

NINTH WARD

Jewell Parker Rhodes

INCLUDES
Q&A
WITH THE
AUTHOR



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*Dedicated to all the children who
experienced Hurricane Katrina and the
levees breaking in New Orleans*



They say I was born with a caul, a skin netting covering my face like a glove. My mother died birthing me. I would've died, too, if Mama Ya-Ya hadn't sliced the bloody membrane from my face. I let out wail when she parted the caul, letting in first air, first light.

Every year on my birthday, Mama Ya-Ya tells me the same story. "Lanesha, your eyes were the lightest green. With the tiniest specks of yellow. With them eyes, and that caul, I knew you'd have the *sight*." Mama Ya-Ya smacks her lips and laughs. Afterwards, we always have cake. Chocolate. Today I'm twelve. I've eaten three pieces of cake.



Mama Ya-Ya's eighty-two. Half blind now, she's still raising me 'cause my relatives won't. I have a whole family full of uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, grandmothers, and whatnot. They live in Uptown. Richer than where I live, the Ninth Ward, New Orleans. Less than eight miles apart. It might as well be the moon. Or Timbuktu, wherever that is.

Mama Ya-Ya says my family is scared of me. "Everybody in Louisiana knows there be spirits walking this earth. All kinds of ghosts you can't see, not unless they want you to. But you, child, you see them. You've got the *sight*. It's grace to see both worlds," she says as we wash our birthday dishes sticky with bits of jambalaya.

"Better you be an orphan, your family thinks. Better crazy Mama Ya-Ya raises you," she says, sucking air through her false teeth. "Fine. I'm old school. Don't care nothin' about folks who dishonor traditions as old as Africa. I'll be your mother and grandmother both."

And she is. I love her more than anything in this whole wide world.



I love saying "Mama Ya-Ya." Her name sounds so bright and happy, just like Mama Ya-Ya is.

And I love how Mama Ya-Ya says my name—"Lanesha." Soft, with the *ah* sound going on forever.

Lanesha—that's the name my mother gave me. Last word she said before she died. I don't remember hearing it. But I imagine she said it then just like Mama Ya-Ya does now.

Upstairs, I sometimes see my mother's ghost on Mama Ya-Ya's bed, her belly big, like she's forgotten she already gave birth to me.

Like she's stuck and can't move on. Like she forgot I was already born.

Just like my Uptown relatives forgot today was my birthday. They always forget.



Me and Mama Ya-Ya wrap the leftover cake in foil. Mama Ya-Ya shuffles towards the living room. I

follow her like a shadow. We have been together all day long.

Gardening, we cut sunflowers for the kitchen table. We chopped ham and onions for the jambalaya then we played cards while the rice cooked. I squeezed lemons for lemonade while Mama Ya-Ya frosted the cake. A perfect day.

I say, "I wish I could see my father. Dead or alive, don't matter."

"Lanesha, I don't know who he is. Or where he is. Or if he still is. Your momma died before she could say. Maybe she didn't want to say. Don't know. She weren't but seventeen. One of them beautiful, light-skinned Fontaine girls. Proud of their French heritage. Uptown's finest to be sure.

"I think your momma fell in love with a Ninth Ward boy. Rich girl, poor boy. He must've been darker, too. For you are a fine brown, Lanesha. Like pralines."

"Maybe they were secretly married like Romeo and Juliet," I say. I like the idea of my parents holding hands, being brave, and exchanging rings.

I learned about Romeo and Juliet in school. We don't have Shakespeare plays, just these little booklets that tell us about the plays. *Synopses*, my teacher calls them. I don't believe in Santa Claus anymore, but if I did, I'd ask him to bring me a whole set of Shakespeare books. The real ones, with the real words Shakespeare wrote. Then I wouldn't have to take the smelly bus to the city library.

The bus also takes me uptown, but not as far uptown as my relatives live. I think about riding further and further, walking up to their house door, and knocking, but I don't. I get scared that they may not answer.

Instead, I go to the library and try to read *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, but it's too hard. I looked up *tragedy* in my pocket dictionary. Mama Ya-Ya gave it to me for my birthday last year.

TRAGEDY: A CHARACTER IS BROUGHT TO RUIN OR SUFFERS EXTREME SORROWS. I check out the movie *Romeo + Juliet* for me and Mama Ya-Ya to watch. Hearing the words in the movie, I still don't understand everything. But I can see Romeo and Juliet's love, see how their families fought.

The party scene is my favorite. Juliet is dressed so fine in the prettiest long, flowing gown. She wears white angel wings. Romeo wears a silver, glittering knight's suit with a sword.

They just look at each other from across the room and fall in love.

I think that's what happened to my parents, too. They must have gone to a party and while the DJ was spinning records, they fell in love. Everybody else cleared the floor, watching my folks dance fast, slow, even hip-hop.

One day, I'll be able to read all of Shakespeare's words and understand everything he's saying. Like *star-crossed*, which doesn't mean stars zigzagging across the sky. It means "doomed."

My parents were star-crossed. That's why I think my mother is still here, upstairs, a ghost in Mama Ya-Ya's bed. She's waiting for the day my dad—ghost or not—claims us both.

Once we're in the living room and Mama Ya-Ya is settled in her favorite chair—all soft with a blue lap shawl—I say, "I memorized some Shakespeare. Want to hear?"

"Course I do." She gives me her full attention.

I stand on the old living room carpet, imagining I'm onstage. My hands stretch wide, and I imagine I'm speaking to the whole world. Even if it's only Mama Ya-Ya watching me. I say, "For never was a story of more woe/Than this of Juliet and her Romeo." Then, my hands over my heart, I bow my head.

Smiling, Mama Ya-Ya claps, long and hard. "Oh, Lanesha. Your mother and father made magic when they made you."

Mama Ya-Ya sits back in her chair. Mama Ya-Ya is so tiny, and the chair almost swallows her. Her feet barely touch the floor. Her hair is silver and her skin reminds me of a walnut, all wrinkly brown. On the wall above her head is a picture of her favorite president—William Jefferson Clinton.

Mama Ya-Ya closes her eyes. She does that a lot now. She reminds me of a clock winding down. Her head tilts; her body relaxes in the chair like a balloon losing air.

I take out my birthday gift, a package of sparkly pens Mama Ya-Ya has given me. I pull out the purple ink pen and write:

Romeo + Juliet = Me

Ten times.

