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I.

The Art of Marriage

Saturday, 1 May 2010

Morris is suffering from that affliction known as teetotalism. Oh, yes, not another drop of drink is goin' pass his lips before he leaves this earth in a wooden box, he said just now when we was in the dancehall, Mighty Sparrow blasting 'Barack the Magnificent' out of the sound system.

Last time it happen was when he decided to become vegetarian, which was rather amusing, as that fella has spent the whole of his life stuffing his face with every part of an animal except its hair and teeth. Anyways, all of a sudden Morris started throwing exotic words into the conversation like 'soya', 'tofu' and 'Quorn' and asking me how *I* would feel if someone chop off mi leg and cook it for supper? I didn't even deign to reply. Apparently he'd watched one of those documentaries about battery chickens being injected with growth hormones and thereby deduced he was goin' turn into a woman, grow moobies and the like.

'Yes, Morris,' I said. 'But after seventy-something years eating chicken, I notice you still don't need no bra. So, tell me, how you work that one out?'

Get this now: within the month I found myself walking past Smokey Joe's fried-chicken joint on Kingsland High Street, when who did I see inside, tearing into a piece of chicken, eyes disappearing into the back of his head in the

throes of ecstasy like he was at an Ancient Greek bacchanalia being fed from a platter of juicy golden chicken thighs by a nubile Adonis? The look on his face when I burst in and catch him with all of that grease running down his chin. Laugh? Yes, Morris, mi bust mi-self laughing.

So there we was in the dancehall amid all of those sweaty, horny youngsters (relatively speaking) swivelling their hips effortlessly. And there was I trying to move my hips in a similar hula-hoop fashion, except these days it feels more like opening a rusty tin of soup with an old-fashioned tin opener. I'm trying to bend my knees without showing any pain on my face and without accidentally goin' too far down, because I know I won't be able to get up again, while also tryin' to concentrate on what Morris is shouting in my ear.

'I mean it this time, Barry. I can't deal with all of this intoxication no more. My memory getting so bad I think Tuesday is Thursday, the bedroom is the bathroom, and I call my eldest son by my younger son's name. Then, when I make a cup of tea, I leave it standing 'til it cold. You know what, Barry? I goin' start reading some of that Shakespeare you love so much and doing crossword. What is more, I goin' join gym on pensioner discount so I can have sauna every day to keep my circulation pumping good, because between you, me and these four walls . . .'

He stopped and looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was eavesdropping. Right, Morris. Two old geezers talking about the trials and tribulations of being geriatric and the whole room of gyrating youth wants to know about it?

'I suddenly noticed last week, mi have varicose vein,' he whispered into my ear so close he spat into it and I had to wipe it out with my finger.

‘Morris,’ I say. ‘Varicose vein is what happen when you is ole man. Get used to it. As for forgetfulness? Likely you got early dementia and nothing you can do about that except eat more oily fish. As for staying sober . . .’

I shut up because Morris, with his eyebrows scrunched up pitifully, suddenly looked like a puppy dog. Usually he will banter right back, whack me on the head with the proverbial cricket bat. Morris is a sensitive fella but not hypersensitive, because that really would make him more woman than man – especially at a certain time of the month when they get that crazed look in they eyes and you better not say the wrong thing, or the right thing in the wrong way. Actually, even if you say the right thing in the right way they might come after you with a carving knife.

‘Don’t worry yourself. I is joking, man.’ I punched him in the chest. ‘If you was goin’ off your head, I would be the first to tell you. Nothing to worry about, my friend. You as sane as you ever was.’ Then I mumbled out of the side of my mouth, ‘Which ain’t saying much.’

Morris just stared at me in that wounded way that he really should-a grown out of about sixty-nine years ago.

I worked out he must be in the throes of alcohol-withdrawal symptoms. Not that I got direct experience of this withdrawal phenomenon, because I ain’t never gone a day without the sweet sauce blessing my lips. Difference between me and Morris is that most days that is all I do, wet my lips with a taster, a chaser, a little something to warm me up. A sip of Appleton Rum, a swig of Red Stripe or Dragon Stout, mainly to support the intemperance industry over there on the islands. Call it an act of benevolence. Only on a Saturday night do I give in to my *bacchanalianese* tendencies. In Morris’s case, he don’t consume the drink;

the drink consumes him. Pickled. That man is *pickled*. The ratio of alcohol to blood in him must be 90 to 10, a-true. Not that he should worry, he's one of those pissheads who look good on it.

