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Papa at the Window

“From the Author: My memoir, **Ask for the Road**, takes place in 1997 when “Laura” has returned to Côte d’Ivoire where she lived and was once happily married to “Simon.” It’s now 10 years since she last lived there and 3 years since her divorce from Simon. She’s a newly minted PhD and engaged to Henry. She’s gone back to Africa to do anthropological field research on divination, the practice of interpreting signs, such as the random cast of objects, to foretell the future or reveal hidden knowledge.

Back in the haunted places of her youth and marriage there, and again received into the bosom of her former in-laws, she naturally reminisces about her past, even while diviners reveal its secrets. “Papa at the Window” is a flashback to those earlier years and to an uncanny incident that took place during the turning point of her marriage.

— Laura S. Grillo

Once Simon and Jacques let me in on the family secret, giggling all the while. “Watch Papa. If he likes what you’re saying, he puts the tip of his finger to his nostril and plays with the tuft of hair there. If he doesn’t agree with you, he pulls on his earlobe.” After that, I could see that he approved of me. He’d listen to me with placid attention, forearms resting on his knees. Then he’d touch the prickly filter of his wide nostril. It was positively endearing.

Papa was the glue that held the family together. I never realized how he alone provided its guiding force, until he was gone. When Simon and I visited one of his sisters, or his uncle, Papa might arrive unexpectedly, stopping on his way back from his rounds to the churches “in the interior,” as they would say, meaning the remote villages where he’d tend to the far reaches of his parish. Whenever he showed up, he would come in quietly and stand at the apartment entrance, waiting to be beckoned closer, dangling the keys to his Toyota Corolla. I remember the little jingle of his keys as if they had been a call from another world to take note, to pay attention.

Papa’s high, wide cheeks and small eyes twinkled and glistened with intelligence. Back then I’d thought of him as rotund, and Simon teased him about his “colonial egg,” the rounded belly that preceded him. But now I realize he only carried the weight of middle age and the comfort of the modest food he could afford for himself and the family on his shrinking minister’s salary. Later, after he got sick, he seemed to swim in the polyester suit we bought him. His gaunt frame shocked me, and I wished he still had that reassuring belly.

Simon once showed me a photo of Papa as a young man, taken in England where the Ivoirian government sent him for a year of seminary training before his ordination as a Methodist minister. In the black-and-white portrait he wore a fedora cocked to the side and the dark wool coat Simon later brought to New York. Papa posed with his shoulder slightly angled so he appeared to cast one last winning smile behind him. I found him dashing, and I imagined that Maman must have thought so too, back in the days of their courtship. Maman told me, in her halting French, that a rival suitor once came to try to seduce her. His flattering attentions only earned him a cold rebuff. Finally he could bear it no more; he came right out with a proposition. Maman hurled a bottle of palm oil at the impudent man. “It chipped his tooth,” she cackled, with a smack of satisfaction. “Ehy... Can you imagine him thinking he could take the place of my husband?”

They made an unusual couple, he an educated Christian minister who’d studied abroad, and Maman an illiterate villager. She spoke four African languages though, and knew how to haggle in the market in all of them. Simon told me Papa never even learned Dida, though they lived six or seven years in Lakota. The differences in their cultural horizons didn’t seem to be an obstacle between them, but rather a source of amusement. Once Papa told me that when he lived in Europe he’d discovered a liking for cheese. “I brought some home with me,” he said, “a nice camembert.” He’d wrapped it carefully, then put it in the back of the refrigerator before leaving for a week’s journey to greet the village churches under his charge. “The whole way back on my long drive home, I thought about that cheese waiting for me. I went right to the fridge, went rummaging through it, but couldn’t find it. ‘Florence, where’s my cheese?’ Maman said, ‘Oh, if you mean that little package, whatever it was went bad. It smelled like rot. I told Simon to dig a hole and bury it out back.’ She buried my cheese!”

Their interaction fascinated me. Like the time we visited them in their house in Adzopé, a small town up-country, the last place Papa served as a minister.