I like practicing cursive. It makes me feel grown.

Laneshia Mama Ya-Ya



I like watching Mama Ya-Ya sleep. Sometimes, she twitches with dreams.

If I wanted to wake her, all I'd need to say is "Oprah" and she'd be wide-awake, hollering for her Coke-bottle glasses and for me to turn on the TV. But we've celebrated a lot today. She should rest. Every day this summer, we watched Oprah. Mama Ya-Ya says, "Oprah is a southern girl. That's why she's got so much sense!"

I like it when Oprah laughs and when she talks about love. I think she must love everybody she knows. I always wonder, if she knew me, would she love me?

This I know for certain: Mama Ya-Ya loves me as the day is long. She is the only one who loves me through and through. When I'm too dreamy, when I don't finish my chores, when I'm grumpy and sad, Mama Ya-Ya just hugs me a long time. Even when she scolds, she finishes with a hug.

When she holds me that close, I can always smell Mama Ya-Ya's Vicks Rub and Evening in Paris perfume. Vicks Rub comes in a green bottle and smells of eucalyptus and menthol. It smells cool and tickles my nose. Evening in Paris is in a midnight blue bottle and smells warm like trees mixed with magnolias. It seems like the two would smell bad together, but they don't. No one makes Evening in Paris anymore. "Soon it'll all be used up. Like me," Mama Ya-Ya says every day, dabbing perfume behind her ears. I always shake my head.

This morning, though, Mama Ya-Ya frowned at the mirror like she could see some other world inside it. "Mr. Death is losing patience. He'll come and ferry me down the Mississippi. I'll put on my feathered hat. Wave like I'm in a Mardi Gras parade."

I don't like to hear Mama Ya-Ya talk like that.

Mama Ya-Ya's chin is on her chest. She is fast asleep, dreaming.

I put my purple pen back inside the plastic case. I stroke Mama Ya-Ya's hand. Her head lifts; her eyes flutter.

"Mama Ya-Ya, let me help you to bed," I say.

"You are a good child." She pats my cheek. "Did you have a good day? A good birthday day?"

"Yes, ma'am." It was a good day.



Mama Ya-Ya leans on my right arm. Her cane is shiny ebony with an ivory skull on top. Her fingers wrap around that skull for dear life. We walk slowly—inch by inch, step by step, to her small bedroom (my mother's ghost is gone). Her bed is a high four-poster with white sheets and yellow quilt. Lace

curtains hang limp over the two front windows. There isn't any breeze. Just stuffy heat and fading sun. Striped green wallpaper covers the walls.

On the nightstand is a glass for her false teeth and blood pressure pills, cod-liver oil, and rosemary leaves. She puts the rosemary in tea to calm her arthritis.

Mama Ya-Ya's altar is in the far corner. It is a small table filled with flickering candles and statues of Catholic saints and voodoo gods. Her rosary cross is silver, with sparkling blue beads. Next to a plate offering the gods beans and rice is her black midwife bag. The bag is never opened and it never moves. But I know Mama Ya-Ya still touches her bag. She keeps it cleaned, locked with all her birthing stuff inside. Always ready.



I slip Mama Ya-Ya's black clodhopper shoes off her tiny feet.

"I should be putting you to bed," she says.

"It's my turn," I say, smiling. "'Sides, I never had a baby doll."

Mama Ya-Ya chuckles. "Are you saying I'm a baby doll?"

I burst out laughing. "No, ma'am." My cheeks are warm. The thought of Mama Ya-Ya as an overgrown doll tickles me. "Got you," I say.

"You sure did, Lanesha. Me, a baby doll. Hah! Go on, now. I can take care of myself. Me, a baby doll." Mama Ya-Ya is puttering, taking her nightgown out the drawer and laying her glasses on the nightstand. She is grinning, muttering, "Baby doll. Big windup toy. Chatty Cathy." She is happy. Laughing.

"'Night, Mama Ya-Ya." She doesn't hear me.

I skip across the hall to my room, happy that I made Mama Ya-Ya laugh.



I plop down on my bed. I love my room.

This summer, Mama Ya-Ya let me paint the walls different shades of blue. One wall is Robin's Egg Blue. Another, Ocean Blue. Another, Blue Sky. And the wall behind my headboard is Blueberry. I used a rolling brush and it was as easy as rolling pie dough: Back and forth. Up and down. Turn around. Roll the roller in the pan. Back and forth. Up and down. Over and over and over.

My hands were blue for a week. Pieces of my hair, too. I didn't mind.

I lie back and stretch. The ceiling is bright white, like my bedsheets and comforter. I promised Mama Ya-Ya I wouldn't get ink on the sheets or dirt on the comforter. And I haven't. It's the prettiest room in the whole house!

My room does have puzzle pictures on the wall. I like tiny puzzle pieces with colors on them. I like trying to figure out where they fit. Mama Ya-Ya and I have finished several puzzles together, and some I've done all on my own. Afterwards, I glue the pieces together and hang them on the wall. There is a puzzle picture of wild flowers—all yellow, red, orange, and white in a field. There is a picture of a monkey, too, hanging upside down from a tree. My favorite is the picture of a steamboat churning up the Mississippi. I think I'd like traveling by water. Unlike dirt, water seems alive, moving and shifting, always making lapping sounds against the boat and shore. On the right wall, above my dresser, I have a picture of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, all lit up with lights. I like it because it looks like a Christmas tree. It took me months to fit all those itty-bitty pieces of light into something beautiful.



Outside, the sunset has turned from orange to purple. I still have math to finish. It's the third week of school and I want to get ahead.

I grab my math book. I love flipping through the pages. Squiggly marks everywhere. Plus, +, equals, =, less than, <, greater than, >. Alphabet letters. Numbers.

Since I was at least three, Mama Ya-Ya always said, "Signs everywhere, Lanesha. Pay attention." And I did. Do.

I learned three apples could be the number 3. In math, the apples can even be a *y* or an *x*. Squiggly marks can be *symbols*. "A sign for something that is more than it is."

If I was blind, I could even rub my fingers over dots. Braille, it's called. Raised dots, like pink candy on white sheets, can tell you what elevator button to push, or what door leads to the GIRLS' BATHROOM, or tell you a story like *The Three Little Pigs*.

My new English teacher, Miss Perry, and my math teacher, Miss Johnson, both talk about symbols. Signs.