Finally, he decided to lighten up and crack a smile. Nobody can be depressed around me for long. Yesss. I am the Great Mood Levitator. I am the Human Valium.

'We veterans now,' I tell him. 'We have to adjust. What is more, we must believe that our best years are ahead of us, not behind us. Only way to deal with this non-stop train hurtling towards oblivion is to be positive. Is this not the Age of Positive Thinking? You know what they say, glass either half full or half empty. Let we make it half full. Do we have a deal, my man?'

I hold out my hand for a shake but instead he gets the wrong end of the stick and starts acting like a teenager, attempting one of those hip-hop, fist-pump, finger-flick handshakes that we both get all wrong and anybody looking will think we are a couple of pathetic old *dudes* trying to be cool.

Morris, oh, my dear Morris, what I goin' do with you? You have always been a worrier. Who is it who always tell you 'Morris, take it off your chest and put it on mine?'

Now look at you, that welterweight body of yours – selfsame one that used to do the 'Morris Shuffle' around your opponents in the boxing ring to become Junior Boxing Champ of Antigua in 1951 – is still mighty strong in spite of a piddling varicose vein or two. You still the chap I used to know. Still got impressive *musculature* on your arms. Still got a stomach more concave than convex. Still got no lines except those around your neck, which nobody will notice anyways except me.

But, Morris, there is one thing I does know for sure about you – your heart and mind has always liked to travel on that sea-goin’ vessel them-a-call Lady Booze. No way are you goin’ jump ship for dry land at this late stage in life and end up marooned on a desert island called Sobriety.

This I know without a doubt because I, Barrington Jedidiah Walker, Esq., have known you, Monsieur Morris Courtney de la Roux, since we was both high-pitched, smooth-cheeked mischief-makers waiting for we balls to drop.

I ain’t complaining, because, while Morris is planning on bettering himself, he chauffeurs me home in his Ford Fiesta, as I am too plastered to get behind the wheel of a car and negotiate the high roads and low roads of East London without getting arrested by the boys in blue. That’s one thing I does miss – drinking, driving and getting away with it, as we all did in the sixties and seventies. No CCTV cameras silently ogling you with their Cyclopean eyes three hundred times a day as you go about your business in London Town. Soon as I leave my door I *watched*. Big Brother come into we lives and none of us objecting. I can’t even pick a booga out of mi own nose without it being filmed for posterity.

Morris drives me up to my yard, No. 100 Cazenove Road, Stoke Newington, waits to make sure I go in the right gate and don’t collapse in the gutter, then drives off quietly in first gear with a cheery backhand wave.

He should be coming in for some spiced cocoa and some ole man’s gentle comfort.

Instead, my heart sinks because I goin’ into the lion’s den.

This is the story of we lives.

Hellos and goodbyes.

★

I tiptoe up the noisy gravel path and, as Carmel has the hearing of a bat, I am in the Danger Zone. I turn the key in the lock, push open the door and wait, cock-eared. In the old days Carmel sometimes used to bolt it, forcing me to haul my arse over the side-gate and sit on the lawn mower in the shed, waiting for the dawn to rise and for her wrath to descend. Until I kicked the garden side-door down one time to show her that she can't keep the king out of his castle no more.

Once safely inside, I take off my jacket and throw it so it hoops over the coat rack to the left of the door. It falls on the floor. Rack must-a moved. I try again. It lands on the stairs. Third time – back of the net! Gotcha! Yesss. You go-wan, Barry. I high-five myself to the cheers of the multitudes meanwhile catching sight in the hall mirror of the 'dashing gentleman', as the English ladies used to coo back in the day. The ones with polite manners that is, as distinct from those trollops who hurled less flattering epithets at a man innocently strolling down the road minding his own business. Never no mind. Those days long gone. I've not been called no names by nobody except the wife for at least twenty years.

