



Story

Akani Diagnosis

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Abstract This story explores the intersection of intergenerational trauma, healthcare discrimination, and racial bias in medicine through the lens of the Akani family. It looks at the complexities of patient-provider communication and the impact of historical medical mistreatment on Black Americans' healthcare-seeking behaviours. The narrative weaves together themes of family dynamics, cultural beliefs, and the struggle for adequate medical care, highlighting the persistent challenges faced by marginalised communities in the healthcare system.

Keywords: Intergenerational trauma, Healthcare discrimination, Racial bias in medicine, Patient-provider communication

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The sickness came into existence as a hushed whisper between aunts. The murmuring generated a dull buzz, conjuring and strengthening their bond.

This is how Leilah first learned of her family inheritance. The electricity flowed through the air and tingled against the earlobes of the small child in the living room. Leilah had strained her little neck toward the kitchen, hoping to catch the secretive conversation while avoiding being branded nosy. Hearing nothing more than the faint timbre of voices, she bunched her sparkly tutu in chubby fists and tiptoed to the edge of the staircase, where the kitchen door remained slightly ajar.

'They say she gotta get more iron, but it's the sickness.

I tell ya, I don know why they lyin' to dat chile.' Auntie Linda held the lit cigarette further away from her face as she mulled over her words. 'It's like this e'er time. Lorraine ain't differin.' She placed the cigarette expertly between her lips and took a long drag. She released the smoke uneasily through her nose as her shoulders relaxed slightly. 'She ain't gon make it. We betta start prayin

Leilah could still smell the smoke as she came to herself in the hospital waiting room. Her right hand clasped tightly around her grandmother's silver locket. Her heartbeat felt slow, dull, but certain against her fingers. Releasing the locket, Leilah fussed in her seat—smoothing minute wrinkles in black jeans, crossing one booted foot over the other, readjusting her fuzzy, fuchsia sweater and pulling small pieces of lint from various places.

Glancing at the old television in the corner of the room, she blinked lazily at the blurred image of an old gameshow and pre-recorded laughter occasionally disrupted the thick silence in the room. The space had no windows. Instead, it boasted a cheerful, though peeling, wallpaper adorned with minuscule, intertwining roses against sage and white stripes. The vague scent of vanilla wafted through the space from an air freshener in the outlet. Eight standard, brown leather chairs faced each other from either side of the space and sat empty. All except one corner seat, where Leilah sat as far from the door as possible, as if to delay the inevitable return of the doctor. A minute gurgle accompanied a large dispersal of bubbles to the top of the water dispenser on her left against the wall and a stack of cone-shaped paper cups rested on top. A long, white coffee table rested against the wall adjacent to the television, which was suspended from a higher point on the wall.

Leilah shuddered. Nothing in this room made sense—the colors, the sounds, the smells, the arrangement, her presence. A disconcerting thought settling just out of consciousness when one falls asleep. Not quite a fever dream, not a nightmare, not sleep paralysis, but a

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womb-like space akin to limbo.

She braced her equally fuchsia-painted lips together to prevent an involuntary yawn escaping. The passage of time suddenly dawned on her, and she glanced quickly at the smartphone in her lap. 03:44. Leilah resisted the urge to scream by putting the weight of her face into both hands and firmly massaging the exhaustion from her eyes and cheekbones with her palms. Letting out a soft groan, she began to rub her temples. When they pulled into the hospital parking lot nine hours before, emergency surgery was the furthest thing from their minds. The crease of concern in the doctor's brow turned to suspicion when Leilah explained the family history and practically begged him to believe her. 'Can't you see som'thin' ain't right wit' ma child? Help her.'

When he glanced over Rena's tired, worn face—a face much older than her 19 years—he sighed with resolve and explained that he would run every test he could for her. If she did not mind her healthcare deductible rising.

'Doc, do what ya have to. Save her, please,' Leilah implored, taking her daughter's hand into her own.

And, evidently, they found something in those scans and tests because two hours later they whisked Rena away, stopping for little more than to ensure Rena's consent to the procedure.

A small vibration from her phone caused her to pause briefly.

The family group chat had 25 message notifications. Most of them came from the aunts talking about Rena. The most recent message came from Auntie Lee. It read: **Praying.**

Prayer wouldn't fix this any more than it had for Lottie or Lorraine or Leanna.