Simon and I sat outside in the clean-swept courtyard between the house and Maman’s little hut where she kept her pots and other utensils for cooking on outdoor charcoal fires. When Papa arrived home, he stood at the back doorway, his feet slightly apart, firmly set on the sill. He held his black bible with the red-edged pages. He dangled the car keys underneath. Papa didn’t sit outside with the rest of us. He just checked in to say hello, to let us know he was home on his way into his study. Maman barely interrupted the pounding rhythm of her pestle rising and falling with a thwack against the boiled yams in the mortar to look up at him there. Even though she wasn’t a woman who smiled very often, something softened around her eyes when he showed up. She would squeeze her lips together in satisfaction as if she’d just proved a point. “Akba-o!” she called out; “Welcome!” Then she started in with one of her long monologues.

Her full-throated recitation started mid-sentence and never found a natural conclusion with a change of pace or breath. I wished I could have understood those long narratives in Adioukrou. Was she recounting anecdotes about the mischievous grandchildren under her care? Or chiding Papa for the days she spent alone while he made his rounds as an itinerant minister? Maybe she was sharing gossip she learned at the market. What started out sounding like one long complaint – a bleating tale of discontent and recrimination – surprisingly shifted. Her tone rose and she cackled.

Papa looked out first at her, then up at the mango tree, interjecting an occasional “Ah-hah...” or “Ehy...” which meant “yes.” Then he touched the tip of his nostril. Even as she continued speaking, he turned and walked away, back into the house. His retreat didn’t interrupt Maman’s steady recitation. Papa’s face reappeared briefly at the window of his study, and then, from the shadowed interior, he laughed quietly and called out a brief, amused reply.

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Ten years later, long after Papa had died, I sat in a dark room in Papa’s house, listening to Maman on the other side of the wall. Simon was away working on the farm, and I stayed with Maman, who’d moved back to Dabou by then. Simon had said it was better that way. He would come to Dabou from the farm on weekends. I made the long drive to teach classes in Abidjan every morning then back again every night to sleep in an empty room. Now Maman spoke her long monologues alone in her room at night. I lay on my pallet on the cool cement floor next to the open suitcase that served as my dresser, listening to her plaintive drone. At first I thought she was praying, but her words did not have the rhythms of either recitation or confession. She would pause long enough that I thought her speech had ended and we both might sleep. But then she would begin again – sometimes with a soft chortle, or a call, “Ehhye...” I imagined she talked to Papa. I had no doubt he was listening.

Maman shuffled things in the room – baskets piled with her rolled pagnes, the thermos bottle I bought her for her early morning bath water. I heard the lisp of her bare left foot dragging along the floor as she limped. Her infirmity made her seem older than her years, older even than Papa.

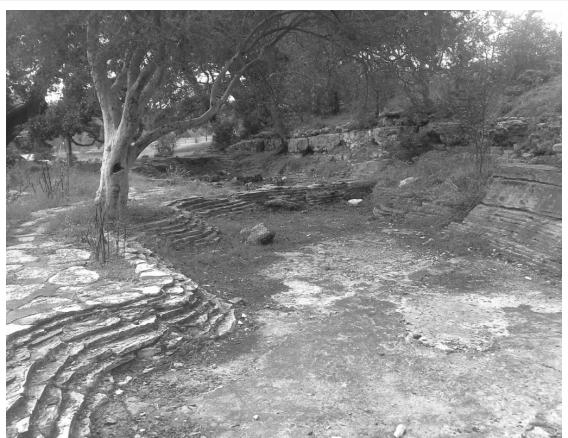


Photo by MikeZ ([instagramikez](#))

I never imagined she'd outlive his even-paced vitality. She'd born seven children, and six of them had survived. The penultimate birth went wrong, leaving her in the hospital for months. Simon believed the doctors had pinched a nerve trying to deliver the stillborn, or maybe she'd lain too long on one side. "It's children that ruined me," she said, rubbing her aching hip and pulling her stiff leg under her as she rose from a stool. Her tone suggested bitter rebuke.



Photo by MikeZ ([instagramikez](#))

I began to share that strangling bitterness during those weary days waiting for Simon and watching for him to come in at night. I wondered whether Maman's long hospital stay accounted for Simon's independent streak and if it was then that he learned to run so wild. Surely his mother's sudden absence must have bewildered and angered that five-year-old boy. He spoke of that time as a wonderland of childhood, of lone play under a canopy of twigs and leaves in the woods, excursions to the river, meals of smoked fish and peanuts swiped from the courtyard baskets of village women. But Papa once told me that Simon had always been an unruly child, so much so that one day in exasperation he chased his son around the compound with a rifle, bent on shooting him.

