

SHOW ME A MOUNTAIN

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1966

I TOOK HOLD of the padded paper bag. In both hands.

‘Yu alright?’ She asked.

I nodded.

She crouched down in the aisle at the side of me. Knees held firmly together by her navy blue pencil skirt. Steadying herself with one hand on the seat arm.

‘First time?’

I nodded again.

‘Nothing to it.’ She said. ‘I fly up and down, up and down, week in week out. Not nobody ever lose the contents of their stomach yet. Even if sometimes they feel like they want to.’

I smiled.

‘Don’t you worry about a thing. Captain Byfield know what he doing. Got his wings in the Royal Air Force no less, so that should be good comfort.’ She patted my arm lightly.

‘And I am here to tek extra special care a yu.’

Then she stood up and walked away with her BOAC pillbox hat perched on her head.

I replaced the bag in the seat pocket and sat back, wanting to be reassured by what she'd said to me. Forcing myself to believe that everything was going to be OK.

Gazing out of the window I could see the traffic moving on the ground below. The grey metal staircase being retracted. The dusty flat-bed of the retreating luggage truck. The refrigerated wagon now empty of its pre-prepared food.

But even as I watched all of this, the vision in my mind was of him. Doing the thing I knew he would do. In the haven he knew best. The cathedral. Lying face down, prostrate on the cold, marble tiles in front of the altar. In the darkened gloom. His arms outstretched like the figure hanging on the cross high above him. That was the picture I couldn't shift.

And then there was a sudden lurch and we started to move as the stewardess walked back through the cabin checking that all our seatbelts were securely fastened. She smiled at me briefly, encouragingly. A moment later, a crackling on the Tannoy followed by the captain's instruction 'Please prepare for take-off'.

Palisadoes airport flashed at me as we taxied along the runway. I breathed in deep and slow, because something in my heart knew that this was not farewell. It was goodbye. That is how final it felt. No more lush green hills and gushing waterfalls. No more coconut palms or Bamboo Grove or Fern Gully. No more bougainvillea or hibiscus or wild orchids. No more lignum vitae. No more squeezing between my toes the warm, white sands of Dunns River, or listening to the clicking legs of crickets as evening sets in. No more feeling the salty sea breeze on my face, or tasting it on my lips. Or smelling the sweet, tangy scent of the eucalyptus. No more Negril sunsets watched from a cottage high on the West End cliffs. That was all going. Creeping past me frame by frame through the aeroplane window. Low-rise concrete buildings, shrubbery, scrubland, dry and brown and brittle under the Caribbean sun.

Fading. Evaporating, like the musty dampness of rain lifting off a hot afternoon lawn.

I remembered the card I had posted to Gloria Campbell. The one I'd written days ago and dropped into the mailbox just before the departure gate. In the middle of all the commotion. A regular tourist postcard. With a picture of the Jamaican flag, yellow, black and green, and Dunn's River Falls and a sunset on Negril beach. *Look after him. You were always more of a wife to him than I ever was.*

The engines roared as the plane lifted its nose into the air. The wheels losing contact with the ground. First the front one, followed by the others. Taking me away from Jamaica. So beautiful. So vigorous. So ripe with promise and possibilities. This land of mine that I so loved but did not know how to help. Trained as I was for nothing. Apart from being on the wrong side.

Then there was a sudden surge as we rose above the Blue Mountains and headed north. Away into the clear blue sky. I thought of the half written letter in my bag. Not a blue pre-paid aerogram but actual white airmail paper and an envelope that I would have to stamp and post when I landed. That was the least he deserved.

The 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign flashed off. I reached down to unbuckle my belt and saw the paleness of my hands. Too light to be black. Too Chinese to be white. I shrugged off a shiver. Too late now. I was on my way, having done the only thing I could do. I had made the decision to live.

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1935

I HELD MY breath. Like I was swimming under water. And then I closed my eyes. And let everything wash over me. The muffled sound of their angry voices and the sight of Samson standing there in his white shirt and black bow tie trying to explain to Papa why Mama wanted me removed from the premises. Right now. This instant.