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After Baby Girl was born, Leilah did not trust herself to hold the bundle of blankets placed expertly in her arms. She trembled in her seat while gazing upon the miniature face, whose skin shone a translucent pink and whose eyes remained stubbornly shut. The baby's lungs pushed against her fragile ribcage as she slowly learned to breathe air. Only when the baby began to cry did Leilah stir from her wonderment. As her mother took Baby Girl to soothe the crying, six-year-old Leilah vowed to protect this small being from anything that would cause her cries. When Baby Girl came home, Leilah learned her name would be Leanna. Slowly, Leanna morphed from a small pink thing to a small brown baby that resembled dolls with big brown eyes, long baby eyelashes, and tiny, perfectly formed pursed lips. Leanna moved from cuddles to rolling to crawling to walking. Yet those large, expressive eyes, long eyelashes, and pursed lips remained a staple

of her personality. She was a curious and purposefully obtuse child, whose obstinance and intelligence tested the patience of her parents.

Other babies came home after Leanna: Johnny, Jace, and Julien. Yet Leilah knew that Leanna was always Baby Girl. While the boys grew up bounding and rowdy and unafraid of mud, Leilah and Leanna would take bike rides through their winding neighborhood to the nearby pond to skip rocks, draw tadpoles and lily pads in their journals, and discuss becoming biologists, their six-year gap disappearing as they wrapped each other in their dreams. Only once did Leilah and Leanna speak about the sickness. Leanna crawled into Leilah's bed across the room, as they sometimes did, and snuggled up to her sister's warmth.

'Auntie Letitia said I should watch out for if I feel sick,' Leanna began.

'Yeah, ya should,' Leilah replied with her eyes shut.

'You think I'll get sick?'

'Get sick? Yeah, everybody does.' Leilah punctuated this with a yawn.

'Nah, like sick sick. Like Auntie Lorraine low. You think I'd get like that?' Leanna fidgeted against Leilah's body. 'Auntie Tish said I look jaundiced or somethin' like that. Said I better watch out fo' the sickness.'

Leilah opened her eyes. 'Why you think you would get like Auntie Lorraine? You been strong since birth! I was there.' 'I know you were. You always sayin' that.'

'So I know you not likely to feel Auntie Lorraine low.'

'Never?'

'Ever.'

Seemingly satisfied, Leanna wrapped an arm around Leilah's waist. And they fell asleep.

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Knowing brewed between the girls in the recesses of their minds until the day Leilah realized things would change. She had traveled home to New Bern from Charlotte, North Carolina, to celebrate Independence Day with her family and to meet her brother Johnny's newborn son, Jesse. She was newly liberated. A young adult away from home starting her first gig.

'I'm home,' she called as pushed her way through the front door. She fought to release her key from the lock and took stock of the chaos in the foyer. Lots of muddy and sandy shoes lined the floor, while various jackets, umbrellas, and beach towels hung haphazardly from the coat hooks. The room smelled of moisture and outdoors.

Careful to avoid the clumps of sand, Leilah maneuvered herself and her small luggage through the space and into the living room.

'Mama?' she called, hoping to see Lourdes's face

emerge from around the kitchen entryway and break into a wide, welcoming grin. She wrestled her feet from her Adidas and placed them next to the foyer entryway.

Instead, she heard a set of footsteps come down the stairwell from the back of the house and shuffle through the kitchen slowly. She turned toward the noise. Jace's tall and wide frame appeared in the doorway. He was 17 now, with rich, deep notes in his voice and the beginnings of facial hair growing from his sideburns and the top of his lip. 'Hey, Lei, welcome home.' He gave her a signature half grin, but the warmth that normally glittered in his eyes was absent.

'Jace, what's up? Where's Mama?' Leilah said, unable to keep a skeptical edge from her voice.

'She upstairs,' he answered and reached to take Leilah's luggage. 'She wit' Leanna.' He firmly took the bag from her hands.

Leilah felt her stomach drop and her hands twitched uncertainly. 'What? What's wrong?'

'Come on, I'll walk with ya. Don' freak out, alright, but Leanna been looking low the last couple days. We think it's da flu, but don' know exactly.'