I am still a Saga Boy. Still here, thanks be to God. Still spruced up and sharp-suited with a rather manly swagger. Still six foot something with no sign of shrinkage yet. Still working a certain *je ne sais* whatsit. I might have lost the hair on my head, but I still got a finely clipped moustache in the style of old Hollywood romancers. Folk used to tell me I looked like a young Sidney Poitier. Now they say I resemble a (slighty) older Denzel Washington. Who am I to argue? The facts is the facts. Some of us have it, some of us do not. Bring it on, Barry. Bring it on . . .

Seeing as I been acting like a cat burglar in my own home for fifty years, climbing the stairs towards her lair is fraught with anxiety.

The bedroom door is ajar.

I squeeze myself through and creep inside.

First thing I do in the darkness is slide out the gold clip that holds the two tongues of my blue striped tie together. Only decent thing I got when I retired from Ford Motors in Dagenham. After forty years at the coal face mi get a tie, mi get a rubbish-engraved plate, mi get a watch that is more Timex than Rolex, and mi get a clammy handshake and patronizing speech from the Managing Director Mr Lardy Comb-Over in the staff canteen.

‘It is with tremendous sadness, Mr Walker, that we say goodbye to an employee who has given us such dedicated service over such an extended period of time. Your presence on the factory floor has greatly endeared you to your colleagues. You are quite the joker, I hear, quite the anecdotalist, quite the raconteur.’

He paused to study me, like he wasn’t so sure I understood words of five syllables or ones that was a bit Frenchified, then added, ‘Oh, you know, one who regales others with stories.’

Oh, boy, I catch so much fire when people talk down to me like I’m some back-a-bush dumb arse who don’t understand the ins and outs of the Queen’s English. Like I wasn’t educated at Antigua Grammar School, best one in the country. Like all my teachers didn’t come from the colonial mother ship. Like this here Little Englander can’t speak the Queen’s as well as any Big Englander over there, I mean *here*. And so what if me and my people choose to mash up the *h-english linguish* whenever we feel like it, drop our

prepositions with our panties, piss in the pot of correct syntax and spelling, and mangle our grammar *at random*? Is this not our *post-modern, post-colonial* prerogative?

Anyways, when I arrived here on the good ship *Immigrant*, I brought with me a *portmanteau* of school certificates, and the only reason I didn't go to no university was because I didn't score highly enough to get the single government scholarship to a university in England. I been taking evening classes since 1971 to make up for it.

Sociology, Psychology, Archaeology, Oloyology – you name it. English Literature, French Language, *naturellement*. Don't even get me started on Mr Shakespeare, Esq., with *whom* I been having the most satisfying *cerebral* relationship, *sirrah*. I know my Artology too: Miró, Monet, Manet, Man Ray, Matisse, Michelangelo, Murillo, Modigliani, Morandi, Munch, Moore and Mondrian, not to mention the rest of the alphabet. I even dragged Morris to that controversial *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997 to see Emin's slutty bed, Ofili's elephant dung, Hirst's pickled shark and Quinn's bloody head. Morris scoffed, 'I can do better than that.' To which I replied, 'It might be more concept than craft, Morris, but art would be boring if artists still only painted buff male bodies with rock-hard buttocks, juicy lips and dangling protuberances in the style of the Renaissance.'

Although . . . come to think of it, perhaps not . . .

Morris's final word on the matter? 'In that case I'm goin' piss in a bucket and exhibit it as Art with a capital A.'

Morris's problem is he don't like to go too deep. It's not that he's not capable, because that man is smarter than most. He's the one who got the scholarship to study maths at Hull University, but when he got there he didn't like the cold,

didn't like the food, didn't like the course, didn't do the work and, when he was sent down at the end of his second year, didn't want to go home. Lucky fella found work as a book-keeper for a textile wholesaler in Stratford, which was pretty good, seeing it was hard for we people to land such jobs. His boss was a Mr Szapiro, a Polish Jew who'd escaped the Warsaw Ghetto. Morris liked his boss but was bored brainless by the job. Nonetheless, he stayed forty-three years.

