

SETTING

A hair braiding shop in Harlem off of 125th Street

TIME

A very hot day in July of 2019

Miriam & Maria

JAJA'S AFRICAN  
HAIR BRAIDING

Scene 1: Nine AM

*It's a quiet and hot summer morning on 125th and St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem. Miriam is drinking a smoothie and waiting in front of a closed Jaja's African Hair Braiding Shop. After a moment, Marie runs up. She is carrying a bunch of "Obama Must Go" bags that are very heavy. She plaps them down in front of the grate.*

MIRIAM. Good morning.

MARIE. Hi. Good morning. Sorry. So sorry. I hope you weren't waiting long.

MIRIAM. No, no, it's fine. I wasn't waiting long.

*Marie fumbles to get the keys out of her large book bag. She goes through the process of unlocking the grate and opening up the shop all while speaking.*

MARIE. It's just been one of those days already you know? I slept through my alarm, which like, I don't even know how. That never happens to me. Then the hot water wasn't running in our building—and like, I know it's hot today, but not hot enough to just be taking a freezing cold shower—which I had to anyways. Then I threw on my clothes and ran out of the house. I get to the station, swipe my MetroCard and, of course—"Insufficient Fare"—UGH!

But it was actually a good thing because I realized that I forgot to bring the new packs of hair that FINALLY came in after all of this, back and forth with the post office and you know how much fun

that is for me! Even though cute Johnny has been working the morning shifts, but anyway, anyway.

I'm just not tryna deal with all of the braiders coming down on me today about not having enough new hair for the week, mainly, my mother—because you know that I would never hear the end of it from her. *(Imitates her mother.)* "Eh-eh! So you want me to go broke?! Be starving in the streets? You want to ruin my business and my shop?! Hmph! I know you are my daughter, but darling, I will not let aaaaaanyone ruin my business while God is still keeping me alive! You understand?"

MIRIAM. You sound just like Jaja.

*Miriam laughs, both amused at Marie's spot-on impersonation of her mother and the glaring accuracy of her words. Marie prattles on while continuing this intricate choreography of unlocking the grate and pushing it up. It feels like a big job for such a tiny girl, but Marie is used to this dance.*

MARIE. But you know what I meant. Anyway, I go back home, grab the bags, run back to the train station, refill my MetroCard, and catch an A train right as it pulls in. But then it's like... Okay, is this an express train or what? Like whhhhhhyyy does it move so slow? There's train traffic every day? Every minute? How? But whatever, I finally made it! Anyways... Hi! How was your morning?

MIRIAM. ... Fine.

*Marie and Miriam finally enter the stuffy shop.*

MARIE. God—it's going to be a hot one today.

MIRIAM. Yeah, I saw on the news it's going to be close to a hundred.

MARIE. Well, hopefully it doesn't get too packed in here. *(Speaking to the air conditioner.)* I need you to stay working today, okay little air conditioner?

*Miriam notices a notebook that Marie placed on the front counter along with her things.*

MIRIAM. *(Reading the title.)* "For the Love I Lost in the Sea" by Marie Ndiaye. *(In-the-EYE.)* Your new short story?

*Marie nods—sky but proud.*

MARIE. Yeah...

MIRIAM. Okay! So what is this one about?

MARIE. Okay so boom: it's about two people, from the Caribbean, but from two different classes, and they meet on a boat and fall in love, but lose touch once they reach America.

MIRIAM. *(A little confused.)* Like *Titanic*?

MARIE. Yes. Well, no, I mean... there are similarities I guess. *(Immediately worried.)* Oh no... I actually never thought about that comparison.

MIRIAM. Hey—Black *Titanic* love story sound good to me.

MARIE. Sure, but this one is deeper. More romantic. I think you'd like this one a lot.

MIRIAM. Well, me, you know I like reading all of your stories. I think it help me make my English better.

MARIE. Aww thanks Miriam.

MIRIAM. Eh-ehh. So now, this your third one. And you still don't want to tell your mom you want to be a writer and not doctor like she want?

MARIE. You know that she doesn't understand. If it's not a job that screams "I make a lot of money," then it's pointless to her. So I can't tell her I want to write for a living.

MIRIAM. But your mom like romance story. Look, she's getting married today!

MARIE. *(Sarcasm.)* I wouldn't call that romance Miriam.

MIRIAM. Ah, Marie, don't say that.

MARIE. It's true.

MIRIAM. Anyway, are you hungry? Would you like this bagel?

MARIE. Oh, thank you. You're the best. I didn't get a chance to grab breakfast.

MIRIAM. It's no problem. I got the special at my new corner deli and it comes with bagel. But you know me, I'm trying to watch my weight.

MARIE. What are you talking about? You look amazing.

MIRIAM. No, no. I saw CNN doctor say that if you want to lose weight, you have to not have too many "carbs."

MIRIAM. Thank you. *(To Jennifer.)* This is the color that you want right?

JENNIFER. Yup, that's it. Thank you.

MIRIAM. Okay good.

*Miriam starts to comb Jennifer's hair, but Jennifer winces.*

JENNIFER. Umm, can you comb lightly please. I'm kinda tender-headed.

MIRIAM. Okay. No problem.

BEA. *(Talking to Aminata about Ndidi.)* Can you believe this one? Talking to me like we're friends.

AMINATA. Don't worry about this girl. She's just silly.

BEA. I'm telling you! And you see how she's all "Good morning!" like she's nice. We know she's not nice.

AMINATA. I know.

BEA. *(Sucks teeth.)* Anyway... I'm not going to let her mess with me today. I'm not.

MARIE. Going to pick up some water. Does anyone want anything from the deli?

MIRIAM. *(Takes a sip of her smoothie.)* No, I'm fine.

BEA. Egg sandwich and ginger tea.

AMINATA. Onion bagel with cream cheese.

NDIDI. Bacon, egg, and cheese on a roll.

MARIE. Cool. Alright, I'll be back.

*Marie exits.*

BEA. *(To Aminata—sucks teeth.)* Bacon, egg, and cheese. You see how she copies me? I get an egg sandwich and then she wants the same thing with bacon and cheese. You see this nonsense?

AMINATA. Yeah, I see it.

BEA. Eh-hh-verything I do, this girl wants it. It's crazy.

AMINATA. I know.

*Ndidi takes off her headphones. Clearly there was no music playing this time.*

NDIDI. Sister Bea... Is there a problem? Today? Again?

NDIDI, BEA, AMINATA

START

BEA. Excuse me?

NDIDI. You know I can hear you.

BEA. Okay. So you say what?

NDIDI. No YOU say what?

BEA. Eh-eh! Who are you pointing at?

MIRIAM. Ladies.

NDIDI. Listen, I don't want any problems with you. I just want to do my job and go home. That's it.

BEA. Me too.

NDIDI. Good. Great!

*It should be over, but Bea likes to start shit.*

BEA. — And if you don't steal any more of my customers, we won't have any problems.

