

# burning bush | Sheree Greer

The thing wasn't that she couldn't look away. It was that she didn't want to.

Naomi stood leaning against a tall kapok tree, the yellow blossoms closed in the daylight. The tree wasn't very wide, but neither was she. She pressed her budding breasts against the bark of the tree, careful not to shuffle too loudly in the bed of palm bushes around her. She hid amongst their wide, shiny green fronds.

A breeze blew through Naomi's thin cotton tank top as she slid her right hand into the pocket of her cut-off denim shorts. The summer wind carried the smell of fresh fish and ripening breadfruit from Naomi to her cousin, Rachel, who was stark naked, dipping a toe into the stream.

Rachel was tall, a small paunch just below her navel, arms and legs slender from childhood races where she beat all the boys except Isaac. The loss marked her retirement from racing and the beginning of a new Rachel. Naomi watched her finger-comb the small bush of matted hair between her legs and imagined her thinking of Isaac or daydreaming about leaving Cove de Morant—a small town that clung to the edge of their West Indian island for dear life—where everyone grew the same fruit and recycled ancient stories.

Rachel stepped into the stream. A quick shiver shook her breasts, and she steeled herself, walking towards the water that poured from the rocky cliff overhead.

Naomi swallowed, her tongue thick and fuzzy in her mouth like a caterpillar. She remembered when Rachel used to take her to this part of the river. Rachel had taught Naomi how to bless fallen candy, how to take it to your lips and kiss it with your eyes closed, then hold it up to the sky for God to kiss it. *God made dirt and dirt don't hurt, but if I should die before I wake, I pray for God my soul to take.*

But things were different now. There was no blessing away those three years between them. They had shown themselves more substantial than dust on a piece of tamarind candy dropped to the ground and picked up again. Rachel was different in ways Naomi didn't always understand. Rachel didn't want to talk dreams with her anymore. She didn't want to go swimming, or chase one another. She wanted to bathe in their secret stream

without her, at what used to be their secret time—the time when the sun was directly overhead, beaming down with a quiet heat everyone else hid from. Rachel wanted secrets of her own, secrets she didn't have to explain to Naomi. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to be with that stupid boy.

Naomi clenched her jaw, remembering when she saw Isaac, a knotty-headed, ashy-elbowed fool, holding hands with Rachel on the porch swing at Big Mama's house.

"She let you win!" Naomi had yelled from her hiding place beside the porch. Rachel jumped up from the swing and chased her around the house. It was almost like old times until Rachel tackled her and pinched her underarms.

Naomi sank down into the bush. Cracking palm fronds snapped her out of her memory. She knelt forward and pressed her body against the base of the tree, remembering and craving the weight of Rachel on top of her, tickling, giggling, and pinching. She watched her cousin spin around under the small waterfall.

Naomi pushed her hand deeper into the corner of her pocket, touching her thigh through the lining. Her face, usually the color of shea butter, was now plum red with heat. She pressed her middle finger into the corner of the pocket and moved her hand into the space between her thighs. Her finger sought to quench the fire. It rested on the secret place between the fleshy folds that were still smooth and hairless, even in this, Naomi's thirteenth year.