The premises. Where the smell of the opium I can still remember. Sweet and heavy like burning maple syrup. Hanging there in the air. Soaked into the walls. Even though, according to Papa, they stopped smoking it a long time back. Not that he ever smoked it himself. So he said.

And as well as the opium, there was the mah-jongg. All day, every day. From early morning until late night. With players taking their tiles from the wall and tossing others gently away into the centre. Not slapping them hard and loud on the table like a game of dominoes. But picking and choosing and rejecting them just as deliberately. Players sometimes pinching my face or rapping me on the head with their knuckles to be friendly and funny. Other times giving me *sore foot* money to celebrate their luck, when they had won. All with an endless supply of jasmine tea and food, cooked in the lean-to out back. Steaming rice

and sausage, boiled chicken, roast duck and sugared pork, pak choi, choy sum, chicken soup.

To keep everyone nourished while they set up for the next game.

‘This instant? That is how she order me?’

‘I cyan say nothing ‘bout it Mr Henry. That is what she say to me.’

And then he reached out and grabbed me, Samson, by my nine-year-old arm and yanked so hard I fell off the chair on to the floor and Papa leapt to his feet overturning his stool. And Mr Lowe came running from the kitchen to see what all the commotion was about, adding to the shouting himself and waving the *dow mah* in his hand like he just left off chopping up a duck to come and run off an intruder in his cookhouse. Wearing his long white cotton apron hanging half way down his calf, and his little wispy beard, all grey and stringy like it was a big effort for him to make it grow.

‘Tell Miss Cicely if she want the child she will have to come fetch her. Herself.’

Pausing after ‘her’ like he was preparing himself to say ‘herself’ with the weighty emphasis he wanted to make his point. And then he took hold of my other arm so then I was being split in two. Samson on one side. Papa on the other.

‘She say di place not suitable fah a child.’

True. But it was my father’s substitute home from home. His not-so-secret hideaway from the life he was trying to avoid.

‘Leave the child alone.’ That was Mr Lowe trying to break Samson’s hold of my arm. Twisting his hand so that Samson’s grip made a burning sensation on my skin.

‘No need Lowe. Not your problem.’ That was Papa while he reached for Mr Lowe across the table and snagged the cloth so that everything went crashing to the floor. Blue and white porcelain bowls, rice, soup, boiled chicken and soy sauce everywhere. Smashing and splashing dark, wet stains on to my white cotton socks. Turned down like frilly collars around my ankles because that is how Mama wanted them worn.

Then Samson suddenly let go of me. ‘I never mean to be pulling and tugging at di child like dis Mr Henry. It just dat Miss Cicely waiting in di buggy outside and I cyan step on to dat veranda without Miss Fay at my side. My life not worth it.’

Papa nodded. I waited.

‘Go on.’ He said dropping my hand and motioning his head towards the door. ‘Yu mother expecting you.’

As I walked away I turned and looked back at him. Papa. Standing there so tall and broad. Taller and broader than most other Chinese men. And I wondered, as I had wondered so often over the years, how such a strong, healthy, successful businessman like him got to be so beaten down by a woman like her.

‘Get yourself in here.’ Her voice was firm and hard.

Samson held my hand as I climbed up into the *mah cha* and then he got in up front with the driver who cracked the leather reins to set the horse moving.

‘How many times have I told you to stay away from that place?’ She slapped my knee. Hard enough to sting. ‘How many times? As if enough prayers not being said over your head. You have to tempt the devil at every turn.’

‘I was with Papa.’

‘Don’t you sass me young lady.’ She slapped my knee again. Harder this time. Leaving behind the red mark of her ample palm. She shifted around and rearranged herself, trying to get comfortable in a seat designed for slender Chinamen, not African women of my mother’s proportions.

The driver moved his buggy steadily in the late-morning heat. Through North Parade, along Slipe Road, past Cross Roads market, and headed uptown along Old Hope Road to Lady Musgrave Road. Mama and me comfortably shaded in the back under the black canvass canopy. The driver and Samson with the sun beating down on their heads.