NDIDI. Are you serious?

BEA. Eh-eh! Natasha has been coming to me for YEARS. And then all of a sudden, I walk in and she's sitting in your chair. How is that not stealing? *(To Aminata.)* Aminata. Is that not stealing?

AMINATA. Sounds like stealing to me.

NDIDI. Oh so I forced her? She called ME, okay?

BEA. And how did she get your number?

NDIDI. I don't know! From her friend who recommended me.

AMINATA. *(Laughs.)* "Recommended" might! By who?

BEA. Exactly.

NDIDI. Look, I'm not doing background checks on every customer who calls me. I'm sorry about Natasha. But I'm not doing this back and forth with you every day while I'm here. As soon as they are done renovating my shop, I'm gone.

BEA. That's right. Your chair is temporary. If your shop hadn't burned down and Jafa didn't feel sorry for you, you wouldn't even be here. So mind yourself, yeah? You should be grateful.

AMINATA. Temporary!

AMINATA. Grateful!

NDIDI. I am.

BEA. Then act like it.

AMINATA. Yeah!

*Ndidi laughs and shakes her head as she puts on her headphones and plays her music loud again.*

BEA. You see? That's why she put on her headphones. Because she knows I'm right!... Anyway... What were we even talking about?

AMINATA. Jaja's wedding.

BEA. Oh right. That sham marriage.

AMINATA. Eh! Beah!

BEA. Listen, I wish Jaja would just stop lying and call it what it is, yeah? When I married stupid Peter from my church, you think I was in love with him?

*They laugh.*

No! Who could love a man that hideous? But he needed his papers and he offered me a good price.

AMINATA. Do you still even talk to him?

BEA. No. For what? After the divorce, I didn't care! And that's exactly what Steven is going to say to Jaja!

AMINATA. Aye! Beah. Come now.

BEA. I'm telling you. I give it two months. He's going to drop her fast-fast and she will be right back in this shop, breaking her fingers, braiding hair all day, trying to make ends meet like the rest of us. You see—that is her problem. She's always wanted too much, too soon. She thinks she's better than everyone.

*Ndidi scoffs and chuckles to herself, but Bea is too self-involved to notice.*

You know this whole plan for a shop? This was my idea.

*Aminata (treatly everyone) has heard this story many times before:*

AMINATA. Oh yes. I remember.

BEA. The concept, the design, how to run it, everything. It was all my idea and she stole it from me.

MIRIAM. Bea—Are we still on this?

BEA. It's true!

MIRIAM. (Rolls her eyes.) Okay.

BEA. Everyone knows that! Back in the day, humm—me and Jaja were like this. (Crosses her fingers.) We would be cleaning these white people's houses and would talk all the time about the shop that we were going to open. Where it would be, how much money we would make, everything. And then she met that sleazy landlord who offered "a deal she couldn't pass up" she said. (Sucks teeth.) I told her not to use all the money she had saved for an immigration lawyer on this. I said that getting her green card was more important, but she was determined...

And because I couldn't get all of my money together in time, she went ahead. Hmph. I'm telling you—this place should be called Bea's African Hair Braiding!

*Marie enters. Bea changes her tone.*

But, anyway, it's fine. As soon as I have my money sorted, I will get a nice property, on a nice block, and open my own shop. The right way.

*Ndidi rolls her eyes.*

AMINATA. You've been saying this for years now Bea.

BEA. Eh-eh! You don't know business. Am! These things take time.

AMINATA. Sure.

MARIE. (Handing out orders.) Alright, here's your sandwich Bea.

BEA. Thank you.

MARIE. And for you Aminata.

AMINATA. Thanks.

MARIE. And you got the bacon, egg, and cheese, right Ndidi?

*Bea sucks her teeth and rolls her eyes.*

NDIDI. Yes. Thank you.

END

*Beat. The shop falls silent. Animate and Bea make eyes at each other. Miriam smiles solemnly at Marie.*

MIRIAM. (To Marie.) Listen, God will work it out for you, eh? You will see. God can make anything happen in your life.

ALL WOMEN. Amen! / Yes, praise God! / He will work it out for you.  
*Franklin, the Sock Man, enters the shop. He pulls in his large shopping cart and display of different colored/designed socks.*

START

THE SOCK MAN. What's going on y'all. What's going on?

ALL WOMEN. Good afternoon. / How are you? / Hello. / Hi Franklin.

THE SOCK MAN. Socks. Socks. I got socks. I got socks. Long ones. Short ones. Winter socks. Summer socks. Color socks. Black socks. White socks. Whatever socks you want. Trust me, I got Socks. Socks. Socks. Anyone need socks?

JENNIFER. Oh, can I see?

THE SOCK MAN. Sure. Got a bunch right here. And much more in my cart.

JENNIFER. How much are these?

THE SOCK MAN. What you wanna pay sis? I'll give you a good price.

CHRISSEY. (Holding up a picture on her phone to show Ndid.) You know, it's funny because people tell me I look like Beyoncé all the time, but with my hair like this, I like really see it.

NDIDI. Yeah...

CHRISSEY. And can you see about braiding it all the way to the end like this?

NDIDI. Okay. No problem.

CHRISSEY. Cause this is for my birthday party and I need my hair to look exactly like how hers did in the video.

NDIDI. I understand.

CHRISSEY. (Looking in the mirror.) See. Sorry. I don't want to be picky or whatever, but this braid right here doesn't have enough blonde.

NDIDI. Okay. I'll redo it.

CHRISSEY, SOCK MAN

CHRISSEY. Yeah, 'cause I need it to look EXACT. You know what I'm saying?

NDIDI. No problem. I will make you Beyoncé today.

CHRISSEY. Thank you.

JENNIFER. Okay, let me get these two and then three pairs of these black ones.

THE SOCK MAN. No problem, miss, no problem. I'll give you all of these for twenty.

JENNIFER. Okay, I love a good deal. Thank you.

*Jennifer hands him some money.*

THE SOCK MAN. No, no, thank you. (To Chrissy.) And for you, Miss Beyoncé. You need socks?

CHRISSEY. (Flattered.) Oh my God. You are so stupid. But nah, I'm not Beyoncé. And I'm good on socks right now.

THE SOCK MAN. No problem miss. Next time. Hey Marie. Tell your mother I said hello and congratulations.

MARIE. I will. See you Franklin.

STOP

*She holds the door open for a new customer walking in. Vanessa. She doesn't thank him. Everything about how she's walked in suggests that she's... not the most fun person in the world (aka: rude).*

THE SOCK MAN. (As he exits.) Socks. Socks. Socks. I got socks for sale. Socks.

MARIE. Hello. Welcome. How can I help you?

VANESSA. Yeah. I wanna get braids.

MARIE. Okay great. Do you know what style you want?

VANESSA. No. Y'all don't got a book or something?

MARIE. Uh, yeah we do. (Pulls a photo album from behind the counter.) Here you go.