All the while, I was getting intellectualized. This here humble engine-fitter can pontificate about all of those chin-stroking armchair philosophizers with the best of them. How Socrates believed we should know ourselves and question everything, break through the limits of we own beliefs. Plato said being a moral person meant not just knowing what is right but choosing it as well. But I eventually realized that if you spend too much time with these Ancient Greek egg-heads, your mind will spin off into the stratosphere. They are so mentalist, you goin' end up demented. So I dropped my philosophy class at Birkbeck and reverted to the most ancient and most reliable kind-a wisdom: homespun.

If only I'd told Comb-Over I'd not even needed to work at Ford's for years, because I'd been building up my property business since the sixties, buying cheap, doing up, getting Solomon & Rogers Estate Agency to rent out. The only reason I continued clocking on at the factory was because I actually liked the work and liked working with my hands. Man must work with his hands, not so? And I would-a missed my work mates too bad: Rakesh, Tommy, Alonso, Tolu, Chong, Arthur, Omar – the United Nations of Ford's, as we dubbed ourselves.

I place the tie clip inside the small bowl on the bedside table, the one with blue storks painted on it à la Chinese

porcelain of the Ming Dynasty period, I do believe. Its stem-cup design with peony scrolls is certainly recognizable from my numerous expeditions to the Victoria and Albert Museum, to which I frogmarch Morris. Only difference between this bowl and the original is that Carmel bought this one in Woolworth's for 99p in 1987. That's never no mind, because God will *not* be able to help me should I ever break the damn thing. Selfsame bowl used to hold all of those lemon sherbet sweets I loved exploding in my mouth before I decided to stop taking my pearlies for granted. Just as well, because I can still bedazzle with my indestructible ivories. Must be the only 74-year-old in the land with his own full set, not a single one extracted, capped, veneered or crowned.

Next, I unloop my tie and drape it over the doorknob of the wardrobe just behind me, twisting my torso away from my hip a bit too sharpish. I freeze, turn back and allow my muscles to realign, everything facing in the same direction: head, shoulders, hips. Gotta be careful, because at my age something that should stretch might snap instead.

I ease the gold cufflinks out of my starched white shirt and pop them into the perfect O-shaped mouth of the bowl. I unbutton said shirt and pull its tail out of my baggy grey-green trousers with a permanent pleat down the front and turn-ups at the bottom that always end up full of cigar ash after an all-night bender. It'll soon be time to get Levinsky to make a new suit. Worth the trek across London to Golders Green, because he's the only one I know who can still make suit in authentic fifties style without charging Savile Row price.

Then I wriggle out of the sleeves of my shirt, bunch it up in my hands and throw it into the corner by the window for Carmel to wash.

It lands like . . . an exhalation of breath.

I like *that*. Derek Walcott? You listening over there in St Lucia? Mi no care if you did get the Nobel Prize for poetry, you better watch out, because Barrington Walker's goin' steal the linguistic march on you, fella.

In spite of my efforts, Carmel's deep-sea breathing stops and she comes up for air with a kind of watery spluttering, as if she's just stopped herself from drowning.

Un-for-tu-nate-ly.

Wifey rolls over and turns on the flowery bedside lamp with a click that sounds like the cocking of a trigger. The skin on her underarm sways off the bone.

I goin' get a right reprimandation.

'Is morning time already, Barrington.'

She is using the three-syllable version of my name . . .

'You know how time does pass, dear?'

Statement, not a question.

'Does it?'

Threat, not a question.

'Why don't you go back to sleep, dear?'

Instruction, not a question.

'Oh, I'll have plenty of time to sleep when the Good Lord comes for me and that won't be long now, I am sure.'

Emotional blackmail – pure and simple.

'In which case, I hope he comes for me before he comes for you, dear.'

A lie – pure and simple.

'Unless that one with horns and a pitchfork catch you first.'

I try and concentrate on the job in hand, but when I sneak a glance at Carmel I see she getting ready to invade Poland.

I take off my three rings and pop them into the bowl. My

ruby beauty is like a thimbleful of blood that's been poured into an oval mould of gold. Bought it for myself when my first rental property went into profit. The golden truck tyre was given to me by that German construction worker in 1977. Bit of a knuckle-duster, he was, 'rough trade'. My favourite is a coiled serpent with diamond scales and glinting sapphire eyes, its head poised, ready to take a bite of the apple.