"Did he ever tell you about the time he tried to bury his baby sister alive?" Papa asked me with a darting light in his eyes and a leftover weariness in their creased corners.

"Heh, Maman told me to dig a hole," Simon protested. "She thought she'd ruined the food and told me to dig a hole to throw it out. Then she salvaged her stew and didn't need the hole. But it was a good hole. I'm telling you, I worked hard and dug a very good hole. I didn't want it to go to waste, so I put Mélanie in it instead." Simon's narrow eyes disappeared behind the rising grin and his teeth glistened.

"Then he covered her with dirt," Papa said. "That was the last straw..." That was when Papa went and got his rifle.

I slapped my legs laughing at the idea of gentle Papa rushing after an impossibly headstrong and untamed boy. I hadn't seen that side of my husband yet, the fierce loner who terrified his siblings and caused his parents despair. I hadn't yet realized how our early years together were just a parenthetical expression in Simon's life. I didn't understand that the family, that seemed to watch me with studied suspicion, wasn't rejecting the awkward white person, the "ganga," as much as wondering how I had subdued their fierce rebel. Now, sitting on the bare concrete floor in the back room of Maman's house, waiting for Simon to show up, I remembered that story with a new cold fear.

So much had changed since the last time I saw Papa. Simon and I worked in Kenya for a year, then finally married, getting "the papers of the white man," as Simon used to say.

"Look at that." Maman nudged Papa when we visited the family in Côte d'Ivoire that Christmas. "They're wearing rings."

Papa asked me if the Church had blessed the marriage. I told him how after the civil ceremony, at the little party our witnesses held for us in their living room, one of the guests, a minister, had insisted on turning the lively gathering into a solemn ceremony. He donned his robes and grasped us by the wrists so he could deliver his benediction. I saw Papa's face fall. "Ah. Bon, bon." Then I realized we'd deprived him of something important.

But when I proposed that he bless the marriage, too, he said, "No, no. Now it's done, that's fine." He turned away.

Papa didn't refer to our marriage again until we packed and prepared to head back to Nairobi, when he called me over to him. He'd brought two chairs onto the unfinished veranda at the side of the house, and when I saw that I knew he had something important to say. We sat down together, knee to knee.

"Laura, do you want children?"

"Yes, absolutely. But Simon keeps telling me to wait. Maybe when his job in Nairobi ends. He doesn't want me to have a baby while we're in Kenya. He jokes that he doesn't want any baby of his to have the protruding forehead like a Kikuyu." An old wives tale in West Africa was that a pregnant woman shouldn't look upon ugly people, or her baby will take on those features. The Kikuyu, on the whole, didn't enjoy the well-proportioned physiques and broad-cheeked beauty of West Africans.

Papa laughed, touched his nostril, and changed the subject. Neither of us could have foreseen that there'd always be something Simon would want to wait for – the farm that would fulfill his sense of obligation to the family, a chance to finish his Master's degree, a high paying job in the States.... I never imagined I'd hang on so long, trusting that one day the stars would line up for us. Even long after that summer of not knowing why I was always waiting for Simon to come home from the farm.

That afternoon, after we talked, my father-in-law and I, as I got in the taxi to head to the airport, something made me stop and look back over my shoulder at Papa, long and hard. He stood there watching us go. Where did it come from, this knowing that seized me like a gasp, the sudden certainty that I'd never see him again? I knew, and I felt he did too.

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Seven months later I came to help Maman dress the body – my duty as the wife of the first-born son. Maman went in first, with her sister. I sat outside the morgue, waiting for them to call me in. Dozens of Adioukrou women paced the courtyard or sat on benches, holding their bent foreheads, a few of them wailing. I propped myself against the wall and tried to steady the rocking, sinking feeling in my head and belly. Two of the village women on the opposite bench leaned towards each other and gesticulated in my direction, shaking their heads and dabbing their eyes. Maman's sister came out to tell me that the morgue had already prepared him, but I went in anyway.

Maman stood by the body. She reached over to adjust the sleeve of the black preacher's robe they dressed him in. His hands lay stiffly on the red-rimmed bible. His face was so drawn, his lips pressed tight against his teeth. I was shocked to see that he wore a pair of dark glasses. Except for the wide calm forehead, I barely recognized Papa.

"He's been in the morgue too long," Maman's sister whispered. "The eyes sank and we had to cover them."