VANESSA. Ummmm, this is like dumb heavy. You wanna break my arm?

MARIE. Oh. No, sorry.

VANESSA. I like just got my nails done and shit.

*Beat. The shop falls silent. Anniata and Bea nicker eyes at each other. Miriam smiles solemnly at Marie.*

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MIRIAM & VANESSA

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MARIE. Uh, yeah we do. (Picks a photo album from behind the counter.) Here you go.

VANESSA. Ummin, this is like dumb heavy. You wanna break my arm?

MARIE. Oh. No, sorry.

VANESSA. I like just got my trails done and shit.

START

MARIE. Sorry.

*Aminata and Bea look at each other and shake their heads.  
Bea. Vanessa looks through the album quickly.*

Uh...do you know what kind of style you'd like?

VANESSA. Damn! I literally just said I ain't know! Like...chill.

MARIE. Sorry, I was just trying to help.

VANESSA. Well, when I need help, I'm ask, aight?

MARIE. Sure.

VANESSA. (Shows Marie.) Aight, so I want this.

MARIE. Great, Jumbo box braids.

VANESSA. Yeah. How much is that?

MARIE. (Looks around.) Well... Let me see whos avail...able...

*Marie looks over to all of the braiders in the shop and  
Aminata and Bea do a poor job of looking like they are busy.*

Uh...Aminata can talk to you about the price outside.

AMINATA. (Mouths.) NO! NO!

VANESSA. Why I gotta go outside? It's madd hot.

MARIE. Oh, that's just our policy. We don't discuss the price in the shop.

VANESSA. So I gotta go out in the heat?

MARIE. It'll only be for a minute.

VANESSA. Why you can't just tell me now?

MARIE. She will. As soon as you step outside... Aminata?

*Aminata smiles weirdly at Vanessa.*

VANESSA. Ummm, why you looking like that? (To Marie.) Why she looking like that? I don't need nobody touching my hair who got an attitude.

MARIE. No no, it's fine. She's fine. Right?

AMINATA. Yeah, I'm fine. Come. We won't be outside long. I know it's hot.

VANESSA. Oh my God. All this just to say a stupid price. Like...

*Vanessa walks out of the shop and Aminata follows behind.*

BEA. Hmph. These people.

NDIDI. (To Chrissy.) Okay, how is it now?

CHRISSEY. Yaasss! Perfect. (Looks in mirror excitedly.) "Okay ladies now let's get in formation!" (Fishes money out of purse.) Here you go. Thank you so much.

NDIDI. You're welcome.

CHRISSEY. You got a card?

NDIDI. I do. (Pulls one from her station.) Here you are.

CHRISSEY. Thank you. I'll definitely come back. What days are you here? I have to tell my friend to come. She's been looking for a new hair braiding lady.

BEA. Oh, well here's my card. Tell your friend that I can do her hair nice-nice. And you too. I'll do it for cheaper than she does.

CHRISSEY. Oh great. Even better. Alright cool. Thank you.

NDIDI. You're welcome. BEA. You're welcome!

BEA. (To Ndidi.) And that's how you do business.

*Chrissy exits as Bea smiles at Ndidi sarcastically. Vanessa and Aminata reenter.*

VANESSA. All that just to talk about a price? Anyway, is this your chair?

AMINATA. Yes. Please have a seat.

*Vanessa inspects the seat curiously before she sits down.*

VANESSA. Ugh, what is that smell? And why this seat all warm?

AMINATA. I was just sitting in it.

VANESSA. Okay, well I ain't tryna sit in nobody's funk. Cause some of y'all don't be using deodorant and be bathing out of buckets and shit.

AMINATA. I showered today. Just like everyone in here. You have no need to worry.

VANESSA. (Snaps teeth.) Whatever.

*Aminata rolls her eyes out of view of Vanessa and turns to Marie.*

AMINATA. Marie, can I get fifty-six inches in number four?

STOP

MICHELLE. Yeah...that's probably it.

*Michelle dials and is silently hopeful that this will not turn into a thing. After a quick moment, Ndidi's phone starts to ring. She answers, oblivious that Bea has already put it together.*

NDIDI. Eh-low?

*Michelle looks at Ndidi. Everyone knows what's going on.*

MARIE. Oh shut. Not again.

AMINATA. Oh my goodness...

NDIDI. Eh-low? Are you there?

MIRIAM. Why today? Why?

MICHELLE. *(Meekly waves.)* Hi. I'm Michelle. Your twelve o'clock.

NDIDI. Oh. Ha! Sorry. I'm Ndidi. How are you?

BEA. Are you fucking serious?

MARIE. Can we not do this today, please?

MIRIAM. Eh-eh, Bea, don't start.

BEA. *(To Ndidi.)* You must really have a death wish, eh? How many of my customers are you going to steal?!

NDIDI. What are you talking about?

BEA. Everyone in here knows that Michelle has been coming to me for YEARS!

NDIDI. And I'm supposed to know that how?

MICHELLE. Bea, please, don't be upset. I called her.

BEA. When? When did you call her, eh?!

MICHELLE. A few days ago.

BEA. Yeah okay? Marie! Call your mother and tell her she needs to come now! I want this girl fired.

NDIDI. Fired?!

MARIE. Okay Bea—I can't do that.

BEA. Fine, then I will call her myself! Because I am not going to tolerate someone coming in here and stealing all of my customers. I know you have been sneaking and going through my Rolodex. NDIDI. Are you serious? I have customers of my own.

MICHELLE, BEA, NDIDI & Aminata

BEA. And no one should be allowed to get a temporary chair when they are stealing customers.

MICHELLE. Bea! I called her. I promise you.

BEA. For what? Why you no call me? I've been doing your hair for years.

MICHELLE. I'm sorry. I wouldn't have come if I had known you were going to be here today.

BEA. Oh really?

START

MICHELLE. Listen, Bea—you just...haven't done as good of a job lately... And it has been taking you twice as long to finish and I just...you know...wanted to try someone new.

BEA. So you're saying I don't know how to do your braids now?

MICHELLE. I'm saying that I wanted to try someone new.

BEA. Wanted to try someone new... Okay that's fine.

MICHELLE. *(To everyone in the shop.)* I'm so sorry about this. BEA. No, no. You can find someone new. In another shop, because you need to leave!

NDIDI. What?

MICHELLE. Excuse me?

BEA. You heard me!

MARIE. You can't do that Bea. Any paying customer is allowed to stay.

BEA. No! I have been in this shop the longest of anyone here, including you Marie! And no customer who switches braiders in the same shop should be allowed to stay!

NDIDI. Do you hear yourself? *(Looks around the room.)* Does she hear herself?

MIRIAM. Bea, please. Have some reason.

AMINATA. Come now, sista. You know we can't do that.

BEA. I will call Jaja right now. I know she will agree with me!

MICHELLE. You know what? I'm just gonna go.