Romeo + Juliet

Word and math signs mixed.

But I like Mama Ya-Ya's signs best: "Ladybugs mean good luck"; "The Little Dipper means freedom. Its handle is the North Star"; "The color blue means strength and friendliness. Happiness."

Whenever Mama Ya-Ya talks about colors, she'll put her hands on her hips, cock her head, and tease, "Who loves blue in this house?"

"Me," I always say.

Doing laundry, cooking, cleaning, Mama Ya-Ya keeps teaching me every day.

"Dreaming about alligators means trouble," she said this morning. "Numbers mean something, too. Not just math, Lanesha. Three means life. Eight means power. Four means hard work in this here world. The material world. Put them together and they can mean something else." She smacks her gums. "Put 4 and 8 together and it equals 12. That's spiritual strength. Real strength, Lanesha. Some people doubt it because they can't see it on the outside. Like butterflies. To most folks, they seem delicate. But the truth is, butterflies keep changing, no matter what, going from ugly worm to hard cocoon to strong wings.

"Always look for the signs, Lanesha," she said. "Even flowers. Magnolias mean dignity. Beauty."

Magnolia trees grow all over our neighborhood. The big trees, with their buttery white petals, bloom sweet all spring.

If Mama Ya-Ya were a flower, I'm pretty sure she'd be a magnolia.



I lean back into my pillows, take out the purple pen, and write in my math notebook.

Me

Lanesha

Twelve

$$8 + 4 = 12$$

All marks—signs—written in my best cursive. Symbols of me.
Who cares about a stupid Uptown family?

Mama Ya-Ya + Lanesha = Love

I ♥ Me

Like a butterfly, I am strong.

Monday



I do see ghosts. Have since I was an itty-bitty baby.

Ghosts. Here, now. Always. They're soft, wispy. I can put my hand through them. If I blow hard enough, I can make them shiver.

Ghosts don't frighten me. Most of them just look lost—like they can't understand what's happened to them. Their eyes blank, their ghost bodies wander about.

When I was younger, I used to think there were just old and older ghosts. But in school, we've been studying New Orleans's history and now I can spot differences better.

Ghosts wearing yellow silk ball gowns with flowers in their hair, and waving silk fans. Cool men wearing slanted hats to make them look slick, and tapping rhythms with their brown and white suede shoes.

Ghosts wearing jeans and colored beads like they wear during Mardi Gras. They carry signs: MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR. Their fingers make a V, the peace sign.

Now, ghosts in baggy pants, their underwear showing, wearing short-sleeve T-shirts and body tattoos, are from my time. They're mostly boys killed in drive-bys or fights or robberies. Sometimes I know them from school. Like Jermaine. One day I'm seeing him in the cafeteria eating macaroni, the next day he's a ghost, dull eyed, high-fiving me, saying, "Hey, Lanesha."

I always answer "Hey," even if he was mean to me when he was alive.

Every morning since I started my new school, Jermaine's ghost waits for me on the school steps. He should be starting middle school with the rest of us. Instead, he sits on the steps, watching everyone pass by.

Jermaine used to skip school lots. His last skip, he was in a 7-Eleven buying a soda. He got a belly shot. Wrong place, wrong time. He never got to graduate. I always wave at him. Sometimes, he says, "You're cool, Lanesha." Other times, "Stay in school." (As if I wouldn't!) I don't remind him that he used to make fun of my green-yellow eyes, and call me "Evil Eye" or "Devil Eye," and make "OoooOooo Oooooo" scary movie sounds whenever I walked by.

Kids at school have always teased me: "Crazy Lanesha," "Spooky Lanesha," "Witch Lanesha." I just try to ignore them. They make me feel bad and sometimes I even cry. Still, I don't tell them that if they're shot dead or drowned in the swamp or smashed by a car, they'll be glad I can see them. I'll remind them of home. Of being alive.

Sometimes the teasing is just too much, though, and I go in the girls' bathroom to hide. When I'm most sad, I think of Mama Ya-Ya. I see her in my mind like she's a ghost, and it comforts me. "You are loved, Lanesha," she always says. "Lanesha, you are loved."



TaShon, my neighbor from down the street, is in my English class. Every time I see TaShon, I get the feeling that we're related. After all, Mama Ya-Ya helped birth us both. Except TaShon's mother still

lives. Mine died. And I was born first.

~~Mama Ya-Ya doesn't birth babies anymore. Everybody goes to Charity Hospital. TaShon, the last baby she birthed, was born with extra fingers. Two little bumps growing out of the sides of his hands. Mama Ya-Ya tried to tell everyone it was a good sign, saying, "He'll cling hard to life." Before TaShon was born, another baby had died. "Born premature," Mama Ya-Ya said. "Because of you," said the pitiful mother. It was easier for everyone to believe the mother. To doubt the strength of Mama Ya-Ya's roots and herbs.~~

Then, there'd been me. Born with a caul. The ignorant say, "Witch's spawn."

One baby dead, one born with a caul, and one trying to grow twelve fingers—it was enough for all the would-be mothers to go to Charity. No time for a midwife anymore.

When I see TaShon on our street, I wave. He's a sad boy. Picked on all the time, even though his dad sliced off the extra skin on his hands when he was born. Now he has small stumps where his extra fingers used to be. His dad works hard all day at the wharf. His momma, Mrs. Williams, cleans at the Riverwalk Casino—daytime, nighttime, overtime. "Anytime I can get," Mrs. Williams chuckles. Nights, when she isn't working, she sings gospel at the New Life Church, a few blocks over.

TaShon keeps so quiet, and I think his parents forget he's there. But I think he keeps quiet because like a ghost, he doesn't want to be noticed. He's short. Shorter than all the sixth-grade girls. Every year, in every grade, he's been the shortest kid. Every year, in every grade, he has a far-off look. Like he doesn't see what's up close, just what's far, like treetops, or where the ground meets the sky. TaShon slides around the halls, keeps still on the school yard. The ghosts see him. I wish he could see them.

In class, TaShon doesn't look at the blackboard. Sometimes, he plays tic-tac-toe, by himself. Other times, he hums, and when the boys hear him, they sometimes smack his head. Most times, he stares out the window past the safety bars to his own world.

At school, I don't say, "Hey, TaShon," 'cause I'd only make his teasing worse. It isn't fair.

Whenever I see how sad and lonely TaShon is, it makes me doubt Mama Ya-Ya is right about him clinging hard to life. But I keep faith.