The Church had squabbled for almost three weeks over the body. They fought over where to bury their historic founding member. The Bishop, ministers and village elders all lay claim to him. Three graves were dug – one in Abidjan, one in the village graveyard, one in the compound of the tiny Methodist church in his village, Kpass. Meanwhile Papa's body lay in a cold drawer. Where were they when he'd been too poor to pay for the Nivaquine that could have spared him more serious liver damage? Why had they made him feel it was a privilege to be the suffering servant of the Lord and let him waste away? None of them had come forward to help pay for hospital expenses. No one had helped the family bring him his meals or had come to change the soiled bedding where he lay dying. It was Daniel, the grandson Papa raised, who did all this, attending to Papa as if devotion alone could change the course of things.

I looked at the small shape of this shrunken man – and all I could think of were the words, "the remains." I understood at last what the expression meant. His high, apple-round cheeks, usually gleaming, were now matte and gray. Nothing animated the taut and rigid flesh. He was gone. This unrecognizable thing was not Papa. I had worried that I wouldn't be able to contain my grief once I saw the body, but instead, I went cold. I felt far away, as if I were viewing him from the far high corner of the ceiling.

#

A funeral procession of taxis and private cars wound up the dusty road to the village. The five of us squeezed together in the taxi – Simon, his brothers Jacques and Didier, Hélène, and me. Our clothing was made from the same pagne, a gray pattern chosen as the uniform for the funeral. Our driver kept his distance from the wake of red dust lifting from the cloudy tracks of the car ahead. We made our way through the grassy savannah, then bumped along the path under the bending palms of the plantation before meeting the steep and pitted rise toward the village. At the top of the hill, our taxi joined a long cortege of cars inching their way down the lone main road toward the Church and the family compound beyond it. The air was stifling and the car was making no progress, so we got out to walk to the house. It was hard to push our way through the multitude of pilgrims flooding the footpath to the house and the crowd milling about the courtyard. Voices of wailing grief echoed up and down the hill, like seagulls on the beach. I was stunned. I'd had no idea there would be such a outpouring. I'd only known him as Papa, my gentle father-in-law, interested in our ideas and plans, patient when we forgot to bow our heads before a meal, whose eyes sparkled at a good joke.

Simon led us single file, through the press of shoulders and hips, around to the back of the house. A black Mercedes with government plates blocked the lower road behind Maman's kitchen.

"It's the Vice President Yacé," someone called out to us. "He's come to pay respects for Houphouët."

Simon, Hélène, and I climbed to the second-floor balcony of Papa's village home and looked down on the scene below. The iron-framed bed on which the body had lain during the wake the night before stood empty under the tree. It was draped with the heavy woven ceremonial cloth, and the headboard was propped up on bricks to angle the body for viewing. A framed portrait was propped up against the pillow. Mourners sat on the

ground huddled around the empty bed with legs outstretched, mumbling laments and wiping their faces with their palms. Others shuffled and paced, as if waiting to be released from an unthinkable captivity. Suddenly, a youngster with a tear-streaked face fell to the ground. His eyes rolled upwards. His body jerked in a seizure, then turned and collapsed into the fetal position, then wrenched open again. He alternately shouted and muttered. Those around him called out to the others, as if this was what they'd been waiting for. Mourners rose in waves to hurry towards the gathering circle. A crowd rushed around the boy, but held back and looked down on him, watching for a sign.

"What's happening?" I asked Hélène.

"They're saying he's possessed, that Papa is angry and wants to speak."

Good, I thought as she strained to listen. Let him be angry. Let him tell the Bishop and elders to remember who he was, and not make him their pawn. Let him send Yacé packing. He should tell them it's time to let him rest.

When the time came to bear the coffin to the grave, they placed it in an iron carriage the Church had made especially for such a trip. I knew its purpose. It was to prevent the pallbearers from being pushed and dragged by the force of a restless spirit, unwilling to go to the grave in peace without leading them to the house of the witch responsible for this untimely death, or settling other unfinished family business. The rite embarrassed the Church that was helpless to stop it. The clergy preferred to avoid the face-off of spiritual authority between Christianity and African tradition .