NDIDI. No, no, no, please. Come and sit. I'm doing your hair. BEA. No you're not!



MARIE. Bea, I think you should go and take a walk outside.

BEA. (Stunned, very dramatic.) OH! So now you are putting me on street duty?!

MARIE. I didn't say that—

MIRIAM. — Eh-eh! She didn't say that.

AMINATA. (To Bea.) Just relax, eh. You are going to pull up your blood pressure.

BEA. (Slightly emotional.) I have not had to be on street duty flagging down random people for three years, okay! And I am not going to have someone come in here, steal my customers, and force me to stand out on the street like some beggar! I have worked too hard, you hear me? I have worked way too hard for that shit!

*Bea tries to recover as she has become more emotional about this than she imagined. Everyone in the shop stares at her. Eventually Bea grabs her purse and starts to storm out of the shop.*

AMINATA. Where are you going?

BEA. Oh, now you care? Thanks for having my back Aminata!

*Bea leaves.*

AMINATA. Bea... Bea!

*Everyone stares at each other, unsure of what to do or say. Eventually Marie goes to Michelle, who is on the verge of a panic attack.*

MARIE. I am very sorry Miss Michelle, but please. Ndidi will do a good job on your hair.

MICHELLE. (Traumatized.) Are you sure?

NDIDI. Yes, please. I am fine. I am not bothered by her. We have not done anything wrong. Come, sit. Please. I'm very sorry about that.

*Michelle takes a beat before finally deciding to sit down.*

MICHELLE. I just really don't like conflict, you know?

NDIDI. Yeah... So, what style would you like?

MICHELLE. (Traumatized.) Ummm, just some simple cornrows with zigzag parts. Here, I'll show you a picture.

*Michelle pulls up a picture on her phone and Ndidi quickly studies it.*

NDIDI. Okay. Beautiful. Don't worry—I'll do it nice-nice for you, yeah?

*Ndidi pulls a comb out from her drawer and starts to comb Michelle's hair. The air in the shop is tense and quiet. Marie, unsure of what to do to lighten the mood, turns up the song playing on the YouTube channel. (If you can get the rights, perhaps "Love Meantit" by CKay.)*

### Scene 3: One forty-five PM

*It's pretty quiet in the shop. Vanessa is still asleep in the chair, but Aminata is nowhere in sight. It seems everyone has taken some sort of break. Ndidi is just outside of the shop having a cigarette. Miriam continues to braid Jennifer's hair quietly and it finally looks like she's made some headway. Jennifer clicks away on her laptop doing her work as she vents to Miriam about it.*

JENNIFER. ... Well, it's not quite as exciting as you would think since I'm just like a editorial assistant. Lots of tedious work and very little free time. Always scouring the internet trying to find any little piece of information I can get. Or on the phone with someone's friend's cousin's half sister's grandma—begging them for info or a statement. Or reading. Sooooo much reading.

MIRIAM. Oh, I like reading.

JENNIFER. I just want to be in the field, you know?

MIRIAM. Which field?

JENNIFER. Like going out there and actually interviewing people. Getting the real story. Connecting. Just... Something that feels more...satisfying.

MIRIAM. Like Anderson Cooper?

JENNIFER. (Laughs.) Sure. Something like that.

MIRIAM. I would watch you on CNN. You have nice, kind face.  
JENNIFER. Well thank you, but print is more my thing. And I know it'll happen soon, I'm just impatient. But that's probably what two years of annoying grant work will do to you.

MIRIAM. I understand. You just have to keep faith.

JENNIFER. ...Yeah.

*Small beat.*

So, how long have you been braiding hair?

MIRIAM. Oh, maybe three years. Here in the shop. It is my first professional job.

JENNIFER. Oh my goodness, congratulations.

MIRIAM. Thank you. Yeah, Jaja, the owner of the shop, um, I meet her when I first came. They have this thing—how you say—like African community center, you know? So other Africans who have been here long time can help people who just come, like me. At first I no want to go because I think it only be old people.

*They both laugh.*

JENNIFER. Yeah, 'cause a community center isn't usually a hot spot for the young folks.

MIRIAM. Exactly. But it was a mix of people. And we all scared and wanting friends because of what president was saying.

JENNIFER. Yeah he's... yeah.

MIRIAM. So Jaja was there and she tell me she have hair braiding shop. And I tell her I braid hair all the time back home. I even braid a little girl's hair right there, a quick style, just to show her I'm good. And she hire me on the spot. I never know you can make money like this just braiding hair. It's not like that back home.

JENNIFER. And where is home?

MIRIAM. Sierra Leone.

JENNIFER. Oh okay.

MIRIAM. You know it?

JENNIFER. Yeah I've heard of it. But I've never been there or anything.

MIRIAM. You go to Africa before?

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JENNIFER. Yes, actually. In college. I did a study abroad.

*Miriam nods... with a hint of judgment.*

MIRIAM. Mmmmm. Let me guess: Kenya? South Africa? Morocco?

JENNIFER. South Africa. Yes! How did you know?

MIRIAM. That is where everyone goes. No one cares about Sierra Leone.

JENNIFER. Awww, well, how long has it been since you were back home?

MIRIAM. Three years. I came here to make some money and try to be American citizen so I can bring my daughter.

JENNIFER. Oh, is she back in Sierra Leone?

MIRIAM. Yes, with my mother.

*Miriam stops braiding for a moment and takes out her phone to show Jennifer a picture. Her daughter is the back screen of her cell phone.*

This is her. She turned five a month ago.

JENNIFER. Awww, she's beautiful.

MIRIAM. Thank you.

JENNIFER. I bet it must be hard to be away from her.

MIRIAM. Yeah... It is.

*Small beat. Miriam continues braiding, but is struck by a small wave of emotion.*

JENNIFER. *(Noticing Miriam's teary eyes.)* Awww... Are you okay?

MIRIAM. *(Wipes away the one tear she let fall.)* I'm sorry. I no mean to cry, but I miss her a lot.

JENNIFER. Yeah, I understand.

MIRIAM. When I was pregnant with her, it was a real surprise. I was married for two years and all that time I didn't get pregnant so I was thinking, you know, maybe God doesn't want me to have baby. And then one day, it happened.

JENNIFER. That's what they say. When you stop trying, it just happens.

MIRIAM. Yeah.

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Jennifer & Miriam

START

JENNIFER. I bet you and your husband were so excited!

MIRIAM. Uh, yeah. For a while. But then my husband started to get suspicious. Because you know, in his family, the men they have that... Eh, I don't know how to say it in English. *Okobo*... like... he can't have babies. You know?

JENNIFER. Oh... He's impotent?

