just how high the ransom would be.
My father works in construction so his office in Port-au-Prince isn’t well appointed—it’s mostly just a space with a door. The floor is covered in cement dust and bits of gravel. Shelves crammed with three-ring binders, blueprints, and his engineering textbooks from college line the walls. On the coatrack, there are three hard hats—the one from his first job in the United States, the one his company gave him when he retired, and the one he bought when he started his own company. When we were kids, my brother and sister and I loved to wear our father’s hard hats. They were always too big but it was fun to pretend we were just like our father, that we too could build great things.

In my father’s office there is also a desk—wide, made of cherry, polished until it gleams, an imposing contrast to the rest of the office. Each time he hires a new employee, my father invites them to a brief meeting in his office, where he sits behind his shiny desk. He laces his fingers behind his head and stretches his legs and calmly tells the employee he will never pay a ransom, not for himself, not for any member of his family. He smiles and says, “Welcome to Duval Engineering.” He wants the people who work for him to know the only money they will ever receive from him is money they earn through sweat and hard work.

My sister, Mona, works with my father. She’s an engineer too. We were all surprised when she agreed to work with him. She was always the rebel, wearing makeup and short skirts and piercing her ears too many times, the one who openly defied our parents with her wild ways. She is also smart and loyal. Mona and my father don’t necessarily get along but my father is getting old and he trusts blood, says family is the only thing you can trust in a country like Haiti. He is a liar of the highest order. Family is one of many things you cannot trust in a country like Haiti. Mona spends half of every month in Port-au-Prince and the other half in Miami with her husband, a Cuban artist named Carlos, whom we call Carlito because it drives him crazy. Mona is my best friend. Wherever she has gone, the whole of our lives, I have tried to follow. Michael and I moved to Miami because she was there. Wherever she is feels more like home.

When Mona started working for Duval Engineering, all I could think of was something terrible happening to her. Mona always laughed off my concern, said the day she stopped feeling safe in the country where her parents were born, she’d leave for good. As I sat in that crazy-hot room, waiting for something to happen, I wondered if Mona felt safe. I wondered if she knew how unsafe I was, if Michael had called her yet, if she had flown to Port-au-Prince to wait with our family for my release. I knew one thing for certain—she would want me to fight because I would want her to fight if she were in my place.

My mother is terrified of being kidnapped—the threat of it haunts her. She finds the indignity of captivity unbearable. She is a woman who covets her privacy, and to be surrounded by strange men, to be exposed to them in any way, is not an experience she believes she can survive.

When my mother and I had conversations about kidnapping in the past, I got angry. I told her there were people who needed her. I told her if she were kidnapped, she would have no choice but to survive. I told her nothing truly bad happens when someone is kidnapped, that a kidnapping is only a matter of time and money and that she would always have both. This was when it
was easy to speak wrongly on such things. In the after, I understood my mother’s fear more clearly. She knew my father too well.

When my mental accounting began to frighten me, I sat on the narrow bed and tried to pretend I was in Miami, hiding in a host’s bedroom at an awkward dinner party. I was waiting for Michael to find me, something I forced him to do often, but then a tall man strode into the room like he owned everything in it and I was right back in my cage. He wore a tight pair of jeans and a T-shirt with the likeness of Tupac on the front. His eyes were wide and soft brown, like you could see right through them. Just below his left eye was a thickly braided scar that trembled when he spoke. An automatic pistol was tucked into his waistband. He looked at me and smiled.

“I am the Commander,” he said.

I nodded slowly and before I could stop myself, I said, “Commander of what? Where is your army?”

He crossed the room and grabbed me by my throat, pulling me to my feet. I slapped at his forearms but he tightened his grip. My face grew taut as I struggled to breathe. When he was satisfied with his display of authority, he shoved me back onto the bed. He wiped his hands, spat on the floor. He laughed. “Let’s try this again. I am the Commander. Today, I am the Commander of you.”

“Like hell,” I snapped. I bit my lower lip. I wanted nothing more than to repeat my question but I could still feel his fingers holding my throat closed. The edges of the room were dark and fuzzy.

The Commander sniffed loudly, leaned in real close. “How come you don’t cry? I was certain there would be tears already.”

“I do not waste my tears.”

He began pacing. He pulled his gun from his waistband and waved it toward me. “Your family,” he said. “They will pay a lot of money for you. U.S. dollars.”

I watched his frenetic pattern back and forth across the room. I looked him right in the eye. “My father doesn’t believe in paying kidnappers. You should know that.”

The Commander approached me again. He pressed the gun flat against my chest, slowly dragging it between my breasts. I wondered if he could smell my milk, on the verge of leaking. He licked his lips. “Your father will pay for his youngest daughter. I am to understand you are his favorite.”

The word daughter lay heavy on his tongue, took on a repulsive shape.

