

Cajou (1961), a novel by Michèle Lacrosil

translated from French by Dawn Fulton

EXCERPT

“The Last Night”

It's 11:00 PM. Germain has just left. Standing in the hall, out of breath, I grab hold of the doorknob. I feel nauseous. My short reprieve has come to an end; I've known it since this morning. When I woke up, I didn't know what day it was. I tried to remember events from the day before so that I could match them against my work calendar and figure out the date. But there was nothing. Shaken and uncertain, I also felt fear: I would be punished for my forgetfulness. I felt cut off from normal people who know where they are when they wake up. During the several seconds that elapsed as I searched for a memory, I understood what this nameless day would become for me, and felt the anguish of a prisoner watching the whitening of the dawn. His last? He hears someone coming; his heart races. If the footsteps stop... No, they've passed by his cell, it won't be today. But his fear, too intense to fade away completely, crystallizes into two questions: What day will I die? What day is it today? The block calendar on my desk said Friday, October 7. My wayward memory, or rather my absence of memory, worried me. Was it a momentary blackout? A sign of amnesia? I turned in my bed and, between the white sheets and the snowy pillowcase, found my ugliness. I wasn't afraid of dying anymore. I was afraid of the future.

If I loved Germain with conviction, with the certainty that our marriage would not end in failure, I would buy lilac sheets and tobacco underwear. Or chamois. Or mink. My range of colors is limited. The day Germain first pulled me toward him and murmured, “My sweet little thing, my darling,” I ran to Tronchet Street.

“*Brown* underwear?”

The saleswoman's laughter told me I wouldn't be able to hide my ugliness. The shop had something for every circumstance except mine. And for me, this was devastating. Brown satin would have given me the strength to accept a tender gaze and dissuaded me from climbing over the railing of a bridge.

Tonight, leaning against the doorway, I listen to Germain's footsteps grow distant. In the

silence of the night, the squeaking of his shoes and his dry little cough sound strangely foreboding. The door to the street creaks. 11:02. In ten minutes, Germain will have gone past the boulevard; the coast will be clear; I'll leave. In the hallway mirror, my reflection trembles. Will I lose my nerve again tonight?

Habit steers me to the bathroom. I wash my hands. Shall I fix my hair? Why not? In some cultures they put make-up on the dead. I stop again in front of the wardrobe. The coat is heavy, the fabric cold. I draw back and bump into the table. I see the calendar and touch with fear and respect the block of pages I will never turn. So many lives lost. A waste. I'm horribly cold. I sit on the couch, hands clasped on my knees, like someone waiting for a train in a drafty station.

11:10. I promise myself I'll do it at midnight, giving myself a reprieve, time to gather my courage. To avoid thinking about the pledge I've made, I try to remember the day's events.

As I arrived at the lab this morning, Lucienne Angil was putting on her lab coat. Out of politeness I asked her if she'd had good news, hoping she'd just say, "Yes, thank you." But there was more. Lucienne went on and on. "My father was just promoted to assistant manager of the bank back home. His Blacks adore him. They're like big children, but he knows how to handle them. The one who's working as his clerk is completely devoted to him. Father says that with the Blacks..." I interrupted her: "Has he recruited a good staff? Did he find the right people?" But she stayed her course: "His Blacks are very respectable. One of them..." She was so busy avoiding the term Negroes that she forgot they were human beings. Her eyes were shining with kindness. Her goodwill touched me, but I had notes to file and cut the conversation short. I went to ask the secretary if the director would be willing to see me.

"Of course, Cajou. You know you don't need to ask."

The truth is that I don't like to take people by surprise. I walked across the hall. Under my left arm I held the folder containing the results of eighteen months of research. Test tube number three had finally said what it had to say, and the time had come to share the results with the director. It was 10:15. Mr. Domaël would have finished signing his mail. I knocked. "Yes?"

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The director was looking through some papers. Thankfully, he didn't get up. I don't like

it when he stands up to receive me: it's a preferential treatment that bothers me. I noticed that he was writing up notes on his files.

