bioStories

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

A KI TA LA?

by Saul Siarras

Almost every night for the two months that I lived with her, I heard Paulette's relentless pleas in the middle of the night: prayers half-remembered, calls for her estranged son, discussions with someone who wasn't there. I couldn't make out every word she uttered as some of them were in Creole, a language I knew but not enough to grasp all its meanings and nuances.

One of her caretakers had warned me that sleeping would be a challenge in this apartment whose permanent resident was a ninety-four-year-old bedridden Caribbean woman who religiously spoke words into the darkness as soon as the sun set.

Pictures in the living room told a far different story. Paulette had once been a striking woman, her skin so light she could pass for white, and in a country notorious for its colonial past, I could only imagine what doors that had opened for her. She had been a wife, a mother, a grandmother. The photographs showed her at the center of things, surrounded by children, grandchildren, and friends. She was a woman people gathered around. Her husband had died some twenty years earlier. He was survived by a son, Pascal, and a daughter, Monica, now in their late fifties.

Her story followed a path worn smooth by thousands before her. Sometime in the 1970s she left Martinique, a French island in the Caribbean, for Metropolitan France, to pursue the same dream that brought so many of her peers to the banlieues sprawling around Paris. That's how she ended up in Créteil, among the immigrants and French citizens of color who arrived hoping for a better life.

The fact that Paulette and I crossed paths wasn't accidental. I was at a junction myself. I had been back in France for three years by then, in Lyons, after fifteen years abroad in the US, Germany, and Belgium, and I was struggling to readapt. I couldn't always tell what the issue was. Me, the French, or the city of Lyons, which I found too provincial, or perhaps all three. When a job offer came through in Paris, I took it as a sign.

Although I had relatives and friends in Paris and its surrounding areas, I was reluctant to stay with any of them, even temporarily. Those living arrangements have a way of escalating, and I wasn't willing to ruin family relations. So when one of my mother's close friends, Nelly, suggested I stay with her bedridden sister Paulette, alone in a three-bedroom apartment in Créteil, I thought it was the perfect compromise.

I arrived in Créteil at the beginning of October 2023 after spending a few days in the city with friends. Monica met me outside the subway station. We had spoken on the phone weeks earlier but never met in person. She was practical in the way people become when they've been managing a difficult situation for a long time. She was efficient, not unkind, but not warm either. She made me feel welcome in the way someone does when welcome is the task at hand.

We walked back to the apartment through a cité, the kind of place defined by tall concrete buildings from the brutalist era, historically populated by immigrants and French citizens of color. I had grown up in one of those, in a medium-sized town in the East of France. The irony wasn't lost on me. I had vowed, leaving as a young adult twenty years earlier, never to come back to this kind of place. Being back didn't bother me the way it once would have, I had lived in too many cities around the world for that, and it was temporary.

The building where Paulette lived was circular, sitting in the middle of Créteil's concrete jungle. The proximity of those apartments was something I had disliked as a kid. Growing up in one, I knew the layout before I walked through the door. Kitchen on the left, living room on the right, a long corridor between them, and three bedrooms at the end. It was exactly as I expected. Everything about the place screamed 70s and 80s including the wallpaper, the furniture, and the layout. The apartment had aged alongside Paulette. It looked sad and worn out, renovations scarce, but there were telltale reminders that kids had once lived there, that it had been home to a happy family. I could see them vividly as I moved through the rooms, and for a moment I couldn't tell whose childhood I was remembering, theirs or mine.

Monica showed me around before taking me to Paulette's room. It was a hospital room in everything but name. There was a bed and a table crowded with medication bottles. Nothing else. Paulette lay there looking old and gaunt, lighter skinned than in the photographs. You could still see remnants of her beauty, if you looked closely.

No real conversation about me living there took place, and it didn't take me long to understand why. Paulette looked at me, nodded, smiled faintly, but she wasn't entirely there. Whatever was happening behind her eyes was a mystery.

A nurse and caretakers came by twice a day to check on her, feed her, clean the apartment, and attend to her physical needs. I quickly understood that I wasn't expected to do any of that. She was taken care of, just not in the ways that mattered most.

Once Monica left—she lived more than an hour away—I made myself comfortable in my room. I cooked a quick meal, listening for sounds from the corridor. It had been a long day, and I was starting my new job the following morning.

The first few days with Paulette were uneventful. I was barely at the house. I would leave around 8 a.m. every morning and come back around 6 p.m. I sometimes would stay in the city to have dinner with friends. When I returned to the apartment, Paulette was often already sleeping so it almost felt like living alone.

Things took a turn about a week later.

"Pascal!"

"Glory to be God!"