MIRIAM. Yeah. Yeah. That. And you know, my husband—he's not a good husband. He didn't do anything. No job. He's lazy. I have to do everything in the house. So I was not happy, you know? And then one day, I was at the market and I run into my friends from secondary school. And we are talking and laughing and I'm having a good time and they say "Miriam! You need to come with us tonight. This new singer is having a show on the beach. You have to come!" And I know my husband no want to go because he don't like any-thing fun. *(Sucks teeth.)* So I lie to him and tell him I'm going to my sister's house and I go to the show. Then, this singer gets onstage and his voice is so... amazing. I don't know. Me, I never hear any-thing like it. Then I look close-close and I see that I know him, Musa. I know him from when I was small. His family lived down the road from me. Aye, but he looked a lot different now!

JENNIFER. Oh okay—he was looking good, huh?!

MIRIAM. Eh-het! So we stay the whole show and after I go up to him to see if he remember me and you know what? He say my name before I can even call to him!

JENNIFER. Okay! Come on, fate!

MIRIAM. So Musa and me and my friends, we spend almost the whole night together. It was so much fun. The most fun I have in years. And after, Musa drove me home and told me that he wanted to see me again. And I wanted to see him too. So I kissed him. You know, so he knew I was interested.

JENNIFER. Oh my goodness, Miriam!

MIRIAM. *(Proud of herself.)* I know. But I didn't care! I can't have some joy in my life? We all deserve it. And I told you, I'm sick of my husband.

So after a few days, I call Musa and we go out. One time then two

times then many times and soon, we start to see each other every day. I go to his shows. Or we go to the beach. A restaurant. Anything. Joy. That's what I was feeling, eh? For the first time, I tell my sister and she say "Oh no, Miriam! A woman no supposed to act this way and that," but me, I don't care. I don't know what happened to me. I used to be so quiet. But with Musa, I want to be loud, you know? Hmph...

After a time, Musa say he's going on a tour to Europe. He want to take me but we both don't have enough money for papers and visa. And I'm still married. So he goes. And one month after he leaves, I found out I'm pregnant.

JENNIFER. Whaaaaaaa...

MIRIAM. Eh-het. And my husband very excited because he think "Oh God has blessed us! I'm not okobo!" But me, I know he's still okobo. *(Sucks teeth.)* And when my daughter was born and she no look nothing like him, he start to say that he thinks maybe I'm not always at my sister's house like I say. And he call me all of these names and do you know, he raised his hand to me!

JENNIFER. Aye you serious?

MIRIAM. Yes! And I say after all these years? No job! So lazy! No fun! You are so brave to try and hit me? Me, I don't know what came over me because I just rise up and slap him down. *(Laughs.)* He look so shocked! He start to say that I was a witch. That I'm possessed. He's so stupid. And I know he believe anything. So I start to, eh, how do you say? Like a snake. *(Hisses.)* "Sss! Sss. Sss! Yeah, I'm a witch! I'm a big witch!" And then his eyes go big and scared and he start to run away.

*They both laugh.*

Then, I just pack all of my things and I go to my mother's house. She help me get divorce from him which was very hard. It's not like here. Back home, woman not supposed to leave man. So I let him say that I'm a witch and since court feel sorry for him, I get divorce. But I no care... I was free.

Hmph. Then I save money for long time and apply for visa for America. It take me eight times because they no want to give visa to Africans, but I'm lucky. I get approved for America because my cousin live here and have a good job as nurse, you know respectful

MARIE. Your hair looks nice.

VANESSA. I know...

*Vanessa exits.*

MARIE. *(Smiles sweetly.)* Sorry...

AMINATA. You will be lucky if I ever talk to you again!

MARIE. Well, did you at least get a good price?

AMINATA. *(Proud.)* Of course!

MARIE. Then that's all that matters.

AMINATA. No, my peace of mind matters!

*They both laugh it off. Oh, the Jewelry Man, enters the store.*

THE JEWELRY MAN. Afternoon ladies. Afternoon.

ALL WOMEN. Afternoon sir. / How are you? / Hello.

THE JEWELRY MAN. I have some nice things for you ladies today.

Earrings. Necklace. Rings. Bracelets. All the nice things. You want?

MIRIAM. No thank you.

THE JEWELRY MAN. And for you, beautiful Ndidi. How are you?

NDIDI. *(Smiles, flattered.)* I'm fine Olu, how are you?

THE JEWELRY MAN. Much better now that I am basking in the light of your smile, oh.

NDIDI. Thank you.

*He lays down his tray of goods to pull something out of his*

*hook bag.*

THE JEWELRY MAN. Here. I have something for you. Last time

I was here, you mentioned you wanted some large hoopys. So I went

and had these made for you. They are even dipped in fourteen-karat

gold—since I know you have sensitive skin.

NDIDI. *(Mouth.)* Really?

THE JEWELRY MAN. Of course.

NDIDI. These are beautiful.

THE JEWELRY MAN. For you? Only the best.

*A young woman, Radia, walks into the shop.*

MARIE. Hi. Welcome. Can I help you?

*RADIA & MARIE*

*Radia barely looks up from texting on her phone. Marie recognizes her, but is not sure what to do.*

*START*

RADIA. Yeah, hi. I actually wanted to make an appointment for tomorrow afternoon to get some braids. *(Looks up, finally.)* What times do you have available? Wait... Kelly?

MARIE. Radia... Hi.

*They hug.*

RADIA. Hi. Oh my God. What are you doing here? Wait, you work here?

MARIE. Umm, yeah, I do. This is actually my mom's shop.

RADIA. Oh wow. Small world.

MARIE. Yeah... it is.

RADIA. So you're working here until you start school?

MARIE. Something like that.

RADIA. Yeah, me too. My dad hooked me up with an internship at *Vanity Fair*. It's so crazy. I'm just dressing in designer clothes all day and getting paid.

MARIE. That's amazing.

RADIA. Yeah, it's cool. And my dad is all *(Mimics father.)* "Now this will definitely look good on your résumé when you start at Dartmouth." You know how our parents can be. It's always about "being the best."

MARIE. I know, right.

RADIA. Speaking of schools—did you ever decide where you were going to go?

MARIE. Oh, I um... decided to take a gap year. Just to you know, give myself a little break.

RADIA. Okay! On your *Malia Obama* how I feel that.

MARIE. Something like that.

RADIA. Well no doubt you'll end up going wherever you want. Ms. *Valedictorian*. I'm still lightweight mad I missed it by like half a percentage.

*Radia laughs and Marie joins her, but it's clearly fake.*

MARIE. Yeah, sorry about that. Anyways, so you wanted to book an appointment?

RADIA. Yeah, I'm going to Milan for a few days as part of my internship and I want to get my braids done before I go. You know? Just to have something easier to manage.

MARIE. Italy... wow. That sounds amazing.

RADIA. It is! You ever been?

MARIE. Uh, no. But it's on my bucket list!

RADIA. Oh my God, Kelly! We should all plan a trip next year! You would love it—the food is so amazing. We should totally have a little AP Lit class reunion.

MARIE. Yeah... That would be amazing. *(Wants this to end.)* Anyways, so yeah, I'll schedule you for tomorrow at two pm—does that work? You'll be with Miriam—she's great.