Once, in Sahouyé, I'd seen such a struggle at the funeral of Simon's elderly second-cousin Gnagne. It was he who had given Simon the parcel of land for the farm. His only compensation, he said, would be our promise to bury him. Gnagne poured libation in a public ceremony to mark the pact. When we got word that he died, we walked to the carpenter's workshop in Dabou, picked out the best coffin, and hired a truck to take us out to the village. There a small crowd gathered when Simon unloaded the casket and propped it against the hut. Gnagne's immediate family had already purchased a coffin. The elders approached to settle the murmuring scandal we'd stirred. They announced the family would use their own coffin. We didn't protest the decision, but followed the others in the funeral cortège down the steep hill to the graveyard.

Then it happened. The pallbearers weaved, struggling to guide their burden. The coffin turned and the men staggered sideways helpless and frightened, back up the hill. The pastor raced up behind them, and began hitting the coffin with the Bible, shouting an earnest command in the name of Jesus Christ for the deceased to be still and go to his rest. It took some time, but like a piece on a Ouija board that loses its momentum, the coffin quieted and let its escorts lead it to its grave. One of the women pulled me aside. "He wasn't happy. He wanted your casket. We'll have to see if he accepts this one."

At Papa's funeral, I wondered why they used the cart. What did the clergy really fear? Hadn't Papa waited long enough, through weeks of squabbling over his body, to come home at last to rest?

The politicians and Church elders pressed forward and circled the grave. There were long soliloquies about this Christian pioneer, words of homage to him as the first and last of his kind in the young nation. A murmur of shock rippled through the multitude, growing louder as each pastor in turn threw a handful of dirt on the coffin, even before Papa's widow. A voice or two called out in protest. Then came a moment of suspended silence when all movement ceased. The shifting crowd made way for Maman. They urged her forward, their hands gently hovering at her back. Maman hobbled to the gaping edge. Her bad leg stretched behind her, she leaned one elbow on her knee, stooped to grasp some fresh earth, and let the copper soil fall. It made a hollow clatter. Without looking at the others, Maman turned away and left. Then we too made our way to the grave. Simon cast his fist of dirt, then pushed his way furiously back out of the throng, and rushed towards the house. I called after him, but he didn't stop.

The next night, I went back to Abidjan with Hélène. Simon stayed in the village, sullen and unreachable. I was in the shower when I heard a male voice calling me: "Laura. Laura!" Still wet and wrapped in a towel, I went to the living room and found Simon's brother Didier.

"Didier, I didn't know you'd arrived. Why did you call me?"

"I didn't call you."



Photo by MikeZ ([instagramikez](#))

"Oh. I thought I heard your voice." What I'd really thought was that I'd heard Papa, but Didier sounded just like him, and so it had been a relief to see him there. I went back to finish rinsing, and then I heard the insistent call again.

"Ehy, I'm coming." This time I was a little annoyed. I turned off the water and went dripping into the hall.

"It wasn't me." Didier protested and looked to Hélène for confirmation. She followed me back inside and shut the door.

"Laura, if you hear it again, don't answer. And, for God's sake, don't say you're coming. Don't you know, that when the dead are lonely they call you to them? If you answer three times, there's nothing anyone can do to save you."

That night, Hélène came into the room where I slept. She turned on the light and stood at the foot of the bed in her nightgown. "Laura, I'm scared. I feel him. I can feel Papa here."

"If he is here, then it's surely a blessing. He must be watching over you. How could Papa, who loved you so in life, do you any harm in death?"

She just stood there. The light cotton of her gown vibrated with the trembling of her body. I lifted my pagne and shifted over on the mattress. She slipped under the tented cover and curled her back against me. We slept with the light on all night, but I didn't believe that it would bother Papa.

Some think that death is the end, that there can be nothing without the brain, the portal of all our sensations and the maker of all our perceptions. There are no lingering spirits to guard with watchful purpose those left behind. No restless ghosts rattling chains in the night. But there are enough stories in West Africa about "revenants," the ones who return, to make one willing to believe that the dead are reluctant to leave us, and can make their presence known. I'm as willing as any to listen wide-eyed to the bizarre tales about those who'd made a return. What had always puzzled me, though, was that it seemed the dead always came with no purpose. Like the visit Hélène had from her former ward.

It was common for parents to entrust a child attending boarding school to an adult member of the village or ethnic group living near the school, so the youngster would have somewhere to go for occasional refuge, and someone who would look in on him or her. When the girl entrusted to Hélène lost her government scholarship she left Abidjan to continue her studies in Togo. One day, Hélène saw a taxi pull up to her apartment building. Her ward stepped out with her bags.