Like Mama Ya-Ya keeps faith in me.

"When the time's right," Mama Ya-Ya always says, "the universe shines down love."



Mama Ya-Ya says, "There are more good signs in this world, Lanessa, than bad." In school, I think my teachers count for more goodness than a trillion kids teasing me. Even though I'm teased, my new middle school feels good. Miss Perry, my Teach for America English teacher, is wearing yellow, and yellow means peace.

"Class," she says, "today's vocabulary word is *fortitude*. 'Strength to endure.' "

I like the word. I like how when saying it, my tongue touches the top of my teeth.

I look across at TaShon. I'm surprised. He's listening to Miss Perry, too.

Maybe, like me, TaShon loves words, too. *Fortitude* is three syllables. Three is a powerful number. It means life. It means making peace with your thoughts, words, and deeds.

I can't wait to tell Mama Ya-Ya my new word.



The next day I keep thinking about all Mama Ya-Ya has told me. “Signs everywhere. Pay attention.”

And I do. Noticing that the flowers on the way to school seem thirsty. Noticing that our school is old and crumbling, but it always feels brand-new 'cause the blackboard changes. Chalk—red, blue, white, and green—is powerful, sending me signals.



I watch as my math teacher Miss Johnson tries to help Andrew understand *her* signs. Math signs. Miss Johnson explains again and again, ever so careful. Kind.

Andrew always gets stuck on questions like: “How come $y = x + c$? Why not z ?”; “How come water boils?”; “Why didn’t Lincoln play cards instead of going to see a show?” Every year we’ve been in school together, they pass him—even though grown-ups say he’s slow. In school, he’s no trouble. Folks say, “School gives his mother a babysitter so she can work.” I don’t believe that. Andrew is just a different smart. Like if you say, “The world is flat,” Andrew’s mind cuts it up into squares. Like the way my eyes see things that others swear aren’t there.

Usually, I just don’t say anything. I do my work and keep my head down. But today, my third day being twelve, I whisper to Andrew: “I’ll help. At lunch, I’ll show you why numbers and letters mean.”

“Mean what?” asks Andrew.

His eyes are brown and curious. He acts as if I’ve been talking to him all these years. But I haven’t. Like TaShon, I don’t want him to get teased more for talking to me. At my new school, I see only popular kids hang in twos and threes, or in groups. Sometimes, they all wear short black skirts, or have their hair braided with the same color beads, or laugh at kids like me, Andrew, and TaShon.

“Mean what?” asks Andrew, his finger tapping my desk.

“Quantity. Numbers are signs for how much.”

Andrew smiles, polite.

The bell rings and I say, “Come on.”

Our school yard is nothing but concrete with an old handball wall and fading basketball lines. Most kids stand around, looking bored. Me, I usually bring a book to keep me company. Today, I have Andrew. Andrew who usually just stays inside.

We sit at a rusty picnic table. The sun is warming us good. I glare at anyone walking by, daring them to tease us. I must have an invisible sign that says, “Don’t mess with Lanesha.” Because no one says nothing.

Or maybe, everyone’s shocked to see Andrew outside?

“Math problems,” I say.

Andrew looks at me. He has freckles on his nose. His T-shirt has a hole, and when he shifts, I can see his belly button.

Behind Andrew I see a skinny ghost with a beard and bow tie. I wonder if it’s a teacher from long

ago.

~~I draw the numbers $5 + 5$ and $6 + 6$ and $7 + 7$. Then, I write 5×2 , 6×2 , 7×2 . “Are these the same? Is 5 plus 5 the same as 2×5 ?”~~

Andrew blinks.

I think the problems are easy, but Andrew doesn't answer.

I try again. “Here,” I say. “Count these.” I draw little sticks to add up to 10.

Andrew blinks again. “I don't need math. Math doesn't need me.” Then, he scoots closer, and leans in like he's going to tell me a secret. He whispers: “Do you know why there's air?”

“So you can breathe,” I answer.

He nods. “So we can live,” he says. “Can't see it, but it's always here.” He sucks in air, and his cheeks hollow like a skeleton. “Inside.” He points at his chest. Then, he opens his mouth wide, and blows his air out like he's pretending to be the big, bad wolf.

He grins and laughs loudly.

Me and Andrew high-five. See, Andrew's smart. Different smart.

The ghost puts up a hand for a high five, but I ignore him.

We sit, comfortable. Andrew shows me the ants crawling across the table. “Look at them breathe,” he says.

I answer: “Mama Ya-Ya would like you.” Then, I add, “She doesn't need math, either.”

But I do, I think.

Mama Ya-Ya never went to school. Her mother taught her and her mother's mother taught her mother.

I need everything Mama Ya-Ya teaches me. And I need everything that school teaches me, too.

I need all the signs. Dreams. Words. Word problems. Math.

Like air, they make my mind breathe.

The bell rings. I pat Andrew's hand. “You're smart, Andrew.”

He ducks his head like a baby bird.

“Like me!” I say.

“Like me,” he crows.

We walk back to the classroom and nobody—I swear!—bothers us.



After school, my teacher, Miss Johnson, teaches me. On Tuesdays, I try and stay late so we can work on harder problems.

Miss Johnson says, “Laneshia, you're like a sponge.”

Sponges are ugly, but I think I know what Miss Johnson means.

I try to work hard. Mama Ya-Ya says, “Just 'cause you're smart doesn't mean everything's gonna be easy. You have to set your mind to learning, Laneshia. Each and every day.”

When I can't solve a problem, I get frustrated, but when I do solve it, I feel like singing, like I don't have any worries in the whole wide world.

“You could be an engineer,” Miss Johnson says.

“Engineers build things,” I say, feeling happy, strong.

“Yes.”

“Like houses, apartments, and such?”

“More like dams. Bridges. Wait.” She gets up, digs in her purse. “My friend sent me a postcard,”

she says, handing it to me.

A beautiful red bridge rises out of the mist over water.

“The Golden Gate.”

“Why’s it called that?”

“I don’t know. You could find out. It’s a suspension bridge.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Look it up.”

“You sound like Miss Perry.” I will, too. Look it up. I know what *suspense* means. But what does mean for a bridge? What does it mean in math?

My fingers trace the bridge over the Pacific Ocean. It’s got to be the Pacific because the front of the card says “San Francisco.” I stare at the photograph. My heart races, and I feel tingly inside.