She knew then. Leanna had turned 19 three months prior.

Leilah looked at Jace carefully. The women did not talk about the sickness with the Akani men, though they surely knew something about it. They had all lost an auntie or their mother to it.

Jace led a reluctant Leilah toward the staircase. They moved quietly, almost mournfully, through the lingering smell of gumbo and garlic bread in the kitchen. The smooth white tile seemed to be tinged brown from age and some of the blue paint had chipped near the stovetop.

The staircase felt impossibly long. As Jace carried on ahead of her, Leilah felt her stomach drop further with each ascending step. The stairs creaked with the effort of supporting the weight of two grown bodies. She placed her hands on the old mahogany railing to steady herself and propel her forward. She resisted the urge to crumble, instead swallowing the fear of being with her sister when there was nothing she could do to help her.

Leilah's head spun with worry and dread. Her consciousness numbed while her body mechanically traced its way toward her mother and sister. Jace placed her bag across the hall in front of her mother's bedroom door. 'You s'posed to sleep with Mama.'

Leilah turned toward the room she had shared with Leanna. The door was slightly ajar. She took a few quick steps and crossed into the room. She registered Jace following her quietly and leaning against the wall between the dresser and the door.

Her sister rested in her smaller bed against the far wall

of the room. Their mother sat facing the bed in a chair from the kitchen, her head bowed in concentration. The other bed sat on the adjacent wall, blocking the door from fully opening.

Leanna looked paler, almost jaundiced, and the bags under her eyes made her face gaunt and ghostly. She opened her eyes slightly at the sound of footsteps. 'Lei, you made it.' She tried to sit up but Lourdes stopped her with a firm hand and a slight shake of her head. **Rest**, the gesture instructed.

Leilah began to tremble uncontrollably. She had never seen Leanna like this. Her defiant chin seemed to yield, her fiery gaze seemed extinguished, and her strong voice was compromised by rasp. Leilah stared at Leanna, unable to leave yet unable to move. Eventually, her love and concern won and she walked toward Leanna, intentionally folded her limbs, and rested on her knees by the bedside.

'Leanna...'

'I know. Auntie Tish warned me. Told me to take more ginger and lemon in my tea. To avoid taking certain vaccines. To always stay in warm weather. But it got me anyway.' Leanna curled her lip, a strange shadow of her defiant nature against the sallowness of her skin. 'It's July. This ain't flu.' Her hand rested loosely atop a steaming mug that smelled of ginger, turmeric, lemon, and cinnamon. Leilah imagined their mother preparing the tea over a hot stove in the North Carolina heat, desperately trying to recall old remedies from her mother that would help ease the fatigue and hollowness to come.

Lourdes sighed and Leilah glanced at her mother. She could not imagine losing a sister to this and knowing what was coming to Baby Girl. She fitted her hand into her mother's withered, strong palm.

Lourdes cleared her throat. 'Never mind yo' Auntie Tish. She ain't God. She was young when her and yo' Grandma Lana's sister, Lottie, passed on. She don' know nothin'. Nobody know why this happens to Akani women.' Lourdes squeezed Leilah's hand. 'She ain't God,' she repeated.

Later that night, Leilah ran to the toilet sick for the third time that week. After she rinsed out her mouth, she crept to her mother's room and pulled a blue box from her suitcase. Then she returned to the bathroom, where she opened the box, unwrapped the test from plastic, and peed onto the stick unceremoniously. Five minutes later the screen blinked from a vacant blue to display definitive text. **Pregnant.**

Almost seven months later, Leilah waddled alongside her sister, nursing a distinct sinking sensation in her joints. One sister carried life in her belly and a glow in her cheeks.

The other required all her energy to animate her frail limbs. Leilah had felt immense satisfaction at convincing her sister to finally see another doctor before giving up, but the grayness of the day, of the hospital, ushered in a familiar sense of fatigue navigating another medical setting for Leanna.

The pair followed slowly behind a young doctor down the hallway into a new patient room. After helping Leanna onto the small bed, the doctor began a series of tests. Leanna shut her eyes, as if to estrange the reality of the situation, which left Leilah to listen intently to the doctor as he worked through each test aloud. He held up Leanna's arm and attached a blood pressure cuff, then pressed a stethoscope against her inner elbow, then replaced it with a needle in her vein. Blood pressure readings. Temperature checks. Blood extraction for lab work.