As for my wedding ring? Only a pair of metal cutters could get it off of my fingers.

Many times I have resisted a trip to the hardware store.

'Bringing the stink of cigars into *my* bedroom again.'

'I sorry.'

'And that *renk* rum *narsiness*.'

'I sorry.'

'When you goin' mend your ways?'

'I sorry.'

'You could-a called, at least.'

'I know, I . . . am . . . sorry.'

'I told you to get a mobile phone years ago.'

Am I truly bonkers? A mobile phone so the ole girl can track me down any time of day or night?

Carmel been playing this game a long, long time. Sometimes she let it drop for a few months or even years, like in the 1980s, when she seemed quite content, enjoyed her work, made more of an effort with her appearance, started socializing with her work friends. Me and she settled into a *détente*. Then, out of the flaming blue, she decides to get the hump, when all I want to do is crawl into bed and sleep.

Far as she's concerned, her husband is a womanizer. Out sowing his seed with all those imaginary Hyacinths,

Merediths and Daffodils. On what evidence? Alien perfume? Lipstick on my collar? Ladies panties in mi jacket pocket?

I can honestly say to my wife, 'Dear, I ain't never slept with another woman.'

She chooses not to believe me.

Her big eyes are almost popping out of her head. If she don't watch out, I goin' make a grab and play ping-pong with them one of these days.

What Carmel should be grateful for, what Carmel should realize, is that her man here is one of the good ones, because he been coming home to her bed for fifty years. All right, all right, sometimes it's the next morning, maybe the afternoon, occasionally a day or two might pass . . .

'Yes, my dear. I go get a mobile phone if it make you happy.'

My face said, *Don't you go breaking our Non-Aggression Pact, dear.*

I release my big brass belt. The one with the buffalo-head buckle that splits into two.

We have come to the point in the proceedings where I drop my trousers. For the first time this night. (*Un-fortu-nate-ly.*)

I got to get my socks off somehow, but I don't feel like bending over, because I might just throw up all over the moulting shag-pile carpet Carmel bought thirty years ago for her knees when she's praying morning, noon and night and even out loud in her sleep. Nonetheless, if I dare sully it, she'll get a rifle from wherever she keeps her arsenal of *metaphorical* weapons and blast me out of the window.

I cross one leg over the other and, wobbling like an out of practice yogi (and feeling Carmel willing me to fall over), I manage to whip them off.

We have reached an impasse.

She is the Sphinx guarding the city of Thebes. Head of a woman, body of a lioness, wings of an eagle, memory of an elephant, bite of a saltwater crocodile with 2,000 pounds per square inch of pressure, ready to snap my head off.

In order for me to get into bed, I got to give the right answer to the riddle she not even asking, because she think she know the answer.

On the wall opposite is the damned wallpaper she loves so much. It has a certain *theme*: garish flowers, jungle vegetation, tropical animals. It begins to sway, and I steel myself for the herd of elephants that's about to stampede all over me.

I'm so tired I could sleep standing up in my white Y-fronts and string vest.

That's when I realize I still have my hat on. I take it off and bow with grandiose hat-waving flourishes, like an eighteenth-century gentleman being presented at Court. When we first married this would-a been enough to send wifey into forgiving giggles.

She used to tell me I was the funniest man alive.

Now her heart is so cold you can snap off a frozen shard and cut a diamond with it.

When did I last make that woman laugh? What *decade* was that exactly? What *century*? What *millennium*?

She staring at me like I am a complete imbecile.

What I supposed to do? Walk towards the bed and risk the wrath of her forkin' fury? Curl up on the floor? Sleep in another bedroom? Put on my Derek Rose silk monogrammed pyjamas and go downstairs? The very same pair I have to hand-wash, otherwise she'll ruin them as she did my new cashmere dressing gown that was made from wool

sheared from the Golden Fleece. Lady-Wife managed to shrink it three sizes in the washing machine before the month was out.