The bridge is beautiful. I could do that, I think. Build bridges. I love how they look—like strong steel butterflies, soaring high. My first bridge would be from lower Ninth Ward to Uptown, New Orleans. If I built a beautiful bridge to my family, maybe they’d walk across? Or else let me?



I walk home slowly from school. Miss Johnson’s postcard is in my jeans back pocket. She let me have it, even though the card had writing: “Dear Evelyn, You should be here. Love, Jim.”

I didn’t know her name was Evelyn.



The sky is bright blue like marbles with cloudy eyes. The end of summer is hurricane season, but the weather feels just fine. It is like that sometimes—calm, then rains hit. I stop and smell. I smell fish, brine from the Gulf, algae from the Mississippi, and somebody frying catfish. I smell something else—old, sorrowful. I don’t know what it is—I must ask Mama Ya-Ya. She says, “Senses tell you everything. See, touch, smell, feel. Trust your senses and you’ll never lose your way.”

Only difference is Mama Ya-Ya’s lived a long time. Her senses have told her so much and I know so little. I’m only twelve and still have a lot to learn.



I keep walking. Sniffing the air. Imagining bridges in the sky. I can already picture metal and wires, making marks, shapes against the sky. I think fitting the pieces together would be just like a jigsaw puzzle, except it wouldn’t be cardboard pasted together and hung on a wall. It’d be useful with patterns, shapes that did something—helped people and cars cross the street, over water, or a deep hole in the ground. Making bridges would be magic. Math would be my special trick. I’d only make beautiful bridges, I think, strong and as delicate as butterflies.



I hear cursing, and crying.

“Hey,” I shout. Some boys are dragging someone into the alley. Taunting, kicking. Punching.

A dog barks.

I hear: "Stop it."

I hate bullies.

"Hey." I push at one boy. He turns, but when he sees it's me, he doesn't hit. I am Mama Ya-Ya's crazy girl.

"What y'all doing?" I know these boys—Eddie, Max, Lavon.

"Mind your own business," says Max. He puffs out his chest, acting tough. He has always been a thug. I go toe-to-toe. I puff my chest out, too. I still don't see who they've been picking on. I keep my eyes focused on Max.

"You want to fight me," I say. No boy likes to be dared by a girl. If he takes me up on it, I'm dead. I hear crying and I know whoever they've been picking on is gonna be no help.

"Why would I fight a girl? Waste of time."

"Yeah," says Eddie. Max scowls at him to shut up.

Max hasn't moved and his black eyes look me over. "Go home, Lanesha," Max says. "It ain't Halloween."

Eddie and Lavon coo, cackle with laughter. Max is giving high fives.

"Your momma," I say. Everyone goes quiet. Max looks fierce. Like he wants to punch me.

"Say it," I say. Max is supposed to say, "Your momma," back. But no one messes with Mama Ya-Ya. She may cast a spell on him. Of course, she'd do no such thing. She doesn't do spells. Wouldn't hurt a bug. But Max doesn't know that.

"You have skinny legs, skinny butt, skinny everything," he says. "No wonder no boy likes you. You ugly." He stretches out *uhhh-gee* like a moan. I don't mind; it's part of the game. Max keeps a little pride, and I get what I want.

I turn my back and look to see who's been picked on. TaShon! His eye is swollen and he has his arms wrapped about a dirty dog.

"Go on," I say to Max, Eddie, and Lavon. "Pick on someone else."

"They was kicking the dog," screams TaShon. "Dog didn't hurt nobody."

Kids, at school, whisper Max once set a cat on fire.

"You're just a girl. Not worth my time."

I ball my fist. "And you're just stupid, dumber than a rock." I want Max to fight me.

"Go on, hit her," says Lavon.

"Yeah," says Eddie, his eyes bugging out like a balloon.

Max blinks. His eyes are superblack. Mean.

"Come on," Max says. "Waste of time." Him, Eddie, and Lavon walk away, trying to be cool.

I can finally breathe.

"Thanks," says TaShon. He pats the dog and the dog licks him. It's the first time I've seen TaShon smile. A big wide smile that shows his teeth!

The dog looks at me, its tongue lolling. It's a mess, matted hair—more black than brown—big paws, but its body is still small. It's still a pup, with bulging brown eyes and short, rangy hair.

TaShon is loving the dog like there's no tomorrow.

"He tried to save me, did you see?"

"He should've stopped you from getting that black eye, then. What is it? Some kind of lab-terrier mix?"

"German shepherd," says TaShon, defiant.

I think, No way, but let it pass. "Come let Mama Ya-Ya fix your eye."

"I've got to get home. Start the rice."

TaShon's mother gets home at six.

"Later," I say.

"Can you keep Spot for a while?"

"Who?" I say.

"Spot. My dog."

"Your dog doesn't have any spots."

"So? Please, Lanesha. Can you keep him? My momma won't let me keep him. 'Another mouth to feed,' she'll say." This is the most I've ever heard TaShon say!

"Well, how did you find him?"

"He found me. See," says TaShon, grinning, getting up. His pants baggy and scratched; his face bruised. "He's got no collar, no tags. He's a stray and he found me."

I think TaShon is a stray. Like me, he doesn't have friends. I read books, do homework. TaShon just walks the neighborhood in his own world. Or sits on his porch staring out. Once I saw him trying to make an ant colony, filling a mason jar with dirt. I asked him if he needed help, but he said, "No," turning his back to me. So, in the neighborhood, I pretty much leave him alone.

"Please, Lanesha. Help me. I know he's not a German shepherd. I just always wanted one."

I look at TaShon. Hard. Really see him. His eyes are brown just like the dog's. He's nice looking. Kind, I think. He has a kind face. He's tiny, though, smaller than most girls.

Patting the dog, he seems happy.

Seeing TaShon's feelings on his face, I see him.

"Please."

"All right. But Mama Ya-Ya might say we should call the dogcatcher."

"No, she won't."

"How you know?"

"I just do." He is one happy boy and I smile. Then, I whistle and call, "Come, Spot," and the dog does, trailing beside me, his stump of a tail high. I have seen much prettier dogs. But Spot doesn't seem to mind being ugly.



"Lookee, here," says Mama Ya-Ya as we walk through the door. "Is that Spot?"

I am *exasperated*. I learned that word from my dictionary. *Exasperated* as in *annoyed*.