“Could you give me a minute? I'm almost finished. Have a seat, Miss Kébaire.” His thick glasses were on his nose. He looked at me over the lenses and pointed to a chair with the end of his pen. I remained standing. He returned to his work. I thought to myself that Lucienne and Odile would never be offered a seat in this situation. Through the picture window on the left, I could see the workers below repairing the glass walls of the old laboratory. Their blowtorch was smoking. One of the men, his face black with soot, gave me a wink. It wasn't meant as a vulgar flirtation; he was sending me a sign of recognition and making a mischievous joke. Apparently his temporary mask of blackness was enough to inspire a passing friendly sociability in him. But once the soot was gone, he would rejoin his clan. The barrier between us would return, and there would be no more attempts to reach across it. In the end this laborer standing on his ladder in the courtyard was a thousand miles away from me. He was the type Lucienne called a man. For all my hours hunched over test tubes, I would only ever get facts out of them, not the answers to my problems. I turned my back on the man amused by our temporary resemblance and looked out of the window on the right. Barges were coming up the river. The current didn't look strong, but it was holding them in check without visible effort. A tugboat was spluttering smoke: the residue of the men's labor. The grime would get their hands and faces dirty, and as long as they looked like Negroes, the privileged classes would treat them like outcasts. I regretted having turned away from the fellow who had offered me a friendly greeting and I looked around for him. He wasn't on his ladder anymore. I wanted to give him a smile of sympathy, but it was too late. Another failed project. Mr. Domaël said:

“Let's see what you have, Miss Kébaire.”

I placed in front of him the graphs and images from the past year's experiments, which I had abandoned in a fit of despair then taken up again and completed over the last six months. The director rubbed his hands together. His wedding ring, embedded in his flesh, made his finger look swollen. He pushed back his chair and leaned against the backrest:

“Excellent, my dear. We will publish this right away. I'll write a short introduction. I know you don't need one; your publications have already been well received. But I want to draw

attention to the fact that the work was done here. I'm going to give Le Merlinguier something to think about with this! Wait and see."

He was slapping the graphs with the flat of his hand. One of the images flew up and I reached out to keep it from falling. Our fingers touched. Mr. Domaël seized my hand:

"Congratulations, Miss Kébaire."

The pads of his fingers told me his ancestors had not known manual labor. My palms are rough with the calluses of my pitiful forebears. The coarseness of my hands embarrassed me and Mr. Domaël's gesture had thrown me off balance. I had rarely seen him hold his hand out to his assistants. I turned towards the door. Mr. Domaël called me back:

"One more thing?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'd like to talk to you about our party on the 15th. Have you received the invitation from my wife? Not yet? You'll get it today I'm sure. Try to come. We're counting on you." I had been busy organizing my notes since I'd come in and hadn't looked at the mail, which, in my case, doesn't amount to much: a few brochures and scientific publications that I glance through at the end of the day. I said to the director:

"I'm sorry, sir, what is it for?"

"A social occasion, my dear. You and I live in the world of the infinitely small. Now and then we must return to the world of the human animalcule and give cocktail parties. It's next Friday. My wife added a personal note to the invitation."

The idea of facing Mrs. Domaël's guests terrified me. I didn't know how to refuse. I took comfort in the fact that I had a week for fate to intervene. With luck, some unforeseen situation, even an unpleasant one, might prevent me from going. Not something mundane like the flu, that wouldn't do. Something serious. Maybe even fatal. No, of course not, you don't kill yourself to avoid a cocktail party. I walked through the halls quickly as if the danger I had sensed upon waking had taken form. I took refuge in the carrel where I keep my test tubes. My chair, two notebooks, a crystallizer: it was solid and reassuring. I worked for a little while to calm myself down, then, my hand still trembling, I reached for the trolley where the housekeeper leaves the mail. Mrs. Domaël's invitation was there among the brochures. Engraved stationery, grey ink. I imagined taffeta skirts, white shoulders, elaborate hairstyles, drawing rooms to match, a world

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where I would be made harshly aware of my ugliness. I put the card into the pocket of my lab coat and concentrated on test tube number four.

“What time are you planning to go, Cajou? Early, right? Later it’ll be mobbed.” Standing in front of the sink in green rubber gloves, Odile Vasseur had stopped washing her glass slides.

I answered vaguely: “Oh, it’s not for a while.” Telling Odile wouldn’t be right. Mr. Domaël had to be informed first, I’d talk to the others afterwards. In the meantime, I wanted to concentrate on my work. Odile took no notice.