I dug my fingernails into my thighs and hoped my father would be a better man than I knew him to be, would ignore his convictions, would pay, and quickly. I hoped I did not know my father as well as I feared.

The Commander sat next to me, our thighs touching. I tried to move away but he grabbed my thigh, his fingers digging into the meat of my body. “I’ve been to Miami,” he said. “A fine city.”

I stared at the terrible scar beneath his eye. I tried to memorize his features, his clothing, his shoes—Skechers. I recognized the logo. These details felt important. I had to go the bathroom very badly but I didn’t want to ask. I did not want to ask my kidnappers for anything.

The Commander tapped my knee with his gun. He repeated himself, said, “I’ve been to Miami.”

I inched away again.

He grabbed my elbow. “Sit still.”

I shrugged. “I’ve been to Miami too.”
I did not want to tell him anything about my life. I did not want to tell him about my home with the silver palm trees in the front yard and small pool in the back where we swam with Christophe, or how on Fridays and Saturdays my husband and I got a babysitter and went to South Beach, where we ate expensive dinners and danced salsa all night, or how some days we were surprised to hear someone speak English, so varied were the tongues of the city. I did not want him to know anything about me.

The Commander grabbed the bone of my chin. He forced me to look at him. His eyes were strangely warm; not even the scar could make his eyes ugly. He said, "Don’t play games. We know everything about you, where you live, where you work, where your husband works."

I pulled away. "Somehow I doubt that."

He reached into his pocket and proffered a cell phone. "Call your family."

My hands shook as I dialed the numbers. The phone rang once, twice, and then I heard my father’s voice. "It’s me," I said.

The Commander plucked the phone from my hands. He said, "We will not negotiate. We want one million dollars for the beloved daughter of one of Haiti’s favorite sons."

Whatever my father said amused the Commander greatly because his smile grew wider and wider. He handed me the phone.

I said nothing. I had nothing to say.

“You will have to be strong,” my father said.

I marveled at his ability to state the obvious, to say the most useless things.

“I’d like to speak with my husband,” I said.

There was a pause and then Michael said, “Babe,” and I closed my eyes, imagined sinking into his voice, imagined being safe again.

“Christophe…”

“He’s fine. I’m holding him right here.”

I listened as carefully as I could, trying to make out my son’s breathing.

“Are you okay?” Michael asked. “Have they hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” I said. I wanted to be careful and calm. I wanted to say something important, something that would help Michael find me, something he would remember and hold on to. I said, “I’m not that far from you. I am not far at all.” The Commander grabbed me by my hair, yanking hard. I did not make a sound even though my scalp burned. Christophe was listening. I did not want my child to be frightened. Michael shouted my name over and over.

The Commander said, “One million dollars. We will call in two days to make arrangements for payment.” He hung up and released his grip, shoving me to the floor. He waved his men out of the room and just before he locked me in my cage, he wiggled his finger back and forth, said, “You are not as smart as you think you are.”

I was alone again. I had two days and then I would be returned to Michael and Christophe and we could find our way home. I could survive two days with these men. I could.

My parents spent most of their lives trying to find their way home too. They wanted to return to their island, their people,
their food; they yearned for the salt of the sea on their skin or at least my father did and my mother learned to want for what he wanted.

It is not easy to be the child of immigrants who, for most of my life, wore a longing for home nakedly. After they were married, my parents headed to the middle of the country because sometimes, to find home, you must first go farther afield. In Nebraska, a landlocked, flat place filled with thick, pale, cheery people, they were alone, far from everything they knew or loved but they were going to be happy. My father does not understand obstacles, doesn’t believe they exist. He cannot even see obstacles. Failure was never going to be an option. He often says, “There is nothing a man cannot get through if he tries hard enough.”

He built skyscrapers. We’d move for a year or two while he oversaw a new project, and come back to Omaha for a year or two, all our lives, all so he could reach higher and higher. My father said, “There’s no telling how high a man can reach if he’s willing to look up into the sky and straight into the sun.” On the day of the ribbon cutting for his first skyscraper, my father stood with my mother, side by side, their bodies practically melded together. He held his arm around her waist, his hand resting possessively against her stomach. My brother and sister and I ran in frantic circles around them, buoyed by the excitement of a tall building and an oversized pair of scissors and our father, wearing his hard hat and a well-tailored suit. My parents stood staring up at the tower of steel and glass gleaming brightly beneath the high sun. My father said, “I told you I would build you a monument to the sky,” and my mother murmured, “Yes, Sebastien, you certainly did.” She once told me

there was something very attractive about an ambitious man. I think she confuses ambition and ruthlessness. That night, we went out to dinner after the ceremony and my parents spent most of their time sitting with their foreheads touching in their own world. My parents are not warm people. They love hard and deep but you have to work to understand the exact nature of that love, to see it, to feel it. That day was the first time I realized my parents loved each other more than they loved us though I couldn’t know then the price I would pay for that love.