Just what the flaming heck am I supposed to do when I is too tired and blasted drunk to do anything except sleep?

Carmel rolls out of bed in that blue nylon nightie with ruffles at the cleavage that sticks to her various body parts when she walks. (*Un-for-tu-nate-ly.*)

She slips into her foamy orange slippers with bobbles on the toes and halts right up in-a my face. 'I just heard today that my papi's had a second stroke and is in hospital and I been thinking how I should-a never let you turn me against him.'

Whaaaat? That was *only* when we first married; rest of the time she did it herself. Past thirty years I been begging her to take *extended* trips back home.

'Pray, isn't this the man who pummelled your mother so often there was a bed with her name on it at the hospital?'

Morris is not the only one showing signs of dementia, clearly. For long as I known Carmel the words 'bastard' and 'daddy' been hyphenated; just as 'husband' and 'bastard' been similarly conjoined. She's a revisionist, like those Holocaust-deniers.

'That was a long time ago . . . I sure my mother has forgiven him now she's up there with the Good Lord . . . otherwise they wouldn't-a . . . let her in.'

Definitely dementia.

'He nearly a hundred years old and I've not seen him for nearly thirty of them. He asking for his little girl.'

Man had good innings, considering.

He was a big man over there, but soon as I started work for him I saw how small he really was. Broke practically

every bone in her mother's body. I begged her to leave the brute, but what she tell me? 'Barry, this don't concern you.'

Too many women was like that: no matter how much beats they got, they feel say they gotta put up with it. And when they dare go the police, the police tell them a-go back to their husbands.

My own mother's mother got chopped up by her second husband so bad with a bill-hook she ended up in surgery at Holberton, and thereafter never walked again. She died from internal injuries before I born. My mother always drummed it into me, 'Treat women good, yuh hear?' And that's what I been doing, never once laying a finger on my wife and staying around to raise my children. No way was I goin' create space in my wife's bed for some shady, step-daddy character to sleep in the same house as Donna and Maxine.

No, sah, my girls was protected.

Anyways, Carmel better hotfoot it over there to secure that big house she grew up in before the will-contesters change the locks. Her father's had over eighty years to spread his seed.

She still standing up in my face with her morning breath.

'Listen to me good, Barrington. I flying home to see my father on Monday, and when I return, things is goin' change round here. I am not putting up with you putting your thing about with those trampy cows no more.'

I cut my eye at her, but she don't flinch.

Give me some freeness, woman. I am so fed up with having to face your miserable face after a night of conviviality.

'Let me tell you something, Carmel. The only cow I know is the one giving me blasted cheek when I don't deser—'

Before I can finish my sentence, she delivers a bone-crushing ba-daow across my chops.

Oh, Laaard, we have come to this, eh? We have come to this *again*?

‘God will damn you,’ she says, shouldering past me.

I spin around, remembering those heavy potion jars on the dressing table are now within reach of her paws.

‘You and your *narsiness*,’ she says, plucking her yellowy flannelette dressing gown from the hook and wrapping herself up in it, flinging open the door.

I step out after her, repressing the overwhelming desire to help her *hooves* down those very steep stairs, all twenty-three of them.

Calm yourself down, Barry. You better than that.

I go to open my mouth instead, but it feels like I goin’ retch: a projectile vomit of fifty years of deception, disillusionment and self-destruction hurtling down the stairs on to her back.

A bouillabaisse of vomit.

A banquet of sick.

A bucketful of shit.

Carmel . . . Carmel, *dear*, you know what? I tell you what? You right. Yes, you right. God a-damn me a-ready. Never you mind yourself, I was fast-tracked down into the Eternal Flames a long time ago. God a-damn me the day I chose to enter this hellish so-called marriage instead of following my Morris-loving, sweet-loving, full-blooded, hot-blooded, pumping-rumping, throbbing organ of an uncontainable, unrestrainable, undetainable man-loving *heart*.

2.