'Miss Akani—' then, glancing quickly between the sisters, clarified—'Leanna, can you explain to me how you're feeling?' The doctor wrestled his plastic gloves into the nearby waste bin and picked up a clipboard from the counter.

Leilah squeezed Leanna's shoulder with encouragement. Finally, Leanna blurted, 'Well, Doc, I just feel achy. I'm tired all the time. I don't eat much and kinda just feelin' low. The medicine y'all gave me last time don't help none.' Leilah looked at her sister, whose eyes were now pointedly focused on a patient chair in the corner. She remained oblivious to the note of warning in Leilah's expression.

'That sounds the same as the last time you came in. From what I can tell, your blood pressure is low again, though that's probably from stress and a lack of eating. Everything else is coming up normal. There's nothing to be done, in my opinion.' The doctor flipped a page in his chart and read it over before glancing at Leilah. 'Says here there's something that runs in the family?'

Leanna pursed her lips together in reply. 'Yeah, in the women,' Leilah said, shooting another look at Leanna.

'Okay, and what's happened to them? What have their doctors said?' the doctor asked, pulling a pen from his white coat pocket.

Leanna finally eyed the doctor, scoffed, and chuckled lightly. 'They was the same as me. They got all hollow, then they bodies gave out. They wasn't allowed to go to no hospitals. And them doctors didn't know what it was either. Most of 'em came when our women was on they death beds anyway. Just told 'em ta work a lil less and get some rest. Have less babies. Drink a lil hot water and turmeric. Whateva. All them Akani women died eventually.'

The doctor brushed hair out of his eyes and looked down at the clipboard. 'Right.' After a beat, the doctor

scratched the back of his head. 'Well, I am not sure what to do short of prescribing something for stress and your blood pressure. Maybe a little iron and vitamin D for your energy levels. Otherwise, you seem alright. I'm positive you'll be just fine. Modern medicine's got your back.' He looked up quickly. 'I'll be back later, with some papers for outpatient referrals, and I'll get these prescriptions over to our pharmacy for you.'

Leanna sucked her teeth as the doctor shut the door. 'He don't know or care neither. Stress? Of course I'm stressed! But that ain't what's wrong.' She shook her head. 'Modern medicine? Please, they don't know head from tail up in here. And that doc, he's so GREEN. Guess he didn't hear me say all them Akani women dead now.'

Leilah took Leanna's hand into hers. 'But maybe we can go see another doctor who'll listen and maybe they'll find something this time,' she whispered while eyeing the recently shut door warily.

'No doctors ever helped us. Or believed us, Lei.' Leanna glanced at Leilah and sighed. 'All I wan' is to meet my niece.' Tears welled in her eyes and her voice grew soft.

'You will. I won't give up—Oh! She wanna come out,' Leilah exclaimed, feeling her baby press against her stomach. She placed Leanna's hand on her belly until the baby kicked again.

Leanna smiled wryly. 'I'll meet her. Then I can go.'

Nine weeks later, when Leilah had her Baby Girl, Jace and Lourdes held her hands. Her Baby Girl arrived with ringlets around her scalp and a resounding cry that caused the nurse to gasp, 'Well, that one's got a set of lungs.'

She named her Baby Girl Rena. While Rena slept in her arms, Leilah lightly fingered those ringlets, nestled like a crown atop her head. She ran a featherlike thumb over the baby's eyelashes, tiny nose, and lips. She searched for the woman her daughter might one day become.

Two days later, Leilah carried Rena up the front steps and through the front door. She studied the small, perfectly formed face snuggled between the pink blanket and the baby quilt Lourdes knitted as a birthing gift. Rena's closed eyes and mouth seemed to stubbornly push away her mother's prying eyes. Minuscule breaths escaped her cherub nose and wisped around her slightly rosy cheeks.

Her brother Jace appeared behind Leilah and placed one firm hand against her back while opening the front door. 'Gotta get you two out the cold. You look like you gon catch yo' death. Pale as a motha.' As he propelled her through the door, she heard a shuffle of many feet and suddenly a sea of aunties appeared in the foyer.