"I was glad to see her. She'd been away in Togo almost two years," Hélène said. "She told me she was on her way home for the Christmas holiday, and had decided to stop and see me. 'What?'" I said. "You came right from the station and didn't even go see your mother first?" She said, "No, I wanted to see you, and anyway your place is on the way."

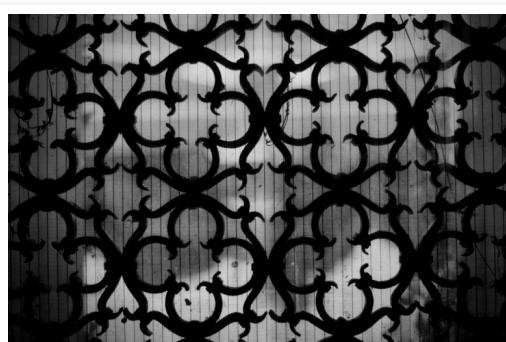
So they passed some time together that afternoon catching up. A few months later, Hélène ran into the girl's mother, and told her what a pleasure it had been to see her daughter that day. The mother almost collapsed. "What? No, no. Impossible. Don't you know? She died in a road accident in Togo on her way home for Christmas break the year before." Hélène looked at me fixedly, watching me take it in.

Didier swore to me that there'd been no mistake. "I was there the day that girl came for a visit. Hélène sent me to buy that girl a Coke. I watched her drink it. But she was already dead."

"Why did she come to you?" I asked Hélène. "Did she have anything to tell you? If she made the journey from the other side, wouldn't she have some purpose?" Hélène only shrugged.

#

The night I sat alone in Maman's house in Dabou so many years later, I thought of these things – the dissipated past and the empty questions it leaves. It was well past one a.m. and Simon had not yet come home. I sat in the soft candlelight, watching ashes drop off the burning coil of incense that chased away mosquitoes. Maman's shuffled steps had quieted hours before. Now it was my turn to mumble in the dark. I propped my little Italian portrait of the Virgin Mary against the wall under the open window. Haloed by the gilded frame, her head bowed in a graceful arc, she seemed ready to bear again a scene she'd witnessed countless times, a scene as old as adultery. I joined the parade of abandoned wives and started to recite the prayer, "Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with you...." I said it over and over, because I had no other words. "Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." I whispered, my lips



"Fleur" by Erica Zabowski ([CC BY-ND 2.0](#))

moving, again and again, a lullaby to calm my aching fears.

I heard the gate rattle and a soft clinking of keys. But there was no squeak of hinges on the heavy front door or footsteps in the hall. I realized it wasn't Simon. I continued my incantation. Then I looked up, into the shadows beyond the iron grating of the window. Papa stood in the dark looking in at me. He hung his head and slowly shook it back and forth. At that instant I knew, with the same flash of knowing I had the last time I saw Papa alive. I saw it all: I knew where Simon was. I knew he was with the American tourist I'd thrown out of the house. I saw in a flash that he'd found her again somehow and hidden her at the farm. I suddenly understood why he he'd insisted it would be better for me not to go out there to be with him that week. In another burst of interior vision I saw the two of them, swinging on the hammock I'd strung between two palms at the encampment. Scene after scene expanded in my mind like a telescope crisply unfolding. I didn't see Papa turn and go. He slipped away like moonlight shadowed by a passing cloud. I sat for a long time unmoving, strangely calm and unafraid.

When Simon finally did come in, he must have seen something in my face. He entered the room, but didn't swagger past me with contempt. He didn't ignore me. He stopped cold and looked at me. "What is it?"

"Papa came and showed me everything. I saw you on the farm with that girl. I saw your cousin Valentin arrive, saw him jump out of the car and say, 'What's going on? Where's Laura?' And you, trying to calm him, trying to explain it away."

Simon's eyes fixed wide, his jaw clamped. "What are you saying? Papa told you that?"

"He made me know. He came to the window and he shook his head slowly, like this."

"Don't say that. You didn't see Papa. Don't tell me he came here," Simon wailed as he paced. He didn't bother to deny the rest. I didn't ask him to. It didn't matter now. Simon went out into the foyer. I heard him strike a match and knew he was sitting in the dark with his cigarette. I lay down on my pallet. I didn't know what either one of us would do, but I knew I would hold no more fretful vigils. Maybe I'd even sleep.