When we got home she ordered me into the house. Up the six whitewashed concrete steps to the veranda, furnished with its wicker armchairs and occasional tables and edged with a flowerbed of jungle geraniums and red ginger, and at the far end, a giant angel's trumpet. I walked across the squeaky-clean tile floor, towards the front door. Breathing as I went the uptown air that was a hundred times more refined than the odour of Chinatown with its crammed streets of cookhouses, grocery stores, bakeries, laundries, betting shops, barbers, hardware stores, dry goods, and gambling dens. And where I imagined they were still holding the pipe over the lamp. Not only the locals, but English soldiers wearing the King's uniform and rich white men, and sometimes women, who walked the streets of downtown Kingston searching out every opportunity to indulge themselves.

Miss Allen was sitting on the veranda eating a mango from our tree. Slicing off the flesh and taking it into her mouth from the sharp edge of the knife. Leaning forward and letting the sugary juice drop on to the floor like it didn't matter because some maid would soon clean it up.

'So yu find her then?'

'It not that hard. Her father only have but one bolt hole.'

I stopped and watched as Miss Allen reached a bony black hand into her mouth. Then she pulled out a stringy piece of fruit lodged between her back teeth and wiped it on the cloth napkin resting in her lap.

'Di mango dem sweet dis year.'

'Yes, my dear.' And then Mama pushed me in the back and steered me towards the piano room.

She kept the bamboo cane in the bag with her embroidery. At the side of the armchair. It was short. Maybe a foot and a half. But when she brought it down on your palm or leg it had the rip of a cat-o'-nine. When properly administered, with the appropriate force and

whipping wrist action that takes advantage of the natural spring in the wood. No need for swinging space. So she said.

‘Yu think yu too big to cry? Is that what yu think?’ And down came her cat-o’-nine once again. This time against my shoulder as I dropped my hand and turned my body away from her.

‘Nine years old and yu think yu a big woman. Come here.’ She grabbed my arm and spun me around. ‘Hold out your hand. Higher.’ Thwack. Two more times. Thwack, thwack. The tears rolled down my cheeks as my palm reddened with the rising welts. But my mouth, I kept shut. As tight as I could. Biting my teeth together. Locking my jaw.

She dragged me by the arm to the piano stool and forced me to sit down. ‘Stay there ‘till I come tell yu to move.’ And then wheeling around as she walked away. ‘Yu hear me?’

She paused by the armchair and wiped her brow with the back of her stick-hand. And then she called out. ‘Sissy.’ Who moments later appeared in the doorway.

‘Take her clothes.’

‘Miss?’

‘You hear me. Every last stitch.’

‘You want me to strip the child, Miss Cicely?’

‘Sissy, I pay you to do what I tell you to do. So don’t act like you gone deaf on me.’

Mama bent down and replaced the cane, tucking it carefully into the bag so that neither embroidery nor threads would become pulled or tangled. She raised herself again to full height.

‘Sissy, I mean today.’

But I didn’t make Sissy have to undress me. I just removed everything and handed them to her. The little pink shorts and white cotton blouse with the short sleeves, a little too tight on the arm. And the still slightly damp ankle socks.

‘Tek her panties as well.’

‘Miss Cicely I don’t think...’

‘I don’t pay you to think, Sissy. I pay you to do.’

But Sissy just stood there so in the end Mama walked over to me and with one hand reached for the elastic waistband and dragged my panties down to my ankles. Then she shoved me lightly in the chest forcing me to step back. She bent down and picked up my underwear and handed it to Sissy and said. ‘How difficult was that?’

I stood glued to the floor as Mama directed Sissy out of the door. Then she stepped out herself, taking the key with her, which she turned in the lock on the other side.

That is when I cried. Actually let out a full-lunged howl. Biting on my forefinger to keep my anguish as quiet as I could. And then I waited. With her half-embroidered table runner wrapped around my waist. Listening to the rain pounding on the roof as it did so often early afternoon. Fiddling with the cane. Turning it over in my hand the way I turned over in my mind what it was that she so hated about me.

A little later when the rain stopped Sissy was outside tapping against the glass with her fingernail. I twisted the catch and pulled up the window.

