



IF I SURVIVE  
YOU

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books

IF I SURVIVE YOU



## IN FLUX

It begins with *What are you?* hollered from the perimeter of your front yard when you're nine—younger, probably. You'll be asked again throughout junior high and high school, then out in the world, in strip clubs, in food courts, over the phone, and at various menial jobs. The askers are expectant. They demand immediate gratification. Their question lifts you slightly off your preadolescent toes, tilting you, not just because you don't understand it, but because even if you did understand this question, you wouldn't yet have an answer.

Perhaps it starts with *What language is your mother speaking?* This might be the genesis, not because it comes first, but because at least on this occasion you have some context for the question when it arrives.

You immediately resent this question.

"Why's your mother talk so funny?" your neighbor insists.

Your mother calls to you from the front porch, has called from this perch overlooking the sloping yard since you were allowed to join the neighborhood kids in play. Always, this signals

that playtime is over, only now shame has latched itself to the ritual.

Perhaps you'd hoped no one would ever notice. Perhaps you'd never noticed it yourself. Perhaps you ask in shallow protest, "What do you mean, 'What language'?" Maybe you only think it. Ultimately, you mutter, "English. She's speaking English," before going inside, head tucked in embarrassment.

In this moment, for the first time, you are ashamed of your mother, and you are ashamed of yourself for not defending her. More than to be cowardly and disloyal, though, it's shameful to be foreign. If you've learned anything during your short residence on earth, you've learned this.

It's America and it's the eighties, and at school, in class, you pledge to one and one flag only, the Stars and Stripes. *Greatest country on earth* is the morning anthem. It's the lesson plan, a mantra, drilled into you day in, day out—a fact as inarguable as two plus two equaling four—and what you start to hear, as you repeat this to yourself, is the implication that all other nations, though other nations are seldom mentioned in school, are inferior.

You believe this.

It's an easy lesson to internalize, except that your brother, Delano; your parents; nearly all your living relatives are Jamaican. When your play cousin moves from Kingston to Miami, to your Cutler Ridge neighborhood, winding up in your third-grade class, refusing to pledge allegiance to your flag, you know to distance yourself from her. You say a quiet thanks that your last names are different.

If you'd had any context for the question of what you "are" when it first came, you might have answered, *American*.

You were born in the United States and you've got the paperwork to prove it. You feel pride in this fact, this inalienable status. You belt Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." on the Fourth of July, and even more emphatically after visiting your parents' island nation for two weeks in your ninth summer. You disagree with every aspect of the island life, down to the general lack of central air-conditioning. You prefer burgers and hot dogs to jerked or curried anything.

Back at home your parents accuse you of speaking, and even acting, *like a real Yankee*. But if by *Yankee* they mean *American*, you embrace it. "I speak English," you respond.

Your parents' patois and what many deem an indecipherable accent still play as normal, almost unnoticeable against your ears, except that it is increasingly paired with the punitive. For instance, when your mother says, "Unoo can spill di t'ing on di tile, but unoo can' clean it?"

And your brother says, "No me, Mummy."

And you say, "I didn't do it, Mom."

She'll say, "Den who did? Mus' be a duppy."

The duppy becomes the scapegoat for all the inexplicable activity that takes place in and outside your house. The duppy broke your mother's vase, then tried to glue it back together. The duppy hid your brother's report card underneath his mattress. The duppy possessed your father, dragged his body out for drinks after work, and didn't bring him home until morning.

A duppy, or ghost, or even a grown man, can be difficult to discipline, so you and your brother alone share the punishments.

In school, when your world geography project is announced and you're made to choose from a list of countries to present on, you choose Mongolia. It's not till another student chooses Jamaica that you consider the tiny island a worthy option.

Part of your project requires preparing a dish native to the country you've chosen. This is fourth grade. Your mothers do the cooking. When they meet one another on presentation day, eyes ringed dark from having wrestled with foreign recipes late into the night, they nod imperceptibly, too exhausted for pleasantries.