Spot lies down at Mama Ya-Ya's feet like he belongs there.

I am *exasperated*, but not surprised. Mama Ya-Ya knows everything. She has the *sight*, too.

She gives both me and Spot a bowl of Hoppin' John.

I look around the warm kitchen as we eat. The gas stove. The dinette set. Mason jars filled with roots and herbs on the counter. Mama Ya-Ya is humming a sweet tune. Some song from her African past, from another life. Spot is snoring slightly at her feet.

When we finish, I do the dishes, watching rainbow bubbles float up from the sink.



"You know, there's a storm coming," says Mama Ya-Ya as I slip the last clean dish on the rack, my hands dripping with water. There's been nothing on the radio or the TV news. Nothing in the papers. But Mama Ya-Ya knows. "By the end of the week."

I shrug. We've had storms before.

"TaShon's coming, too," she says.

I'm always still surprised how Mama Ya-Ya can see people coming before they even get here. Sometimes I think she has more powers than any superhero.

There is a *rat-a-tat-tat* on the screen door. "Lanesha, it's me. TaShon."

Spot gets up wagging his whole body. I look up, drying my hands.

"Y'all clean that dog before bed," says Mama Ya-Ya.

"C'mon," I say to TaShon, opening the door, then moving down the steps, around the side of the house.

TaShon pats Spot. "I always wanted a dog."

I say nothing. Just grab the hose and spray Spot and TaShon both. One shouts, the other howls; both are happy.

It is hot and the water is cold. I toss TaShon a bar of soap and he is scrubbing Spot. I think they both are getting cleaner than they've ever been. Spot licks TaShon's face and TaShon grins. Neighbors pass by.

Mrs. Watson cries, "That is one fine dog. Just a pup."

Mr. Lincoln who has a fake left foot (he says his flesh foot is buried in Vietnam) shouts, "Wash him once. Then, twice. Three times clean. Fleas don't like soap."

Mr. D, Mama Ya-Ya's friend, a retired cop, hoots, "Who's your new friend, Lanesha?"

I look around to see who he's talking about. It's TaShon. TaShon shakes himself, and when he does it, Spot shakes himself, too, spraying water like streamers. TaShon does it again; so does Spot.

"A trick, already?!" exclaims Mr. D. "You've got a smart friend, Lanesha." Mr. D waddles away, his belly wiggling like jelly over his belt. I don't tell him TaShon is our neighbor from across the street.

"Whoop, whoop, whoop," I scream, holding the hose high then low. Spot barks. Soon, him and TaShon are jumping up and down trying to escape the water snake. High, then low. Spot tries to bite the water. TaShon, one eye still closed, just laughs and laughs. I spray his sneakers and Spot's toes.

I wave at Rudy and Rodriguez. They live in the blue shotgun house down the block.

Rudy calls, "Lanesha, spray some here, too." I do and the two grown men laugh like TaShon, jumping back, yet jumping forward enough to make sure their shirts and hair get wet. "Feels good," says Rodriguez. "Our neighborhood rain machine." He tosses a silver dollar to TaShon. "Buy the dog bone."

TaShon, his arms spread wide, twirls like an airplane. Spot barks and chases his tail. I lift the hose high; water falls like a soft summer shower.

There is sweetness to this day.

I thought this day was going to be ordinary. But it was full of surprises: Andrew, TaShon and Spot and Miss Johnson saying I could be an engineer.

I look up and down the street. Most folks are outside. None of the houses have air-conditioning. The houses are painted in pastel colors—pink, yellow, blue, and green. A few are white. Only our house is peach. Pastel colors are supposed to be cool, but all of us are sweating just the same.

I hear Mama Ya-Ya's TV news floating yackety-yak out the window: "*A tropical storm is kicking up high waves in the Bahamas. Satellites show the counterclockwise rotation of a developing hurricane. Winds, thirty-eight miles per hour...*"

I hear someone blowing a saxophone. I hear some boys hollering for pickup basketball; others are rapping on the street corner. Pretending they are on TV.

Girls are playing jacks and double Dutch. The older ones are sitting on porches, gossiping, braiding each other's hair, and looking at old copies of *Essence* magazine.

Grown-ups are arriving home from work. They seem like kids again, grinning silly. Their wrinkly faces go all smooth once they park their cars or step down from the city bus. Men take off their jackets like they're slipping off backpacks, and women swing their purses like empty lunch boxes. Retired folks walk through the neighborhood trying to be helpful. They scold kids to walk, not run, across the street.

I spray TaShon's big feet. Spot barks.

I'm happy. I think this neighborhood is my family. Right here. Now.

Who needs a dumb Uptown family?



I wake, stretch. Sun is shining into my room, making my blue walls glow. Spot stretches, too. He slept with me all night. Warm and soft.

I fall back on the pillow and Spot lays his head on me. He licks my face and I say, "Time for school."

Dressed, I pass Mama Ya-Ya's bedroom. It's empty except for my mother's ghost. Lying on the bed, as still as an alligator, sunning.

I ignore her. I've seen her so many times. But Spot stops. Ears perked, tail and even the hair down his spine up.

"You see her?" I say.

Spot doesn't move.

"It's my mother from long ago. She doesn't mean harm. Most of the time, she sleeps like now. Or just sits and stares."

Spot turns his head and looks at me like he understands everything I say.

"I guess she misses us. Or else she's waiting for something. I don't know what. It's been twelve years."

Spot licks my hand.

I swallow. "I can't touch her. Or talk to her either. Not really. I can talk, but she won't answer back. I don't know why."

Sniffing, Spot lifts his head high into the air. I think: Juliet should've had a dog. She might've been less sad if she'd had a dog.

Spot turns and prances down the stairs.



"Weatherman says a big storm is coming. Might be a hurricane. What I tell you?" Mama Ya-Ya clicks off the fire beneath a pot. "I knew it. Just knew it. I saw the birds leaving their trees. Saw how the water was slow to boil.

"Don't stay after school, Laneshia. I need you to pick up supplies. Milk. Bread. Rice. Beans. Bottled water."

"You think this is going to be another Betsy?" Before I was born, Hurricane Betsy tore up New Orleans. I saw old clips on the news. Mean Betsy. Some of the folks didn't have clean water. Or any food. Mama Ya-Ya wants us to be prepared.

Spot sits, begging at Mama Ya-Ya's skirt. He's already had breakfast. Mama Ya-Ya gives him a piece of toast.