‘Here.’ She passed me a shawl and then a tray with a hot patty and a glass of milk. ‘Yu mama gone wid Miss Allen and di key. God knows where, or what time she planning on coming back.’ Then she started down the ladder only to stop and return a few seconds later.

‘You alright?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yu want pee pee?’

‘If I do I will knock on the door.’

‘And she come back an hear yu!’ Sissy disappeared down the ladder. Next thing, she was back, with a galvanised-zinc pail that she handed to me through the window.

‘Use this and afterwards let it down outside. Yu see dis?’ She showed me the long piece of rope she had tied to the handle. ‘Let it down gentle and I will come pick it up later.’ She looked down to watch her step before reaching into the front pocket of her apron for a puzzle book and pencil, which she passed to me.

‘In case yu need something to tek yu mind off things.’ She smiled weakly. ‘It will pass, Miss Fay. It will pass.’

I sat still on the stool. Didn’t tinker with the keys on the piano. Didn’t smell the pink English roses in the vase or re-position the china ballerina on the shelf. Didn’t stack the sheet music that Mama couldn’t play even though she kept buying more and more of it. Didn’t open and close the chiffon curtains to see them swish along the rail. Didn’t plump up the cushions in the armchair or flatten out the flowers in the creases of the material. Didn’t run my hands over the silk rug on the floor. Didn’t do the puzzles Sissy gave me. Didn’t do anything. I didn’t even use Sissy’s pail.

When Mama came home she unlocked the door and walked away. I got up. Tried the handle. When I stepped out I found my clothes folded in a neat pile resting on a chair by the door. All except the socks, which Sissy had replaced with a dry pair. Just like the clean panties slipped between the shorts and blouse.

At dinner Stanley, home for the school holidays, was silent as always, and Daphne cried. That is all she did. Ever since she was born and they brought her back from the hospital. Two years of crying. Except when Sissy hushed her. Or when she was asleep.

Later on, out on the veranda, I told Stanley what happened.

‘So what is new?’

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘She never drag me outta di cookhouse before, Stanley. Not like dat. Actually come downtown. Bring herself in a buggy from mighty Lady Musgrave Road to di likes a Barry Street to fetch me.’

‘She nuh like yu being down there. Yu know dat.’

‘Being down there or being with him?’

‘Papa?’

I nodded. Stanley was squatting on the floor cutting out a piece of wood to make his model aeroplane. A box kit he got from America. Because Stanley loves aeroplanes. All he wants to do is go to England and join the Royal Air Force. But he is only seventeen years old.

He stopped the knife moving. ‘Yu should learn to leave well alone. Just do what she want.’

‘She strip me, Stanley. Stark naked.’

He looked up at me. Narrowed his eyes. ‘She do that?’ Then he said ‘Yu should shut yu mouth.’

‘About what?’

‘’Bout why she carry on so bad wid yu. How many years yu been asking dat same question? And nuh get no answer.’

‘Long, long time.’

‘So what yu keep asking fah?’

Sissy stepped aside to let me stand squarely at the board as I took up the iron.

‘Yu pester me but I shouldn’t be letting yu iron no kerchief or pillowslip like this. Yu know that?’

‘Is OK. Mama not going find out.’ I pushed the hot, heavy metal back and forth as carefully, smoothly and precisely as I could. Standing out back where Sissy had the flatirons

heating on the fire. Two of them so that as one cooled she could switch to the other. Holding the handle with a thick, padded white cloth.

‘Why yu think Mama beat me so?’

‘Pay attention to what yu doing. I don’t want no burning here today. Not you or these clothes.’

‘Sissy.’

‘Miss Fay, yu keep asking me this and I tell yu I don’t know.’

‘But it not true, Sissy is it.’

‘No?’

‘Because yu always know everything.’ She came over and took the iron from me. ‘Yu think maybe it because I light and Stanley dark like her? Why she nuh pick on him?’

She thumped the iron down on its heel. ‘What would mek yu say a thing like dat?’

‘Just asking that is all. Because Stanley got a different daddy. Is that it?’