'Look at you. No color at all. At all,' Auntie Linda

tutted. She briefly squeezed one of Leilah's shoulders as if she could will color back into her face.

Jace took that as his cue to disappear. He turned, heading back outside to retrieve the hospital bag and the baby's car seat and bring them inside.

'Let's see the angel, then!' Auntie Letitia and Auntie Lee demanded and limped closer to see the little brown face between the blankets.

'What we callin' da baby? I think I said Laura,' Grandma Lana said and emphasized the Spanish pronunciation with a tap of her cane.

'Y'all, stop crowding Leilah. She just gave birth. Let her sit down at least.' This voice came through quietly but firmly from the back of the foyer. Leanna wove through the aunties slowly, her frail, ghostly frame seeming to float across the floor.

Leanna placed a thin hand under Leilah's elbow and guided her through the foyer, past the aunties, and to the couch in the living room. Leilah sighed gratefully when she felt the velvet cushion beneath her and rested her head on her sister's bony shoulders. Her sister smelled of Auntie Lee's cough salve, undoubtedly smeared across her chest and hidden beneath her thick sweater. Still, even in her illness, Leanna seemed to know exactly what she needed.

'So? What we callin' her?' Grandma Lana repeated impatiently.

When the aunties learned her Baby Girl's name, they shook their heads and spoke as if Leilah were not in the room.

'That Leilah always thinkin' she doin' somethin'.'

'It's no' right. Akani girls always got L names.'

'Ain't too late to change it.'

'She up and leave us. Come back thinkin' she betta or som'n.' The aunties cackled.

'Alright, alright. Leave her be.' Lourdes appeared in the doorway while drying her hands on a dish towel. 'There's some chicken, mac and cheese, and green beans in the kitchen if y'all wanna help yo'selves. Plates and forks on the counter.'

The aunties continued their grumbling while walking toward the kitchen. Lourdes joined her daughters and the sleeping infant on the couch. She wrapped her arms around Leilah. Leanna squeezed Leilah's knee. Leilah let herself absorb warmth and strength from the gestures, her exhaustion finally fully realized in their familial bubble. She held Rena closer to her chest.

There was something about the presence of the aunties, which was normally comforting, that set Leilah's teeth on edge. The dull buzz of their voices seemed to fill the cavernous feeling in her bones.

'So, this is my niece.' Leanna lightly touched one of her fingers to Rena's baby fist. 'She's perfect, Lei,' she

whispered.

Leilah gritted her teeth and looked at a mystified Leanna, who seemed to disappear more every day. Leanna, who could not even lift her niece to her chest. The frostiness in Leanna seemed to melt away as her dying wish was fulfilled. An edge of finality crept into the curve of her spine. Soon, Leilah realized. Soon, Leanna's body exhaled.

Leilah, on the verge of tears, vowed her Baby Girl would not die in pain and alone because of the sickness. She would do everything in her power.

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It was Jace who pushed through the waiting room door at 04:07. He shook off loose bits of snow from his dark peacoat and plaid scarf, which covered a navy sweatshirt and sweatpants. His Nikes slid and squeaked against the floor.

'Came soon as I heard,' he said, placing an arm around Leilah and seating himself in the seat beside her. 'I don't know if they comin'...'

'They not.' Leilah breathed out as a sob choked her. 'They... they told me not ta come. They said she wasn't no different and... the doctors wouldn't know whatta do about this. Wouldn't care to do nothin'. Wouldn't listen ta us. That I'd just watch her hollow out. Like we did—'

Jace cleared his throat to keep her from finishing. Their unspoken sibling hovered in the molecules around them, binding them with her ghostly apparition. She was as obtuse and obstinate in memory as in life.

'Yeah, alright. But she'll make it, Lei. She strong like you.' His arm squeezed her tightly, willing some resolve into her limps.

'They not gon' understand what's wrong. And she ain't lived yet, Jacey. She... she's just a kid.' A few tears peppered her cheek and slowly rode down into the hollow of her throat. Instinctively, she clasped her locket for the second time that night.

'She's just a kid. She wanted to come here. She said to me, "Ma, don't let me die at home like Auntie Leanna, Auntie Lorraine, and all them other Akani women." And she started cryin' and I... I couldn't let her go like that, Jace. I begged the doctor.'