RADIA. *(Plugs it into her cell phone.)* Perfect. Thank you... Oh my God! It was so good running into you! I like never come to Harlem, but I really need to. It's so cute up here.

MARIE. H is... Yeah.

RADIA. Anyways... Well, if you're working tomorrow, I'll see you then.

MARIE. Okay. Bye!

RADIA. Bye!

*Radia exits. Marie is relieved that that dagger-filled exchange is over. Aminata saunters over to Marie.*

AMINATA. Marie... who is "Kelly"?

MARIE. "Kelly" is who everyone at school thinks I am.

AMINATA. Oh! So you're still using your cousin's papers? For how long now?

MARIE. I don't know, Aminata. Another thing, my mom is still working on.

*Aminata makes a face—she won't push it. Bea walks into the shop. The whole place falls silent for a moment—it's clear she is still in a mood. Ndidi clocks Bea, but continues to browse Chis's earrings. She puts her purse down, goes to the*

*closet to grab packs of hair for her next customer, and sits at her station to sort it.*

AMINATA. *(Eventually.)* Are you okay?

BEA. Yeah.

AMINATA. I would have gone to look for you if I didn't have a customer.

BEA. It's fine. I just ran a few errands.

AMINATA. Okay...

*Small beat.*

You know you can take the day if you want. I don't think it's going to be as busy today.

BEA. No it's fine. I have a customer coming in a few minutes. Or at least I hope she stays my customer.

*Mitchelle reuses up again. Ndidi hears that jab, but continues to look through Chis's jewelry selection while braiding.*

NDIDI. Here, I'll take these two. How much?

THE JEWELRY MAN. It's on the house.

NDIDI. Eh-eh. Oh, please. No. This is your business. Let me pay. I insist.

THE JEWELRY MAN. No, no. It's fine. I promise.

NDIDI. Yeah?

THE JEWELRY MAN. It is my sincere pleasure.

NDIDI. Thank you.

THE JEWELRY MAN. And next time, I'll show you some of my new rings. I want to get a head start on knowing what you like, eh... For the future.

NDIDI. *(Giggles flirt.)* You are so foolish.

THE JEWELRY MAN. You ladies have a good afternoon.

*The jewelry Man exits.*

ALL WOMEN. *(Like school children.)* Oooooohhhh.

MIRIAM. Ah-ah! So are you hurting?

NDIDI. From what?

MIRIAM. From how hard you've fallen in love?!

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JAMES. Hi darling.

AMINATA. Why are you here? Are you trying to ruin my day?

JAMES. Don't be like that my love. I was just trying to surprise you, eh?

AMINATA. You surprise what?

JAMES. *(Hands her a plant.)* Here. I got this for you. A rare African violet. For my African queen.

*Aminata tosses the plant. The whole shop sticks their teeth and/or laughs at James. Sheila returns from the bathroom and sits in Ndidi's chair.*

AMINATA. *(Unimpressed.)* Thank you is that all?

JAMES. Ah-ah! Still giving me cold shoulders?

AMINATA. You're lucky that's all it is.

JAMES. *(Laughs.)* Look at you. Jokes. You are so silly Ami.

AMINATA. James, I am not playing with you. I told you to give me some space. I need time to think.

JAMES. Of what? More foolish reasons you will make up in your head for why we cannot be together?

AMINATA. No, because I don't need any more reasons.

MIRIAM. *(Under her breath.)* Exactly!

JAMES. Ami. Come now. She was just a friend. Her father passed away back home and she came over for some consoling. I'm telling you. What you saw was just a hug. Nothing else.

AMINATA. You know? If this was the first time, maybe I could believe you. But how many women do you need to hug, eh? And how many times am I supposed to believe that they are all just friends? You have a new "friend" every month!

JAMES. Oh okay. So you don't know how to leave things in the past? You see. You just want to make problems for nothing.

AMINATA. I'm making problems? And what would you say if you came in here and saw me hugging another man?

JAMES. Well, that's silly. Why would you be doing that at work? You're supposed to be braiding hair.

AMINATA. And you're not supposed to bring other women into

JAMES, AMINATA

our... excuse me, MY house! And what about Essie? This is the example that you want to set for your son!

*James smirks. He's sliding into his usual manipulative tactics. A master of gaslighting.*

START

JAMES. Look at this. Look at you. Getting all upset. Making your blood pressure high. For what? You know that is dangerous for you, yeah?

AMINATA. I want my keys back James!

JAMES. Are you serious?

AMINATA. Are YOU serious?

JAMES. Ah! Ami. Ami. Ami. Please. I don't want to do this with you. I love you too much for this.

AMINATA. James—

JAMES. —Woman! You are all I think about. Look at me. Giving you plants. Always thinking, always searching, always trying to find new ways to show you my heart. But it's not easy, eh. It is not easy to find new ways to tell you what your love means to me.

BEA. *(Eye roll.)* Sha!

JAMES. I'm telling you the truth, now. There is no one else for me Aminata. Only you. And if I'm lying, may God strike me down right now.

*All the women casually take a step away from him.*

*(Looks up at the ceiling, winks, and smirks.)* You see? I'm still here. *(Playful.)* I'm still here, oh. You are not getting rid of me that easily baby!

*Aminata laughs. The charm of this man. It's working.*

AMINATA. Whatever.

JAMES. Listen, let's discuss this when you get off today, eh? We'll go and get beef patties from the place you like and we'll talk it all out, yeah?

AMINATA. *(Weakening.)* I don't know...

JAMES. Come now. You know that sounds good. Especially after a long day at work.

AMINATA. *(Softly.)* ...Okay.

JAMES. Yeah?

AMINATA. Yeah.

JAMES. *(Smiles and leans in closer.)* Yeah?

AMINATA. Eh, I said yeah.

*James laughs and gives Aminata a kiss and she melts. She's suddenly a teenager again.*

JAMES. There's my smile.

AMINATA. No, it's my smile.

JAMES. Okay, it can be yours. But let me borrow it from time to time, yeah?

AMINATA. You are so silly. Get out of here.

JAMES. I'll see you later.

AMINATA. Yeah, fine.

*James starts to walk out, but turns back around.*

JAMES. Oh, I almost forgot. I wasn't able to make it to the bank today to get out cash. Do you have any I can hold until later?

AMINATA. *(Pulls money from her pocket.)* Yeah... sure.

JAMES. I don't need much. Just a couple hundred.

*Aminata hands James some money.*

Thank you baby.

*James kisses her on the cheek one last time. The whole salon sucks their teeth.*

*(Laughing.)* Don't be jealous ladies.

BEA. Trust me. We're not.

JAMES. Ah, Bea.

BEA. James.

JAMES. I know you are the main one filling my wife's head up with your nonsense.

BEA. How would you know what I'm doing? Maybe if you had a job, you wouldn't have so much time to think.

AMINATA. Bea... please.