She lifted the iron again, finished off the pillowcase I’d been pressing and turned her attention to the right sleeve of one of Papa’s shirts. Then she said ‘It got nothing to do wid you. Dat is all I am going to say.’

‘So who it to do wid?’

Sissy puckered up her lips and gave me no answer, just carried on moving her arm back and forth. And then she put the shirt on a hanger. And hung the hanger on the rail to air. And reached for another shirt that had been sprinkled and rolled and packed tight in the basket of clothes. In readiness for the ironing board.

I sat down on the nearby wooden stool. ‘I remember the first time yu know. She lock me in the piano room. Like it was yesterday. The day she bring Stanley inside to talk to him.’

‘Hush yuself now. Dis got nothing to do wid you excepting being a burden yu have to bear. A heavy one fah sure. But like I keep telling yu. It will pass. Believe me.’

How many times I'd replayed that day in my mind. School vacation time, two years ago. Porridge, boiled egg, bread and butter for breakfast. Sitting in the yard watching Stanley fix the bicycle and then pushing it all the way up to the top of the road. Settling myself in place. Feet resting on the pedals. Stanley holding on to the back of the saddle and running behind. Down and down the hill we went, until he let go and moments later I was in a heap again. Right knee bleeding.

'Yu supposed to balance the thing.'

'Alright. Next time tell me when yu going let go. Just shout "now" and I will be ready.' So we'd do it again, over and over until the blood ran down my leg and Stanley pushed the bicycle, with me sitting on it, back home for Sissy to have a look.

'What the two a yu been doing?' I was sitting on the hard, straight-back chair in the kitchen while she bathed my wound and smothered it with iodine.

'Learning to ride the bicycle, Sissy.'

'So yu learn yet?' She measured the bandage before cutting it to size.

Stanley laughed. 'She never going learn.' He walked off. When he came back he was carrying a grape soda from the icebox, for me. Sissy wrapped up my knee, firming everything with a tight squeeze of her hand.

'Well next time tek off yu clothes. Skin mend itself. This thing...' she held up my torn skirt, 'somebody going have to put needle and thread to.' Then she said 'It nearly lunchtime anyway, so go wash up now.'

Afterwards, the Barretts came over. Dudley and Elizabeth. And Peter Malcolm too. We were playing musical chairs on the veranda when Mama came home.

'Stanley, come inside I want to talk to you.' He got up and followed her into the living room. The others smelt trouble and left. I waited. But after all her hushed tones behind a closed door, there was silence. A long, long silence. And I wanted Stanley back. So I

knocked and entered the room in one single, flowing motion. And what I saw was Stanley standing there with his hands loose at his side and Mama sitting in the chair with her elbows on the arms and hands together, fingertips meeting in an arc. What was she saying? I didn't know because as soon as I opened the door she jumped to her feet and grabbed me. I never knew she could move so fast, covering the width of the room in no seconds flat. And then she marched me across the dining room into the piano room where she was reaching for her cane and I was putting out my hand. And the bamboo was landing with a sting.

But no matter how many times I replayed it there was nothing I could understand. What sense does a child make of these things? Stanley stopped talking to her though. So I knew it was serious. Oh, he would say a good morning or good evening. Pass the rice or the chicken. Please and thank you. But that was it. And if she came into a room he would get up and walk out. He couldn't even bear to look at her.

It made me remember the other time. Two years before that. The morning I went into her bedroom running an errand for Sissy to collect the empty glass from Mama's bedside. The water she kept by her each night. And there she was, sitting on the edge of the bed with Stanley standing between her legs. Soothing him she was. Rubbing his back like he was upset about something and she was saying 'There, there'. Except she wasn't actually saying anything at all. It was more like she was singing, or humming softly to him. The minute she turned and saw me, there was a horror on her face. Deep shock, like she'd seen a duppy. And I ran because there was some dread that she had put into me. I locked myself in my bedroom and didn't come out until dinner time. And afterwards, I didn't say anything to anybody about it. Not a single word to not a single soul. Not even to Stanley or Sissy. Because he was thirteen years old and I knew I had seen something I shouldn't have. I just didn't know what it was. And it was after that, that she started to find fault with me at every turn. That is what I knew. Knew it in my heart. Never mind what everybody said about it, making out that her

spite started when the blond hair I was born with turned to brown. I knew that wasn't the truth. Not the whole truth.