“I’m planning to go early too, Cajou.”

She interpreted my response as she saw fit.

“All of us from the lab should go together. Don’t you think so, Cajou?”

The silence imposed by my deference to the director was turning into a lie. Too bad. I said simply: “Mm...we’ll see.”

“The problem is I have nothing to wear. Tonight I’m going window-shopping in Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Will you come with me, Cajou?”

If she could just stop talking and let me monitor the results from test tube four in peace! I had a pipette in my hand and was getting ready to take a sample to examine it. I put down the pipette; Odile was waiting. A simple refusal would not be enough to silence her. She would insist. She did not understand the meaning of the word no. She had a stubbornness that, if applied to scientific research, would have resulted in impressive achievements. But she used up all her energy on trivialities. The only way out was to ask her questions myself.

“You shop in Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Odile?”

“With my salary? You must be joking. I see what’s there and buy elsewhere. I think I might get a turquoise dress. What color are you going to wear, Cajou?”

I looked at Odile, eyebrows raised. She turned beet-red and began to stammer. “If we wore the same dress, it’d be so... You know, like twin sisters. We’d be so embarrassed, can you imagine?”

I lowered my head. Was Odile making fun of me? I decided to pretend not to understand. Lucienne, who was busying herself with tray two on the other side of the room, started to cough.

There was a sound of shattered slides. I turned to Odile. Blushing, she was picking up the pieces of broken glass scraping against the side of the sink. She said, "I'm sorry, Cajou, it slipped out."

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I told her that the state funding agency would likely survive the loss of a few slides. She turned scarlet. Lucienne crossed the room and positioned herself between me and Odile. "I'm going to wear my black silk skirt and my cousin's embroidered wedding blouse. Pieces like that never go out of style. What do you think, Cajou?"

I didn't think anything. I said yes, I guess...and Lucienne seemed pleased. She went on: "Buying something new is out of the question: I just got my tax bill. What about you, Cajou, what color will your dress be?"

I never wear anything but black and brown, haven't they noticed? I wanted the conversation to end. I said, "Oh, I don't know..." and plunged my pipette into test tube number five, the control sample. Lucienne insisted:

"You haven't decided yet, Cajou?"

Odile exclaimed, with exaggerated enthusiasm:

"You should wear green!"

Me, in green? The most difficult color to wear! I would look like an anole lizard on a leaf. Where were the days when Stephanie and I would go chasing after anoles for fun? Stephanie used to put them in matchboxes and hide them in her desk at school. To tease Jacqueline, she would open the box a crack.

"A lizard! How horrible! Throw it away," Jacqueline would whisper, holding in her screams so Stephanie wouldn't be punished.

"Anoles are not *real* lizards. And they're too little to be ugly," Stephanie would say. The anole, with its black back and tobacco-colored tail, would meander across the white page of a notebook, then scamper across the classroom towards the window and the greenery outside.

Brown and green. Colors that clash, I thought. Undeterred by my silence, Lucienne raised the ante:

"Preferably jade green. Those dark colors you wear all the time make you look older, Cajou. Believe me: you should wear pastels."

I emptied the contents of my pipette onto the crystals. It was hopeless. They could never be in

my skin. They had no regard for my aversions and dismissed my way of looking at things.

They would force their own tastes onto me if they could. The confidence with which they decided what I should wear was humiliating. Standing side by side, they were rearranging my