Leilah's tears dripped onto her sweater, the liquid pooling on the tips of the pink fuzz and gathering in the stitches. 'I had to do right by her. I couldn't let her just...'

'Alright, Lei.' Jace's voice quivered slightly. 'She gon' be fine.'

They became aware of a quiet presence beside them and they turned to face the doctor.

And Leilah felt the eyes of Leanna. The full weight

of Lorraine and the Akani women who went undiagnosed nestled around her spine and curled in her lower back.

She blinked back tears of exhaustion and worry momentarily before clearly looking into the eyes of the doctor. He looked green, freshly out of medical school. His fatigue etched in the corners of his eyes and the twitching of his shoulders as he squared to meet her gaze.

'So?'

He cleared his throat and looked down uncertainly. 'Well, Ms. Akani. . . we haven't seen anything like this before.'

Leilah continued to stare at the man coldly, annoyed by his reticence and roundabout delivery and his indistinguishable American accent. 'How she doin'?'

'Rena is not conscious yet, and she has not had any complications from the surgery. But the surgical team is in shock. The size of that parasite was unlike anything we ever read about.' His face grew paler. 'We couldn't have known until we began how much she needed the help. She would've almost certainly died within the next day or so.'

Jace instinctively placed a hand on Leilah's shoulder as she whimpered at the image of a monster eating the insides of her child. 'Where. . . where would she have got somethin' like that? Up at that school?' Leilah half-whispered to no one in particular. Her eyes flitted uncertainly as she desperately tried to remember all the places she had visited on Davidson College's campus. Rena had

studied there since the previous school year until she fell ill that November.

The doctor shook his head. 'I'm not sure as to where you are referring but I cannot think of a place that would have a parasite like this. We have sent it to the lab to be identified. However, rest assured that we've removed all of it. It's a good thing we did those scans or we wouldn't have noticed any abnormalities.'

All Leilah could do was nod. Jace stepped forward and shook the young doctor's hand. 'Okay. Thank you, Doc. We really can't thank ya enough.' The doctor smiled tightly and began to turn away but spun back quickly to Leilah and said, 'You said she had a family history of this "sickness" when you brought her in.'

'Yeah, she do.'

'Well, you can't inherit a parasite. Listen, it's not possible.' When Leilah did not reply, he sighed. 'You can come see her in about an hour once we've finished getting her comfortable. We're hopeful she'll make it through the night, but no guarantee yet.' He quickly whirled around and walked back through the waiting room door.

'Thanks, Doc,' Jace offered to the already closed door. He wrapped a firm arm around her, willing himself to absorb her pain. Only then did Leilah dissolve into tears. She allowed them to carry her away from that room to the space at the edge of awareness and fatigue, where all her senses fogged and her resolve unraveled.



Figure 1: Artwork by Ugomsinachi Agu @Gomsi_Artz (Instagram) created based on the article

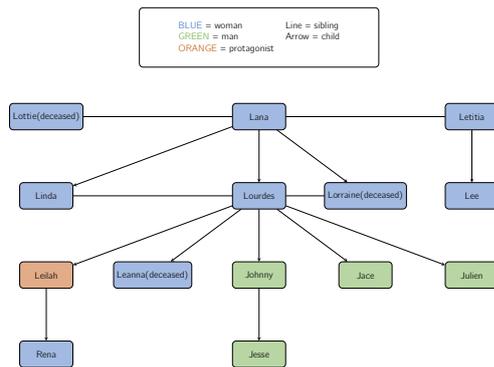


Figure 2: Akani family tree

Author's Note

The roots of this story lie in anthropological discussions of kinship, community, and conceptions of health and healthcare. More importantly, this story derives from the historical medical treatment of Black Americans and my own family's navigation and sense-making practices regarding health. As a Black woman from the US, I know I am less likely to be listened to by a doctor and, therefore, not receive effective health treatment (Doose et al., 2021; Giurgescu & Mirsa, 2022; Noursi et al., 2021; Small et al., 2023). To be a Black American is to be a perpetual outsider. I know this from academic studies (Cuyler, 2023) but I also know this from the stories my family tells each other.