As your classmate begins her presentation on Jamaica, your mother sucks her teeth—a sound akin to industrial-strength Velcro ripping apart—drawing glances from several of the other parents. “Me could’ve brought in leftovers,” she whispers, leaning in, “if only you chose home.”



On career day, your father stands in front of your class and identifies himself as a general contractor. The block letter alphabet strung along the edge of the blackboard arcs over his wavy black hair. Below the arch, he unspools a foot of measuring tape with the tip of his thumb, then releases it, causing the tape to zip back into its case. The sharp whiz emitted by the swift violence of the retracted tape gains your classmates' undivided awe. Your father repeats this action several times before deigning to speak. Your classmates hold their breath in anticipation.

As he explains that “when man need dem bat’ room fix, is me get all di plaster an’ PVC an’ t’ing, an’ is me make di worker man come nice up di place,” a string of snickers breaks out from the classroom’s back row.

Your teacher shushes the students, but as your father continues his speech, her face crinkles, head bobbling to the beat of his patois. You concentrate on the pink surfacing over her cheeks, the color spectrum helping you determine the magnitude of this disaster. If she remains light pink—a shallow blush, a rose petal, a ballet slipper—you'll know this is a faint debasement, to be forgotten in the weeks ahead. But as her skin brightens, flashing past punch, nearing violet, you recognize this as catastrophic.

You question why you didn't insist your mother come in your father's stead. She knows better how to iron out her words for American ears, as she must for work every day.

Earlier in the week, you asked her about the details of her secretarial position. From the edge of your bed, your mother explained that she works in the office of a company that ships jet engines internationally. The hem of her nightie shimmied as she skipped across the room to pull down the globe from atop your bookcase. "You see here. And here. And this here." She kneeled at your bedside, pointing to Germany, then Brazil, then to the chain of Hawaiian Islands, singing, "We go all-around-the-world," dancing her slender index and middle fingers across oceans and lush green continents before lifting them to tap your nose.

"We?" you asked her. "You don't get to go to these places, do you?"

Your mother blinked twice, then walked the globe back to its shelf. "Someday," she said. "Someday maybe when you're all grown up." She added, "Better you ask your father to visit school. Him they'll find exciting."

In your fifth-grade history section, you learn more about the founding of America. You learn about the subject referred to simply as “slavery.” It’s an abbreviated, watered-down lesson, much like its subject heading. It’s: *Mostly good people made a big mistake.* It’s: *That was a long, long time ago.* It’s: *Honest Abe and Harriet Tubman and M.L.K. fixed all that nasty business.* It’s: *Now we don’t see race.*

An air of shared discomfort infiltrates the classroom during this lesson; the students agree this was a terrible event. You’re mildly aware that some of your classmates are supposed to have descended from the perpetrators of this atrocity and that some descended from the victims. You’re not quite aware that many descended from both. Should *you* feel slighted by this country you love so dearly?

This is not the first time you’ve heard of the transatlantic slave trade, as your father never misses an opportunity to denigrate your country of birth. In his boisterous version of the lesson, you learn “that’s why these Black people act so, the ignorant monkeys. Them come out o’ bondage not two seconds ago, now them must act civilized? Boy, I tell you, White people wicked, you see.” At the height of his lecture, he’ll add that slavery ended in Jamaica *hundreds of years* before slavery ended in America, a claim you’ll later learn is off by hundreds of years.

He has a word, a Jamaican word, for the Blacks of either nation he deems disreputable: *butu*. If ever you do something that might cause him shame, he’ll say, “You can act like real butu sometimes.”

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“What am I?” you’ve repeated to your mother by now. You’ve been asked enough times by strangers to begin seeking answers.