BEA. I'm just saying what we're all thinking.

JAMES. But you're the only one talking.

BEA. Because I actually have something to say.

JAMES. Tell me Bea—where is your husband? Oh that's right, you don't have one. Because all four of the men you married ran for the hills.

BEA. Wow. *(To Aminata.)* I see how much you like to talk. Amn.

JAMES. Listen, if you want to be mean and lonely, don't bring other people down there with you, yeah?

*Bea doesn't have a retort to that since James walks to the door.*

*(To Aminata.)* I'll see you later darling. *(Blows a kiss.)*

*James exits.*

AMINATA. Hey listen, Bea—

BEA. —He missed going to the bank? It's the middle of the afternoon.

AMINATA. *(Sucks teeth.)* Excuse me? You need to mind your business, alright?

BEA. Then stop bringing your business in here.

AMINATA. Oh really? You are one to judge.

BEA. Hey! Don't turn this on me. I'm just trying to be a good friend to you! Even though clearly you don't know the true meaning of that!

AMINATA. Oh this is friendship to you? Telling me what to do? Throwing insults? You don't have to worry about me. I've kicked James out!

BEA. That's great! So now let's sort out how many times you are going to let him back in?

SHEILA. *(Charles.)* Oop! Okay.

*Some of the women in the shop look around at each other, "Damn that's harsh..."*

AMINATA. Whatever Bea! You don't know the first thing about real love.

BEA. Oh, I don't?

AMINATA. No, you don't! Anyone who makes one little mistake, that's it! You're done with them.

AMINATA. AYE! Injal! Look at you, eh? Beautiful! Just beautiful.

IJA. Oh, this old thing.

*The women laugh.*

Eh, Marie, get me some water.

MARIE. Yes, Mommy.

IJA. But listen eh, I don't pay you all to dance around and party now. Are we making money today or what?

MIRIAM. Of course. **NDIDI** Yes! **AMINATA**. You know we are.

*Ija walks over to Jennifer and inspects Miriam's work.*

IJA. Eh, Miriam. Nice job. You have such a good steady hand.

MIRIAM. Thank you sista.

IJA. *(Leans over to Jennifer.)* And you have a lot of patience. Your boom boom must be hurting, yeah?

JENNIFER. *(Laughs.)* A little bit.

IJA. You can get up and stretch anytime you want.

JENNIFER. Thanks. I definitely have.

IJA. She's almost done—won't be too long.

JENNIFER. That's... what I keep hoping.

*Ija saunters over to Bea.*

IJA. Aye, Sista Bea. How are you?

BEA. *(Girt.)* I'm fine.

IJA. *(Mimics her.)* "I'm Fine." *(Laughs.)* Since when are you this quiet? Did someone die?

BEA. *(Weak laugh.)* No. I'm just... working.

*Ija catches eyes with the rest of the shop. She gets that Bea is in a mood and leaves it alone.*

IJA. Okay... I'll let you keep working.

NDIDI. You look very nice Ija.

IJA. Oh, thank you my dear.

NDIDI. Are you excited?

JAMES P AMINATA

IJA. Beyond. You know how long I have been waiting for this? Shall I longer than you've been alive.

*Ndidi and Ija laugh.*

START

AMINATA. And where is Steven now?

IJA. He's on his way to come and get me. I told him that I needed to come to the shop first to show off. Make you all jealous.

BEA. Mmmm...

**ALL WOMEN**. Ayyyyye!

IJA. Listen, this was made special by that Gambian woman. You know, with the store on 116th. I told her "Make it nice-nice. This will be my last dress as an African and my first as an American, oh!" Ayyyye!

**ALL WOMEN**. Ayyyye!

IJA. I'm telling you ladies. This is it. This is the life that God planned for me, you know? Get all of this nonsense immigration stuff out of the way so I can really make a name for myself here.

MIRIAM. That's right.

AMINATA. That's the only way.

IJA. 'Cause these people, hmmm, I have been running this shop for ten years. Hurting my back, arthritis in my hands. Paying all of this money to this landlord for what? All for them to raise the rent whenever they feel like it. Always making sure to keep us under their foot. And now, these people are making it hard for my baby to go to college.

MARIE. — Morn. Can we not —

IJA. — After all the money I spent sending her to private school. No one said anything then. They were happy to take my money. And taxes too! How is that fair, eh? If we are paying taxes, then we should become citizens, that's it!

NDIDI. I agree.

IJA. And you know they are all jealous of her, eh? 'Cause she's smarter than most of their children! So now all of a sudden, they have all of these questions: "Oh let me see her birth certificate please!" "When did you all come here?" "Where did she go to school in Senegal?" Jealous! You hear me?



MARIE. That has nothing to do with it Mom. How long am I supposed to use the I.D. of some "cousin" I've never even met?!

JAJA. (*Deflects.*) They are just trying to keep you down! That is all it is. Even now, they are trying to say "Oh she needs to pay ten thousand dollars so she can apply for a 'dream'" What kind of nonsense is this?

MARIE. Well it doesn't matter. It's not like we can afford it anyway, JAJA. But who can? What kind of perfect immigrant are they looking for, eh? When it comes to us, the rules are allways changing!

AMINATA. That's the problem.

JAJA. Exactly! This country is fine with TAKING. They are even fine with us GIVING, but the moment we ASK for something? Hey! That's it. Who are you? Dirty Africans! Get out of our country! Go back to your... "shat-holes!"

*The whole shop does collective teeth sucks and hisses.*

Clay, so you want me to go? Fine, I will go. But when do you want me to leave? Before or after I raise your children? Or clean your house? Or cook your food? Or braid your hair so you look nice-nice before you go on your beach vacation? (*Mimics a white woman customer.*) "Oh, please miss. Can you give me the Bo Derek hair please?"

*The whole shop laughs in agreement.*

So now that's it. Today, I will be on THEIR level. When they ask me to go back to my country, I will just (*Thrusts in place.*) okay, I'm here—in my country!

*Jaja and the rest of the shop laugh.*

MIRIAM. Jaja, you are too much oh.

JAJA. I know. (*Walks over to Marie.*) And then my little baby girl here. We will make her a citizen too, yeah. And she'll go to university. And become a doctor. And buy me a four-story brownstone on Lenox Ave, yeah!

MARIE. Mom. Please.

JAJA. Okay, you don't have to be a doctor. I'll take engineer.

*Jaja laughs.*

MIRIAM. You have to let her be what she wants Jaja.

JAJA. I'm just playing with her. She can be whatever she wants. This is America after all. (*To Marie.*) Oh my goodness—just smile Marie. For once, everything is working out for us.

MARIE. Working out for you maybe....

*Jaja playfully rolls her eyes at Marie's attitude.*

JAJA. You all see this? That's how I know she's American. You see how she's talking to her mother? She won't even come to the courthouse with me. She says (*Mimics daughter—bad New York accent.*) "I don't support what you're doing Mooom. I don't like him for you, Mooom. How do you know you can trust him Mooomom?" (*Laughs.*) Because she needs to approve something for me. (*To Marie.*) I'm the mother here, yeah?