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hairstyle and my look with complete freedom, as if I weren't there. When they did turn to speak to me, it was to reproach me for not having asked them for advice earlier. I waited until they looked away again and fled. I wanted to go and see Germain, who worked one floor up, but I was afraid of what people might say. I went to take refuge in the storeroom where we keep the lab animals. Fifty mice had been delivered the week before. The lab assistant had put the white mice in the cages on the right and the grey ones on the left. The little animals were all busying themselves over nothing, obviously taking their pointless tasks very seriously. I wondered what a scientist with skill and vision, someone who could see the truth I was searching for and the conclusions to be drawn from it, would think of my test tubes, my graphs and my images. The scurrying of mice, nothing more. They kept on rushing around, the white ones on the right, the grey ones on the left. It was disheartening. I sat down on an empty crate and thought about all the effects of separating the races. A word came to me: DIASPORA. I could see it in front of me, etched onto the blue placard in the window frame as clearly as if it had been posted in capital letters two inches high. Through the dormer, I could see a little bit of sky and light clouds frayed by the wind. They were fleeing – fleeing each other. Out of nowhere, a musical phrase seized me in its rhythm: the syllables of the word DI – A – SPO – RA rang out with great fanfare, faded, then resumed in an imperious crescendo, inaudible to the mice. *Diaspora?* But whose? Was I to open the cages and let the white mice scatter away? They would die, without the care they had become used to, or a stray cat would kill them. Had we decreed their death? We had, from time immemorial. But their dispersion? This made no sense. Was I mad? Where had this idea of diaspora come from? Was it a desire to flee? Yes, from the depths of my being. But where could I go? The room where I had successfully completed my experiments no longer appealed to me. A moment earlier, I had been annoyed because the girls had kept me from concentrating with their chatter; now my work was of no interest. I had taken it on to prove to myself that my troubles growing up hadn't compromised all my possibilities. Other scholars, more talented than I, and better positioned in a society that would support them instead of seeing them as curiosities, would carry on and succeed. It was clear that if I insisted, if I tried to go too far, I would fail. I

would never be anything but an *outsider*. A voice told me to resign, to leave the laboratory, to disappear... But how? By doing something else? Disappearing altogether? Thoughts came in a jumble one after the other. One image lingered: ashes in the wind, the exodus, the ancient Patriarchs. I saw nameless, faceless silhouettes, draped in tunics with stiff folds, filing past

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against a receding sky. Their outstretched hands held urns, their skeletal fingers scattered ashes over the city. Their procession faded away and there was emptiness. But I hadn't lost consciousness, I am certain I hadn't fainted. My body was numb, my limbs stiff, my mind completely scattered. Pinned to the crate with cramped muscles, I felt like my skull was being stroked by fingers of wind and like my hair was standing on end. My seat was uncomfortable, the smell of the animals was awful. I stood up. My head hurt. Hammers banged out in four-four rhythm: DI – A – SPO – RA. DI – A – SPO – RA. I went back to my worktable. Lucienne and Odile, looking put out, asked me why I had run off. They knew that I had left because of them. By asking the question they were absolving themselves and forcing me to take all the blame. They were above reproach; I was a difficult and impatient friend. I was the guilty one. I apologized and said I had gone to wash my hands in the new buildings.

Odile shrugged:

“Why not tell us you needed the sink, Cajou? We never know what you want.” I looked at Odile: where did her confidence come from? I saw pink cheeks, medium-high cheekbones, light blue eyes, tidy hair. Our eyes met; she smiled. I wondered what she saw when she looked at me. The prospect of becoming the immediate superior of this girl with the clear conscience and impeccable hairstyle sent shivers down my spine. How could Germain and the director not understand?

The hammers of the diaspora banged away softly. The row of test tubes and the bubbles of acid on the crystals had a settling effect.

I worked until noon. Lucienne and Odile tried to drag me to the cafeteria, but I got away from them. Being in their company and listening to them talk would bring on another attack. I had enough time to go eat at home, but I couldn't face seeing the dirty walls of my room again. I bought a sandwich and walked along the banks of the Seine. I found a quiet spot under the arch of a bridge. The motor of a distant boat pulsed: di – a – spo – ra! di – a – spo – ra!

For the rest of the afternoon, I buried myself in my work. At around half past six,

Germain came to get me and we went home together. He asked me how things were going with my promotion. He scolded me.

“I’d understand if you were living in 1900, my dear Cajou. But not today! Look at Black Africa on the international scene. Just when the French are paying attention to the problems of

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the black man and giving him the benefit of their experience and knowledge, you’re weighing yourself down with complexes that are obsolete. It doesn’t make sense.”

“But Germain, my problems are not political! That has nothing to do with it. Have I told you, sweetheart, that Mother was from Paris? I love her country, I think of it as my own.” “You never talk about your mother’s parents. What happened to them?”

“My grandparents died in 1940, during the war. The rest of the family is all dispersed.” Germain murmurs something I don’t hear. That dispersion. The diaspora, of course. The cadence of the word accompanies the sound of our footsteps.

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