After the day Mama told Stanley the secret he was out of the house most of the time. And even though we would still sometimes play cards or checkers or dominoes, in secret because Mama thought it was sinful, mostly it was just him and Dudley and sometimes Peter, going off to do whatever it was that fifteen-year-old boys do, saying to me anytime I asked about going along 'You stay at home. Get Elizabeth to come over.'

But Elizabeth didn't come over any more. Mama put a stop to it. 'The child is rude.' That is what she said. 'I don't want her in this house.'

'I could go over to her house.'

'I don't want you mixing with her. Find a decent girl to spend your time with.'

But there was never anyone decent enough for Mama. Every girl I brought home from school was too noisy, or insolent, or stupid. Or too black.

'What is too black?'

'I am not here to argue with you, child. I don't want the girl in the house. That is all there is to it.'

'But why, Mama?'

'If you think I owe you any explanation young lady then you had better think again.'

I looked at Mama's African head that she had the hairdresser straighten every week with the hot iron and Vaseline. And each morning fight and argue with the maid because nothing she did could satisfy Mama's idea of what perfectly relaxed hair should look like.

'Are you too black, Mama? Because of your hair? Is Stanley too black because he had a black papa? What about Daphne? Dark like she is. Even though Papa her daddy. Is she too black?'

‘Who do you think you are? A little bit of light Chinese skin and some yellow hair and you think you can talk to me any which way you choose?’

No dinner. That was my punishment on that day, and every other day when she lacked the strength or inclination to raise her cane. So I would sit outside on the back steps listening to the clatter of plates and knives and forks, and wait. Wait. Because I knew she would change her mind. That sooner or later I would hear her voice and it would say ‘Fay, come and get your dinner.’ And when that happened I didn’t want to be out of earshot. I wanted to be there. Ready to spring to my feet and take my place at the table.

But she never did change her mind. Not even once. Not ever. Stanley would save me scraps from his plate, smuggled in his napkin. Sissy would rescue leftovers from the table or sometimes even give me her own meal. Mama? She never showed one ounce of concern. But still I waited. Never straying further than I thought her voice could carry.

‘What are you talking about? Boarding school.’

‘I’m going to board, Fay.’

How could he leave me like this? ‘Why Stanley?’

‘It’s better.’

I was sitting on the swing under the mango tree. He was lying on the lawn. On his back. Propped on his elbows. The sun was setting. Evening coming in. Crickets and croaking frogs.

‘How will it be better?’

He looked down, plucked at a few blades of grass by his side. Scattered them on the breeze. ‘She’ll be better with you when I’m gone.’

‘So is it to do with you? Why she hates me?’

‘She doesn’t hate you, Fay. She’s your mother.’

After that, the rain didn't bother me, even though it went on day after day for weeks like the whole Caribbean Sea was pouring down from the sky. To me, it was a welcomed excuse for sitting inside with my puzzles and colouring pens. Stanley stayed at home too. Sometimes. And sometimes Dudley and Peter came over. But the only outside activity was riding the bicycles, which I could do now, through the flooded streets, legs outstretched hip-high. Or making paper boats from old newspapers and sailing them into the unknown.

The night the gullies burst their banks the water washed away homes and drowned the people sleeping in them. So Sissy said. Twelve inches of rain in just twenty-four hours that damaged the mains, which is why we could only get water out of the pipe certain times of the day. A shortage, Sissy said. They had to ration it. The people? Sissy said that's how it goes. That's what happens if your house is too feeble to withstand the weather.

The day Stanley left I threw my arms around him and wouldn't let go. 'I'll be back for Christmas. Promise. It's only a few weeks away.' But I couldn't say anything. Couldn't form words with a mouth so full of wailing as he tore himself away from me and headed for the waiting taxi cab.

Stanley did come home for the holidays, but he wasn't the same. He was lost to me. I could see it in his eyes.