"The prayer of the Lord!"

I woke up immediately. Paulette was wide awake, screaming her lungs out while holding conversations with people who weren't there. There was a rhythm to cries, which consisted of her speaking Creole, then calling Pascal's name, then back to conversing before finally screaming "The prayer of the Lord" out of nowhere. I wasn't sure what that phrase meant. It made no sense in French, in Creole, or in English, but like many Caribbean women of her generation, I had no doubt that prayer had likely been at the center of her life.

Her pleas lasted hours that night. They were disruptive and difficult to listen to, but Monica told me that it was normal, not to worry, even though the pain in her voice was hard to ignore. She was clearly longing for someone, her son, and something, her former life, the one in the photographs when she had been surrounded by loved ones. My concern wasn't for my loss of sleep, but rather for the discomfort of hearing someone in that much pain and being unable to do anything about it.

Pascal never visited and wasn't involved in any of his mother's affairs. Monica had a life of her own and came by once a month at most. Paulette was old, forgetful,

not entirely there, but most of all she was lonely. Every plea was a cry for love and attention from the people she loved most.

The following day after work I went to her room. She looked at me and her face immediately lit up.

She smiled before asking: “A ki ta la?” which is Creole for “Whose child is this?”

I looked at Paulette and saw women I already knew. My two grandmothers, one of whom shared her name. Popo, my paternal grandmother, was a Caribbean woman as dark-skinned as Paulette was light, as small, and just as old when she died in 2012 at ninety-four. But unlike Paulette, she had not been alone. My father had been with her until her very last breath, day in and day out, alongside caretakers and nurses. My mother had done the same for her own mother, who died eleven months before Popo.

I knew I would do the same for my parents when the time came. I would be damned if I let them meet Paulette's fate. My parents would not die alone. That was the promise I made to myself as I looked at Paulette.

“My name is Saul," I replied. She responded with something I couldn't understand, but I could see she was happy, whoever she thought I was. I asked her in Creole how she was doing, and she was more than happy to tell me. That was, unfortunately, the extent of it. My French wasn't working, and neither was my Creole. We couldn't fully understand each other, but I stayed anyway, and when I got up to leave, she called me back.

Our daily ritual would now consist of a visit, a conversation that was more feeling than language, and always, the next day, the same question to start us over again, "A ki ta la?”

Living with Paulette would often make me think about what dying actually looks like up close, not the moment itself but everything leading up to it. The pain when you're sick. The loneliness when you're old. The goodbyes to your loved ones, if you're lucky enough to have them there.

Paulette didn't make me think of my own death, but of my parents'. My father was seventy-one and my mother sixty-seven. I knew we still had time together, but time had a way of moving faster than I expected or realized. They had my brother and me young, so I had always seen them as immortal, permanent fixtures, and untouchable. It was hard to reconcile that they were now entering the last stage of their lives. The thought gave me a constant knot in my stomach. Losing them would

mean losing not just the people I loved most, but the version of myself that only existed as their son. It would all come to an end, and Paulette was the sad reality check.

Every plea was a reminder of what the future would hold for me and the people I loved. Night after night, week after week, I wasn't sure I was prepared to keep hearing them. I felt powerless.

Eventually, I understood that I needed to leave. Not because of the lost sleep, but because of the overwhelming feeling of death and abandonment in a place that reminded me so much of my childhood. And so, I too would be abandoning Paulette, just like Pascal, just like Monica, in hope of escaping a discomfort I couldn't name but couldn't ignore either. We were all, in our different ways, staying away from something too painful to face every day.

I found an apartment ten minutes away in another banlieue named Alfortville. I told myself it was about the job, which wasn't going well, and that a quieter place would help me focus. But deep down I knew my time in Paris, in France, was coming to an end.

Just like Paulette who was on borrowed time, my life in France had been hanging by a thread for a while, it was time to recognize it and move on. We were both at a crossroads, both experiencing the end of a chapter. The final one for her. I was lucky enough to be able to turn the page.

I moved back to the US less than a year after first meeting Paulette. I never kept in touch with Monica, but Nelly and I exchanged messages from time to time. A year or so into my new life on the other side of the Atlantic, Paulette remained on my mind. Yet, looking back, I realized I had never truly given Monica her due even though she had always been helpful, and supportive, until one day, shocking news broke.

Pancreatic cancer.

All this time, she had been fighting her own invisible battle. She had kept her diagnosis secret until the very end. She knew no one would be there for Paulette, so she made the difficult decision to put her mother in a retirement home shortly before meeting her own fate. That's where Paulette was finally called to glory a few months later. By then, I had already left, carrying the lesson with me.



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