MARIE. (*Trying to be respectful.*) I know that Mommy. I just don't want to go and watch you marry someone I don't like.

JAJA. Okay, that's fine. But you're going to have to get over that because he's going to be your new father.

MARIE. Yeah....

JAJA. You don't have to approve, but you have to respect. And anyway, aren't you happy that I don't have to be worried about us being sent back? He cares about us. Ah, you just worry too much. And it's all for nothing. You're going to give yourself wrinkles. You'll be looking older than every woman in this shop!

*Jaja laughs as she kisses Marie on the forehead. A horn hawks outside.*

Ah, that must be Steven. I've got to go. We don't have time to waste, eh.

MIRIAM. Oh, did you end up finding a witness?

JAJA. Yes, one of Steven's friends. And he's a white too, so we're going to be just fine.

AMINATA. Oh, why? They don't believe Steven is with you?

JAJA. No, darling. They can't believe I am with HIM!

*Everyone in the shop laughs, except Bee.*

Alright Marie... I'll see you later, yeah? I'll bring you some cake.

MARIE. Oooh, that pound cake from Cleo's?

JKSA

MARIE. That has nothing to do with it Mom. How long am I supposed to use the I.D. of some "cousin" I've never even met?!

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*Jaja and the rest of the shop laugh.*

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*Jaja laughs.*

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JAJA. I'm just playing with her. She can be whatever she wants. This is America after all. (*To Marie.*) Oh my goodness—just smile Marie. For once, everything is working out for us.

MARIE. Working out for you maybe....

*Jaja playfully rolls her eyes at Marie's attitude.*

JAJA. You all see this? That's how I know she's American. You see how she's talking to her mother? She won't even come to the courthouse with me. She says (*Mimics daughter—bad New York accent.*) "I don't support what you're doing Mooomom. I don't like him for you Mooomom. How do you know you can trust him Mooomom?"

(*Laughs.*) Because she needs to approve something for me. (*To Marie.*) I'm the mother here, yeah?

MARIE. (*Trying to be respectful.*) I know that Mommy. I just don't want to go and watch you marry someone I don't like.

JAJA. Okay, that's fine. But you're going to have to get over that because he's going to be your new father.

MARIE. Yeah....

JAJA. You don't have to approve, but you have to respect. And anyway, aren't you happy that I don't have to be worried about us being sent back? He cares about us. Ah, you just worry too much. And it's all for nothing. You're going to give yourself wrinkles. You'll be looking older than every woman in this shop!

*Jaja laughs as she kisses Marie on the forehead. A horror hanks outside.*

Ah, that must be Steven. I've got to go. We don't have time to waste, eh.

MIRIAM. Oh, did you end up finding a witness?

JAJA. Yes, one of Steve's friends. And he's a white too, so we're going to be just fine.

AMINATA. Oh, why? They don't believe Steven is with you?

JAJA. No, darling. They can't believe I am with HIM!

*Everyone in the shop laughs, except Lea.*

Alright Marie... I'll see you later, yeah? I'll bring you some cake.

MARIE. Oooh, that pound cake from Cleo's?

*Everyone in the shop laughs, except Lea.*

Alright Marie... I'll see you later, yeah? I'll bring you some cake.

MARIE. Oooh, that pound cake from Cleo's?

STEP 1

MARIE. I need to get out of here. I need to go pack and find some-  
where to stay.

AMINATA. What do you mean?

MARIE. What if they come looking for me?

MIRIAM. They are not going to come for you.

MARIE. You don't know that.

AMINATA. And if they do, so what? They will have to take us all.

BEA. Okay, okay—Come. Here is what we are going to do. We're  
going to lock up the shop. We're all going to go home with you and  
pack up all the things you need.

MARIE. And where am I supposed to stay?

BEA. With me.

*Everyone looks a bit shocked. Perhaps even Bea is shocked at  
herself.*

MARIE. What?

BEA. You will stay with me. I have plenty of room.

MARIE. Really?

BEA. Yes. You will stay with me for as long as you need to. And in  
the morning we will call Miriam's immigration lawyer friend. And  
Aminata and Ndidi will call all the centers in the city. And we will  
figure this all out. Together. You are not alone in this. Jaja is your  
mother but she could be any of us. And we will fight for her, okay?

*Small beat.*

MARIE. Okay.

BEA. Good... Now let's close up.

*The ladies start to close up. They grab their purses, other  
bags, etc. Marie grabs the lockbox of money and stuffs it in  
her book bag. They quickly clean up and push their chairs  
back, etc. Each of the ladies step out of the shop. They stand  
outside of it and stare at each other for a beat.*

MIRIAM. (Eventually.) Are you hungry?

AMINATA. I'm always hungry.

BEA & MARIE

NDIDI. Me too.

MIRIAM. I can go and get us some Chinese food. Do you want  
Chinese, Marie?

MARIE. Uh, yeah, sure.

AMINATA. The usual?

MARIE. That's fine.

NDIDI. My treat, yeah? It's the least I can do.

MIRIAM. Thanks Ndidi. I'll go and get us a table.

AMINATA. I'll go with you.

NDIDI. Me too.

BEA. We'll meet you there.

MIRIAM. Okay.

*Miriam, Aminata, and Ndidi walk off. Marie starts to pull  
the grate down with some assistance from Bea. She surprises  
herself with how emotional she becomes as she fumbles with  
her keys and finally finds the right one to lock up the shop.  
She stands there for a moment, trying to breathe. Bea pulls  
her in for an embrace.*

BEA. Hey. It's all going to be okay.

MARIE. But what if it's not?

BEA. Then it's not... And after that, it will be okay... Listen, you  
know the one thing that your mother is most proud of?

MARIE. What?

BEA. You. Your straight As. Your valedictorian. How good you are  
to people... Your kindness... How you love... That's why she wants  
more for you. To be anything in the world you want to be. Bigger  
and better dreams than just this shop, which you run better than  
her... But don't tell her I said that.

*Marie softly chuckles.*

And tomorrow, you'll get up. You'll come here. You'll open the  
shop. And we will go on. Cause as long as the shop is here, so is  
your mother, yeah? This is Jaja's African Hair Braiding. And we're  
going to hold on to it for her for as long as we can... Sometimes,  
that's all we can do... You understand?

MARIE. Yes.

BEA. Good. Now, chin up, eh? We have work to do.

*Bea walks off. Marie stands on the street. She looks to the right and the left. Unsure of what to do. She takes a deep breath and stares up at the awning. The sounds of Harlem on a summer night fill the space as the stage fades to black with only the "Jagja's African Hair Braiding" sign remaining illuminated. Fade to black.*

**End of Play**

STOP

### PROPERTY LIST

*(Use this space to create props lists for your production.)*