Her response seems prepared, but not as clearly defined as the question demands. Your mother tells you that you are made up of *all sorts of things*. She lists countries, several countries, and assigns *great-grand this* and *great-grand that* to these many nations. Your mother rarely attaches names to these forebears, so you easily confuse them. “Our last name comes from Italy,” she says, “by way of England.” Most of the countries she lists are European, and though she’s sure to add Africa as though it were a country or an afterthought, she never mentions race.

You want a one-word answer.

“Am I Black?” you ask her. That, after all, is what you want to know. Race has descended upon your world, sudden and grating, and what you fear most is that others recognize in you something that you’ve yet to grasp.

When only the kids asked, you assumed that their limited experience in the world left them similarly ignorant. But now adults are beginning to fish for answers. Some of your teachers simply gawk at you, while others ask how it is you *speak so well*.

At first, you’ll reply, “I’m American,” certain they are distinguishing between your accent and your parents’. This answer only further confuses your teachers. Later, especially when asked by teachers whom your parents have never met, you realize they mean something else entirely.

“Are we Black?” you ask your mother.

Agitation grips her. A shudder takes her bright, freckled flesh and wiggles it over her bones as she quickly finishes the family genealogy, down to the last shaky details. “Your father’s father’s mother was Jewish. Your grandmother’s mother was Irish,” she says. “Your grandmother’s father,” and she lowers her voice to a whisper when she says this part, “may have been an Arab.”

You stare at her blankly, noting, “You haven’t answered the question.”

Her agitation inflates to ire. “Chuh. I was never asked such stupidity before coming to this country. If someone asks you,” she says, “tell them you’re a little of this and a little of that.”

You see that her response is final. Again she’s avoided the one-word answer, what you’d hoped was a simple yes or no.

The few decidedly Black kids in school find you befuddling. They are among the first to insist that you state your allegiance. “Are you Black?” they demand.

You’re a rather pale shade of brown, if skin color has anything to do with race. Your parents share your hue. As do their parents. *Their* parents, your great-grands, occupy your family’s photo albums in black-and-white and sepia tones that conceal the color of their skin. Some look like they might guest-appear on *The Jeffersons*, while others look like they’d sooner be cast on *All in the Family*. Your best school friends, José and Luis, are the two whose skin tones most match yours outside of your home. But when they flip back and forth between English and Spanish, you feel excluded. And when they flip their hair back and forth in mock head-banging motions when singing your favorite rock songs, it becomes painfully apparent that yours isn’t long or loose enough to bang along.

Additionally, your neighbor Julie informs you that—after half a decade of friendship—you are no longer allowed to play together. “Because your family doesn’t believe in God.”

“Of course we believe in God,” you know enough to say.

But she just shrugs and says, “My dad says Jamaicans don’t.”

Your mother tells you and your brother one day, “Unoo better no bring no nappy-headed girls home.” In your mother’s defense, or perhaps to further disparage your mother, her list of girls not to bring home will stretch to the point where you’ll wonder if she ever wants you to bring home girls. “Don’ bring home no coolie,” she’ll start to warn in middle school. Upon seeing your uncut-coffee-colored Panamanian prom date, she’ll lock herself in her bedroom. For her, your mother will have no words at all. And after you graduate, she’ll say, “Please, just not a White girl. Promise me that.”

But this is fifth grade still, and you’re confused about this first warning. What constitutes “nappy” hair to your mother? You study hers—as fine as José’s and Luis’s guitar-string fibers—then study the cotton candy curls on your head. You wonder about your own hair’s nappiness. You wonder who can’t bring *you* home.

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The duppy returns, more mischievous than ever. It hides your father in a bar, in a bacchanal, in a dimension where your mother can’t reach him. Before he rematerializes, plastered in J’ouvert paint, your mother reports him missing. As she talks to the police over the telephone, you and your brother huddle near enough to hear the man on the line say, “Ma’am, I can’t make out a word you’re telling me. Is there someone there who speaks English?”

She passes you the handset before breaking into sobs. The man asks you to describe your father. “He’s six foot one,” you tell him. “Skinny.”

“Black or White?” the man asks.