At Christmas, one year during my teens, my father's cousin told me to watch out for the Jones curse. She said that my grandmother and each of her sisters had some ill or misfortune befall them during their nineteenth year of life. Two got pregnant and had to drop out of college. Another tragically passed away in a car accident. The youngest needed life-saving medical surgery. They presumed then that something supernatural was going on with the Jones women and they warned my father's cousin to be extra cautious during her nineteenth year. Twenty years later, she was warning me in a light-hearted, disbelieving way. Yet, somehow, that story nestled in the back of my mind, influencing much of my teenage and young adult behavior—infusing intense cautiousness and a distrust of the world around me.

While that story continues to be told, the same misfortunes have not befallen the women in the second or third generation. These subsequent generations of women have, for the most part, lived their young adult lives outside of rural Tennessee and had access to education and healthcare that my grandmother or her sisters could not have dreamed of in their earlier years. The dynamic of the all-knowing and overly involved aunties does persist in our family, mixing helpful advice about navigating

the world with old wives' tales or nonapplicable lessons gleaned from their personal experiences. However, it illustrates poignantly the way knowledge transfers within families and communities, becomes a notion with power and affect, and impacts how one comes to understand oneself.

Moreover, in general, both sides of my family maintain a distrust of the healthcare system. This distrust has instilled anxieties as to whether they will be listened to by health professionals, a wariness or complete despondency over their ability to self-manage chronic health problems, and a culture of waiting until the last minute to seek care. We will call health professionals within our family to diagnose problems or to get a second opinion the same way others might simply make an appointment with their primary care doctor. Some of this distrust results from the legacy of healthcare disenfranchisement Black Americans were subjected to until about 30 to 40 years ago (Gamble, 1995; Hoberman, 2012; Skloot, 2010). Only certain hospitals, primary care providers, or specialists provided services to Black Americans and an even smaller number allowed us to come into their offices for care. Thus, health management often relied on home remedies (Arcury et al., 2011), community members with particular medicinal or herbal knowledge (Barnett et al., 2003; Mitchem, 2007), or the blessings of good genetics. Even now, to venture outside of the neighborhood can feel as unsafe as to live with health problems (Mattingly, 2010, 2014).

I would be remiss to ignore the significance of financial burden of healthcare and the stress or survivalist aspects of everyday life as deterrents for healthcare-seeking behavior. The US has one of the most unaffordable healthcare systems (Jost, 2012). Given the economic disenfranchisement of Black Americans over centuries, most cannot afford the astronomical medical bills that come with hospital visits or a regular cadence of bills from routine visits to the doctor. Moreover, the bustle of everyday life placed on Black families makes it impossible to seek healthcare or incentivizes deprioritization. Seeking formal healthcare might be the last thing on someone's mind if they are more focused on paying rent, getting their children to school, buying groceries, taking care of their elders, etc.

In this story, I wanted to explore life for Black women in the home, the role of Black aunties, and class dynamics within intergenerational family structures. I hoped to examine the manifestations of intergenerational trauma and the types of things we believe can be inherited. I knew this story needed to acknowledge Black epistemologies regarding conceptualization and discourse of illness, family dynamics and healthcare, collective and individual decision-making regarding healthcare-seeking behaviors, self-management of chronic health problems, and doctor—

patient relations in the US. Most importantly, I prioritized the depiction of Black life and sought to decenter sensationalized tragedy that often comes with the telling of Black stories. It was crucial for me that the Akani family felt like home, which can feel all at once easy, complicated, unpleasant, joyful and sorrowful, energizing, and familiar.

Finally, my writing has always been deeply influenced by Afrofuturist principles generated within the Black diaspora. While Afrofuturism is attributed to the science fiction and fantasy literary genres, it is also an intellectual project that challenges colonialist, imperialist conceptions of the possibilities for Black life while also illustrating the complexity of how embedded we are within social relations at the familial, local, and national levels (Womack, 2013). It acknowledges how the monsters, like Rena's parasite, cause as much terror and horror as the indifference of those with power, such as Leanna's doctor. This story was inspired by the works of Octavia E. Butler, N.K. Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, and Nalo Hopkinson, among others, which explore Black female lives and futures alongside the weird, the uncanny, and the fantastic.

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