I giggle.

Mama Ya-Ya puts a plate before me. The over-easy egg is bright yellow and white. I puncture the egg and watch the yellow river swirl on my plate. I take hot sauce and sprinkle the runny yolk red.

Instead of cleaning dishes, Mama Ya-Ya sits at the table with me. Her hair isn't neat. It's matted on her head like she's just gotten out of bed. ~~Mama Ya-Ya never comes to the table without her hair combed!~~ She's also left her teeth in their glass. Her cheeks look hollow.

She sucks air through her gums. It's a brief whistle. Spot comes and lays his head in her lap. She pats Spot's fuzzy head, but she doesn't look at him.

I sit up straight and pay attention.

"I had a dream. Don't know yet what it means."

I'm not worried. Mama Ya-Ya often has dreams. Just as she knows about things before they happen, her dreams can tell her things, too. Sometimes she dreams I'm going to have a pop quiz in school. Vocabulary. Math. So, I'll study extra during breakfast. Orange juice, bacon, and eggs are the perfect study food. If I'm lucky, Mama Ya-Ya will make grits or hash browns, too.

Most times, Mama Ya-Ya's dreams are about who's sick, who's delivering a baby, who got laid off from a job. She dreamed Mr. Bailey was going to break his leg. She told him he was too old to be spreading tar on his roof. But Mr. Bailey waved his hand, saying, "Seventy plus seven is a lucky number." He slipped off the ladder just the same. For an entire month, he scowled at me, stomped his crutches, whenever I brought him Mama Ya-Ya's fresh-baked pralines.

Usually, breakfast is my favorite time of day. Me and Mama Ya-Ya talk about school ("I want to sail all the blue on the globe," I'll say), whether I need new shoes ("You're growing so big," she'll say), what I want for dinner ("Pork chops," I'll say), and my weekend chores ("Clean the bathroom," she'll say). We talk regular, everyday stuff.

But today, Mama Ya-Ya sits across from me, her brows wrinkling like cornrows. I'm surprised 'cause Mama Ya-Ya usually cleans while I eat. She can't stand dirty pans or a greasy stove.

She is talking to me serious.

"In my dream, Lanesha, storm clouds come; wind comes; rain smacks down; the water clears. Sun comes out. Folks go about their business. Everyone is happy. But then, everything goes black. Like someone pulling a curtain. Or a shroud being pulled over the dead. Or God turning out the lights." She smacks her hand on the counter. And stares at the ceiling like some truth is up there.

I stare, too, but all I see is our kitchen lamp with dead bugs in its glass basin.

I start to feel a wee bit of fear. Usually, Mama Ya-Ya understands her dreams. I am scared not by her dream itself, but because she doesn't seem to know what it means.

Mama Ya-Ya gets up, and picks up the pot of scalded milk from the stove's back burner. "I think the storm might be bad," she says, certain. "But not as bad as Betsy."

She pours me café au lait—mixing the milk from the pot with coffee in my cup. Since I was five, I've been drinking café au lait. It always makes me feel grown-up. Now that I'm older, I realize Mama Ya-Ya doesn't use much coffee. Still, I pretend I'm drinking exactly what Mama Ya-Ya drinks, and not just 99 percent hot milk.

"Momma is upstairs," I say.

"I know. What's she doing?"

"Just sleeping. Though I don't know why a ghost needs to sleep. She could be sailing the seas. Or flying to Africa."

I don't know why I'm talking about my mother. I used to talk about her a lot when I was little. I wanted to know everything about her, but I discovered there wasn't too much to know.

Mama Ya-Ya pats my head, just like she patted Spot. Pat-pat. I don't mind.

Mama Ya-Ya's eyes are still crinkled with worry. She picks up my plate. The egg and hot sauce had made it glow like yellow, orange, and red finger paint. "Hurry, you'll be late for school," she says.

I grab my notebook of assignment sheets. Even though our schoolbooks are tattered and old, we aren't allowed to bring them home. Spot scurries up. I say, "Stay. Mama Ya-Ya needs company."
"Not with ghosts in the house. Got all the company I need."
"Spot isn't allowed in school. 'Sides, he sees ghosts, too."
"He does?"

Mama Ya-Ya and her cane move closer to Spot. She is bending, peering down at him. Her Coke-bottle-covered eyes looking into his baby browns. I can tell she's smiling inside. Spot will give her someone to talk to. Mama Ya-Ya, I think, will be chattering away before I'm down the porch steps.

I open the screen door. The sun is ever so bright. I can smell the trees, flowers, and bacon. Everybody in my neighborhood loves bacon. Probably a dozen families are frying it right now.

I turn back and say, "Do you ever think my mother's ever going to stop being here?"

"She'll stop when she finds her purpose. Go on now. You'll be late." Then, "You want some bacon?" she says to Spot.

I smile. Mama Ya-Ya and Spot are going to have a good day.



My day is fine. I even like PE. I run track and win. Ginia pronounced like *Virginia*, without the *Vir*, comes in a close second. Ginia has the biggest smile, an itty-bitty nose, and beautiful cornrows with crystal, rainbow beads. Ginia is popular and cute. Not like me. Every PE class, she's been nice to me. Not stuck-up. I wish she were in one of my other classes. Except for PE, I only see her in the halls with the cheerleading girls who like to stroll after school on the Riverwalk, trying to look cute.

Last week, Ginia even asked me to go try on clothes at the mall. No one has money to buy, but that doesn't change anything. Hours can be spent trying on clothes. Drinking a Big Gulp at the mall.
Still.

I didn't say yes. I think Ginia feels sorry for me. I don't need anyone's sorry. 'Sides, even if she was sincere, her friends wouldn't be. Sooner or later someone will bring up my weird eyes. Or say, "You see dead people." Or false-pity me not having parents, calling me an "orphan girl" or worse. More worse, they'd call Mama Ya-Ya a "witch." Then, I'd have to fight. I like Ginia too much to ruin her good time.

Still. She keeps asking. I think it's because she didn't go to my elementary school. She doesn't know that I've always been on my own—except for Mama Ya-Ya and the neighbors who watched me grow for a long time.

"Lanesha, after school want to hear my CDs? I got some new ones." Ginia is smiling, her hands on her knees, still panting from running.

"I can't."

"You always say that."

I'm tempted. "Mama Ya-Ya wants me to go to the store."

