

Blue Waters Are for Drowning

My mother and Flash were conspiring.

From where I sat, five steps above them, bent over my copy-books, I had seen her set the hot iron back unto the flat stone next to the coal-pot, still brimming with hot, ashy balls, before moving to sit next to him on the bench just inside the kitchen door. Minutes before, Flash had come into our house through the front door, a practice he had begun only since his recent return from America.

My mother did not see him stoop to brush his wet lips against my forehead; she did not see me close my eyes as I inhaled the scent of almonds in his hair. It was all too quick, too fleeting.

I lowered my head, pretending to focus on the essay I was supposed to be writing, as he skipped down the steps to my mother. How my ears burned as I tried to listen to them talk, but I heard only whispers.

Two worrying weeks passed before I would come to know for certain that in their conclave of shushes and inclined shoulders, their bent heads affirming “uhnnms,” then an abrupt silence when I came down to dip a cup of water from the drinking-bucket near the back door, after two miserable weeks of wonder, during which my mother had avoided the questions in my eyes, and turned her face away from the words on the tip of my tongue, I learned that they had decided my fate.

To my mother, Flash’s re-entry into our lives was a lucky glance from the gods who had abandoned us after my father had finally left. Pa had taken off a few times before, only to return, for brief periods, with cracked words, sharp cuffs, drunken spells and hard strides through the house in search of things he never found, no matter how many cupboards or drawers he emptied. His final departure would cause my days at secondary school to end. After that term, there would be no more money to pay fees, buy my uniform, or my books.

Then came Flash with his suitcase of presents, back from a six-month work spell in Dundee, Florida, where he had gone to pick oranges. In his suitcase were small vials of rose cologne for my mother, dollies for my younger sisters, and two woolen sweaters for me. He slipped me a package wrapped in white crepe paper, behind my mother’s back. I hid it in the latrine underneath the pile of old newspapers until I could open it. I found seven shiny panties: one red, one blue, one yellow, one green, one white, one black, one pink; individually rolled, each with a day of the week embroidered on the right thigh side. Against my cheeks I touched the pink one Sunday and its caress was silk. Over the grey chambray pair I was wearing, I tried on the black—for Friday—before re-wrapping them all in the crinkled paper. Back in the house, I slipped them into my schoolbag. A few evenings later,

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he and my mother sat together, whispering.

Flash had come to our village to work as the watchman of the mango estate at the back of our house when I was twelve. I knew, right away, that I was going to hate him. With five children and a band of ten to twelve grandchildren living in our small house, the place I found contentment and solitude was the mango estate. I would climb my favorite vert tree from where I could look over the valley to the sea beyond. In my imaginings I saw the waves lashing against the big ships that were taking people from Port-of-Spain, up through the Bocas, beyond Venezuela, past the small islands, bound for New York; to the realization of all my dreams.

When I was younger, I used to dream of England. My brother Mervyn had taken a ship to England five years before, leaving us with promises of dollies and fine English clothes that would make the girls in the village stare at us with cokie-eyes of envy. But after the first foreign envelope that contained a brief note about his safe arrival, we heard nothing from him. Every Christmas, my sisters and I prayed to hear his voice come over the radio when the BBC broadcast greetings from relatives in England. Our prayers were never answered. When I read, in my schoolbook, a lament in Charles Kingsley's poem, "The Last Buccaneer", I understood why.

*Oh, England is a pleasant place for them that's rich and high;
But England is a cruel place for such poor folks as I . . .*

My brother must be in a poorhouse, I imagined, just like the children in that Charles Dickens book, so I set my heart on America, where all things were possible, even divine.

Near the beach where my father used to take us for a sea bath was the American Military Base, and keeping guard were soldiers who would wink and smile at us. They were mysterious, from a land of grand boulevards filled with shops where I would spend the money I would make after I had sent for my mother and my sisters to live with me in a mansion. Up in my mango tree, my dreams were safe until Flash came to put up a fence around the estate, and a 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' sign.

From the first day he came into our yard to greet my mother politely—bringing, of course, a basket of calabash, vert, starch, and the sweetest mangoes in the world—from the moment he flashed his gleaming white teeth on my mother, teased her about what-I-don't-know—to make her laugh so long that she had to wipe happy tears from her eyes, from the minute he opened his mouth to speak to me in that lilting Grenadian accent, a taste to my ear like honey in bush tea, I knew my mother and I were lost. My mother saved food for him, washed his jeans and white tee-shirts, and on any given evening, as I came toward our house round the bend in the road, her laughter would ripple over me like quiet rain, and I would be grateful to Flash for bringing her out of the place of silence to which she had descended after Pa left.

He was thin and tall, and he smiled so often I used to wonder about the pleasures he must have found in the world. Long nights I spent thinking about him, my ripening teenage body aching for his touch. He must have been twenty years older than me, and he had been places and done things I only dreamed about. When I thought about him, and it

was often, I got so dizzy that, in spite of his permission, I stopped going up the hill out of embarrassment that he would see me shake, and would laugh at the storm passing through a single tree.

When he came by our house in his tight blue dungarees tucked into tall, black boots, a sack over his shoulders with gifts of zaboccas, oranges, cassava, sweet potatoes—any fruit or ground provision in season on the estate—for my mother, I was usually bent over my homework. My eyes would dart from difficult algebra problems to his face. He would wink. He would smile, quickly. He would, I knew, read my heart. We carried on like that for months, with my mother staying up later and later during the picking season to wait for his late arrival, and I, intent on keeping her company, hoping in quiet desperation for a touch from him, would have willingly propped my eyelids open with small stick, just to stay awake. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the novel I was reading, only increased my agony. I had managed to get it from its hiding place after weeks of hunting it down. Jean, my sister-in-law, had forbidden me to read it; had refused to respond to my questions about the lines she had underlined in red, or why she snapped its covers when I approached. I watched her with a vigilance the CIA and KGB would admire, until one morning, just after she had left for work, I pulled it from under her mattress.

My fingers parted its worn pages to come to those sentences so carefully underlined, sentences about a woodsman who loved a married woman named Connie, who, Lady though she was, stole away to his small home in the woods to thread the hair at the root of his belly with wild flowers. Forget-me-nots.

There was more, underlined, and my devouring eyes fed on them. Bold, graphic sentences about sex and love and desire and all the unmentionables had been consuming me for months, and I was so happy that I was not a Catholic like my friend Claudette who would have to confess it all on Saturday to the priest who certainly knew the sound of her voice and would look oddly at her on Sunday when she knelt at the altar for communion. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* became my bible.

When Flash took leave to join a group of workers selected to go to Florida to pick oranges in Dundee, I worried that he would slip away from the fields, and disappear in America as other men had been rumored to do. But just as the mangoes had begun to ripen, he came back, and I hummed a calypso as my mother began to laugh again.

He left for Grenada a few days after his quiet conversation with my mother, and the day after my last day in school my mother told me “Flash want to talk to you about something important. He leave money for me to buy you the boat ticket.” It did not occur to me to question my mother. I could read her eyes.

Under my skirts and bodices in my grip, I tucked the package of panties for each day of the week, minus the one for Saturday, which I put on.

When the boat docked, Flash was not there to greet me. Instead, he had sent a friend named Philip, who, after telling me with a grin that Flash had described me well, said he was to take me in his taxi to Flash's house where I was to wait until he came back from the dentist's. Afraid of throwing up on the boat, I had traveled on an empty stomach but was too embarrassed to tell Philip that I was hungry.

A dizzying drive up a winding road that reminded me of rickrack braid took us far away from the dock and did little to ease the growing pain in my forehead and a grinding in