Drinking wine with Lucas at the Grove Brasserie, Simone remembered the opening night in minute detail, as vividly as if it had been last week. She remembered standing barefoot in the wings behind Carla as the auditorium unexpectedly filled up, her hands on her friend’s waist, both of them wearing red rayon skirts and sleeveless leotards. Carla told Simone she felt unlike herself. Their faces were heavily made up. She looked like a startled brown doll. Every few moments as they tried to peep past the curtain at the audience, Simone went up onto the tips of her toes, a habit left over from ballet.

The audience were local Grove folk, curious others, fascinated middle-class liberals, a dance and arts in-crowd with smoky eyes and James Dean haircuts. Toreth was there, sitting dubiously with the other family members of the cast in the front row. Florence had made a point of not coming. She’d attended the dress rehearsal but had been embarrassed by Antoney parading around in his Shango skirt and makeup. The drums, the deity theme, to her it was nothing more than a form of Obeah dancing like that practised in St Thomas back home, and she’d said as much. The two of them were not speaking, a state of affairs that would worsen over time.

The skins of the drums had been spread with talcum powder to create a mist as they were played. The Wonder’s opening chant stilled the final rustlings from the crowd. Overall there were few hiccups. Bluey had his robe on back to front but he kept time. Forgotten steps were mostly well styled, and Antoney was a star as Shango, blazing across the stage his arms gleaming (You’ll be mighty strong one day, you’ll make a fine Shango). It was a mystery what had happened to his voice. Every show they did from then on he lost it fifteen minutes before curtain-up and didn’t get it back until somewhere
during the interval. It was better for everyone that way, Simone said.

She remembered that the electricity between Carla and Antoney that night was almost visible. You felt that should you pass between them you might trip over something – it was as if the apprehension and the cave-like atmosphere of the theatre had put a spell on them both. Any time Carla came near Antoney his eyes would soften. While she and Simone were standing there in the wings in their Shango costumes Simone became aware of a certain charge behind her, and turned to find Antoney lurking a few feet away from them. However strong this chemistry was, though, it seemed to act as a barrier between them because they hardly spoke to one other all evening. It wasn’t until the closing dance, Blues House, that they were finally able to communicate.

This was everyone’s favourite ballet. Six dancers (Antoney, Ekow, Ricardo; Carla, Simone and Milly) the men in fedoras, the women in gold-sequined tops and white chiffon scarves, jiving and skipping through a series of dizzying, eclectic vignettes set to a soundtrack comprising the Maytals, Lord Tanamo and Nina Simone. There were sculpted hands and statuesque heads, loose hips and rustic arms. In the middle of the piece was a full-group sequence using a glittered aluminium disc as a tossing prop, featuring Antoney’s signature motif of tapping the floor, the accelerating stroking of the lap, then the rising up and tumbling forward, here in a festive mood. He and Carla closed the piece with their duet. It was the high point of the evening. As soon as the two of them were alone together on the stage with Nina’s mournful voice, having sloped Kumina-style from each wing to meet in the middle, that chemistry they’d been skirting around for days, weeks, months, took over, and it seemed as though they actually were in an empty room, aware of nothing else but each other, and the audience was looking in through a keyhole. As Oscar would describe it, from his position standing at the back there was something mildly
pornographic about watching them. In all his years in dance he’d never seen anything quite so erotic, so tangibly passionate. Toreth looked away. Their bodies slid against each other always in contact, in various renditions of an embrace. They appeared boneless and sublime in the haze of heat that rose up from the footlights, Carla’s arms long and hypnotic. They were greater than themselves. When he lifted her up in the red light and pressed his face into her ribs it was the supreme moment, the point where Carla knew, she later told Simone (‘the poor misguided darling’), that this was the man for her.

It was the best they’d ever done it. Oscar was overjoyed. The applause that followed was rich and aromatic. It sounded to Antoney exactly the same as when his mother was cooking and she lost the thread of what she was doing and the onions fried short of oil so she added water. You know that sound I’m talking about?

‘You’re so weird,’ said Carla, lying in the crook of his arm at four a.m.