"I'll go with you."

My eyes widen. But I only say, "Okay."



All through math, I'm distracted. I don't think Ginia means what she says; still, I hope. Wonder if she'll wait for me after school?

At lunch, I eat my tuna sandwich and apple juice at my table. I call it “my table,” ’cause no one will sit with me. But, unlike TaShon, I don’t try to be invisible. I sit right in the middle of the cafeteria. I’m not ashamed of me. In class, folks don’t like to sit near me, either. In my old school, teachers used to make them. Then, there’d be hollering, “I don’t wanna. I don’t wanna.” I guess when teachers figured out sitting by myself didn’t bother me, they let it go. It does bother me that kids don’t sit beside me. I just don’t let it show. During lunch, I read; during class, I stare at the teacher and blackboard. I blot out all the kids being rude! I sometimes imagine that they’re just ghosts, too.

But today I am itching with thoughts of Ginia.

Twice, Miss Johnson asks what’s wrong with me. I can’t answer her. Part of me feels embarrassed and I’m not sure why.

But I watch the clock, anyhow; its hands measure time, superslow. I tell myself I know better than to want something so bad. If my Uptown family has taught me anything, it’s taught me that. If I thought it would add up to anything, I wouldn’t hang out with Ginia after school. Why worry that once she found out about me, she might diss me like my Uptown relatives?

Click. Finally, the clock’s big hand points twelve. Its little hand points three. The school bell rings. I steel my heart. I won’t get hurt.



I didn’t think buying milk, bread, and water could be so much fun. Mr. Ng owns the corner store and him and Ginia talk about his daughter, Mengying, in Vietnam.

“We’re pen pals,” says Ginia. “When Mr. Ng has enough money, he’ll send for Mengying. When we’re older, she’s going to show me Vietnam. The land of a thousand temples.”

“Put it on Mama Ya-Ya’s account,” I say, pointing at the bread, milk, and water on the counter.

“Sure thing,” says Mr. Ng. He knows neighborhood Social Security, disability, and welfare checks come in first of the month. Mama Ya-Ya always pays. She stretches her Social Security to include me. It is Wednesday, the twenty-fourth. On the first of the month, we’ll feel rich (have fresh shrimp and hot andouille sausage); on the second, we’ll be poor again.

“Is Mama Ya-Ya planning on a hurricane?” asks Mr. Ng. “Weatherman says big hurricane coming to Florida.”

“She says a storm’s coming. Told me we had to prepare.”

“Mama Ya-Ya’s ghosts say so? Prepare? Storm’s coming to New Orleans? Or hurricane? Her ghosts say which?”

Mr. Ng understands ghosts. He told Mama Ya-Ya that Vietnam was filled with them. From time to time, the two of them talk about ointments and roots. Mr. Ng confides his worries about his ancestors. He hopes his cousins in Vietnam are caring for his parents’ graves. Mama Ya-Ya says, “I understand.” Then, Mama Ya-Ya hugs him. Mr. Ng bows. Their conversation is always the same.

“Not ghosts this time, Mr. Ng,” I answer, shy to be talking about ghosts in front of Ginia. “She dreamed it,” I say, wincing that these words are no better. Ginia will leave me soon enough. Just wait. “Ghosts, dreams,” she’ll say, disgusted, thinking I’m too crazy to bother with.

I grab the bags and go.

Outside, it’s cloudy, shrill with wind blowing through the cypress trees. The sun seems to have disappeared.

“My grandmother sees things, too,” says Ginia. “We just don’t talk about it.”

I smile. Ginia smiles back. She slips her hand over mine and grabs the bag with milk and water.

The humidity is high. It is still New Orleans hot. Mosquitoes are eating my neck.



Up ahead, there's a crowd on Mr. Palmer's porch. He's an amputee. Both his legs are gone because of diabetes. Every day his wife rolls his wheelchair onto the porch with a TV stand and a small color TV. His pug, Beanie, curls up beneath where his feet ought to be. Both spend their days on the porch until Mrs. Palmer comes home from making beds at the Hilton. If it rains, Mrs. Palmer knows neighbors will take Mr. Palmer inside. She leaves him a pitcher of beer and a paper sack filled with sandwiches for lunch. A bone for Beanie. Neighbors drifting by will sometimes leave pecans or an apple. Everybody knows not to leave sweets.

"Let's go see," says Ginia.

We walk up onto the porch, saying, "Hey, Mr. Palmer." He nods.

Six or seven people are standing around the small TV. No one says much. I recognize Rudy, Mrs. Watson, and some kids from the school. Max is there—but he doesn't pay me any mind. Everyone stares at the TV.

I press in, too, watching the weatherman with a big head of blond hair. His stick is pointing at lines and names on the screen. There are blue, green, brown colors; all good colors; blue means happiness; green, nature; brown, earth. The Atlantic Ocean is blue. Florida sticks out like a green and brown thumb. But the weatherman keeps scratching at his collar like he can't get enough air. He makes me nervous. There's a white circle cloud, too, twisting slowly on the small screen. White is sacred, pure. In the cloud's center, it's red. The red glows, contracting, then growing bigger than before. It has already passed over islands. Now it is rushing towards southern Florida.

Mama Ya-Ya says red can mean love or energy. Or blood, danger.

I realize the TV sound isn't on, but none of us needs to hear the man speak. We can all see. On the bottom of the screen, it says, "Hurricane Katrina, Category One."



Ginia and I walk to my porch. I don't want to think about the colors on TV. I want to think about having more fun with Ginia. But the TV pictures have already changed the neighborhood. Grown-ups with their hands shading their eyes, are looking at the sky, worried. Some folks are unloading gallons of water from their cars; others, zombielike, instead of waving or saying hello when we pass by, keep staring at baby TVs or listening to boom box radios.

Ginia sets the milk and water down, and turns to go.

"Don't you want to come inside?"

"I do, but —"

"Is that your new friend?" Mama Ya-Ya hollers from inside the house. "Is it Ginger? Virginia? Ginia?"

Ginia's eyes open wide.

"Mama Ya-Ya already knows about you. Like I told you, she sees without seeing." Through the screen door, I holler back at Mama Ya-Ya, "It's just a girl from school."

"No, I'm not. I mean, I am, but I'm not —"

Now, it's my turn to be bug-eyed.

"I'll be needed at home, Lanessa. What with the weather and all."

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