The Song of Sweetness

1960

... there you are, Carmel, swaying on the white
Hollywood-style swing-seat on Papi's veranda
rocking back and forth while everybody inside sleeps off
the wedding feast of

pepper pot and conch fritters, fungee and tamarind stew,
papaya pie, ducana, yummy sugarcake and butterflaps
their bodies weighed down while their rum-soaked minds
take flight into the night

relatives are crammed into the two spare rooms, tanties –
Eudora, Beth, Mary, Ivy – the uncles – Aldwyn and
Alvin – numerous spouses and cousins – Augusta,
Obediah, Trevor, Adelaide, Neville, Barbara, who came
from upcountry for your special day

although nobody could afford to come back from for-
eign – Brooklyn, Toronto, London

Mommy and Papi are in their bedrooms, east, west, so
Mommy don't have to hear

the maid Loreene fornicating with Papi before sneaking
back to her hut at dawn and then emerging like she all pure
and innocent to cook breakfast for everyone, and not a
man-eating marriage-wrecker

you could kick that girl to kingdom come – him too
you catch a whiff of the honeysuckle in the hedgerows

just below the veranda and inhale it deep, hoping its heady loveliness will make you drowsy

come morning, you goin' be smelling the yellow bell-flower just outside your bedroom

but you've hardly slept these past forty-eight hours because your mind won't stop replaying the last twelve of them when

although it was a certain Miss Carmelita Miller who walked down the aisle trying hard not to trip up on your beaded, ivory gown, it was a certain Mrs Barrington Walker who did the return trip

all grown-up and sophisticated on the arm of your handsome consort, when all you really wanted to do was a volley of cartwheels up the aisle and a little jig when you got showered with *genuine* pink and white confetti on the church steps, not that rice substitute rubbish

you a real woman now, Carmel

yes, a bona-fide lady conjoined in holy matrimony which no man can put asunder, in accordance with the instructions of the Good Lord, praise him, amen, got the ring to show for it too, gold, perfect fit on your dainty finger, goin' enjoy flashing it hither and thither to let everyone know you got a husband

you spoken for

you not goin' end up spinster now

plenty woman round here don't get husbands

they just get babies.

your *husband* – who is at this very minute spending his first night in your childhood bed, his legs dangling over the end, because he so tall and sprawling

your *husband* – who drank so much rum punch he couldn't stand straight to do any dancing and he the best

male dancer in St John's, same as you the best female dancer

you don't mind: Barry's even funnier when he's drunk, you lucky to have him

all of your life Mommy's been plaiting up your hair between her knees and moaning about how

Carmel, when the day comes, you gotta find a husband who likes your inner nature. Your father picked me for my prettiness, which don't last

and she'd tug your hair so hard you'd yell and she'd dig her knuckles into your scalp to drive the point home

soon as prettiness start to fade, he was out roaming the garden, picking flowers still in full bloom

Mommy, you said when your day finally had come and you and Barry was engaged

don't worry about me, because Barry is a wonderful human being who makes me laugh more than anybody in the whole world and he thinks I'm sweetest girl on the whole island. You see how we get on? It's called compatibility, Mommy. Way marriages supposed to be

she shut up after that, just plaited your hair like she was a Red Indian scalping you

nobody can treat you like a child no more now you're married, not even Papi, who lost his rights over you once your husband inherited them

you goin' be a good, deserving wife too, Carmel, isn't it? you been studying the Home Economics manual from your schooldays in preparation

when your husband gets back from work, home will be a *haven of rest and order*

you goin' touch up your make-up and put a ribbon in your hair and have dinner ready in the oven

and if he late and it gets burnt, you *not* goin' start hectoring him like some of those low-class, bad-mouthed women out there who can't keep man and end up lonely ole hag

no, you goin' ask him questions about his day in a *soft and soothing voice* and listen to his news and complaints with a pleasant smile

you not goin' blow it like Mommy, who should-a kept her lip buttoned instead of backchatting Papi, not that you exonerate his badness, and though you feel sorry for her, Mommy tests the patience of a saint, as Papi keeps telling her

no, you had a plan to catch man, and as soon as Barry started working for Papi you was ecstatic, started sneaking him the looks you'd been practising in the mirror, waiting for the right boy to come along, and then, soon as he saw you, you'd turn away with an enigmatic smile

it worked

because he started to escort you to school, standing at the end of the drive in his khaki trousers ironed like a soldier's, crisp white shirt all smart, smoothly shaven face and always teasing you

Carmel, you'd look simply goy-geous and simply mah-vellous, if it wasn't for that simply gi-normous purple pimple at the end of your nose or those two camel eyes of yours that are so crossed the only thing they can see is each other

or he'd grab your satchel and throw it in a wide, slow-motion arc into a sun-hazy field of damp tomato and cucumber plants, forcing you to chase him to get it or he'd only throw it again, or he'd do a really exaggerated Charlie Chaplin walk with a tree branch like he wasn't eight years older than you but still a schoolboy pranking around

then there was that one time when you was genuinely

annoyed with his antics, because this wasn't exactly your idea of a romantic courtship, and you tossed your head at him and shouted, *Go sling your hook, boy*

he stopped jiving around and stood still by the side of the road, head cocked, all serious, and said nothing while

Ole Pomeroy's horse and cart passed carrying a cargo of straw-hatted farm-workers and black pineapples and

Andrina rode past on her big black bicycle, balancing her small daughter on the handlebars and a baskets of yams on her head

Dr Carter's terminally ill Chevrolet juddered past so noisily it should be given its last rites and

you heard the sound of the Bagshaw tractor droning in the distance and schoolchildren's voices coming up behind you

and there was flies buzzing everywhere because of the manure in the field, but you didn't even bother wave off the one that landed on your face, watching Barry watching

you, and there he was, standing there in the rising morning heat, his sandals all dusty now, sweaty patches spreading under his arms, the sun glinting on him, and then he spoke in a tone you not heard before, *Carmel*, sniffing up his lips and nose like you stank as bad as the manure out there

Carmel . . . I know you ain't no sourpuss, really

and even though tears filled up your eyes and you tried to hold them back, you couldn't

Barry came over, looking a bit regretful, steered you to the rocky outcrop on the other side of the road by prodding you gently on the back with his hand, and you sat down, arms up against each other's, and you could feel the heat coming through his side, and he slow-punched you in the arm

*But I know you a sweet girl deep down inside. Yuh see, Carmel,
I am an archaeologist of the human character and I hereby declare
I go help you excavate all of your sweetness*

Sweet Girl – became his pet name for you, and once you knew that you was sweet deep down inside, you couldn't backchat him no more, you had to be sweet all of the time or you'd disappoint him

oh to swing higher and higher until you reach the top, because what you got?

what you got, Sweet Girl?

you got the cream of the crop, that's what

no man on this island more better-looking or got a more attractive personality than your husband, you swear it, clever too, like you used to be

at Antigua Girls' High you was top girl in your class for Latin and French, second for English and History, fourth in Classical Civilizations, fifth in the Ancient Greek Language, until you met Barry and realized he was clever enough for both of you

everybody knows you can't be too clever or you won't catch man

Mommy barely said a word to you for ages when you stopped goin' school

Papi didn't mind, all he cares about are his two Early Bird stores both ends of Scotch Row, set up by his father's family, the Millers of Antigua

whose large portraits look out from the wood-panelled walls in the hallway behind you, strangled by high-buttons and tight collars, bushy hair tamed into centre partings, moustaches slicked down with grease and twisted up at the ends, haughty busts constrained by brassières, waists strapped in by corsets

once you got engaged, Barry got promoted from Junior Shop Hand to Assistant Manager, but Merty said that's why he wanted to marry you, to get his hands on your family's money, but the problem with her theory is he can't stand his father-in-law because he beats Mommy

besides, you both running off to England soon

studio photographs of Mommy's side, the Gordons, are tagged at the end of the corridor

Papi calls them 'the little people' – fisher-folk, seamstresses, coal-makers, *rum-smugglers*, staring awkwardly into the black box immortalizing them

Mommy tells you these your family too, yuh know?

she calls them *the ancestors*, thereby affording them a gravitas they only get because they dead

seems to you the longer people dead-dead, the more status they get-get

but it should be the other way round, longer they dead, the less they count, so why on earth do Mommy and Papi go on about these dead people like they matter?

all you care about is getting the catch of the century
you one lucky girl, eh?

plenty girls acted like floosies around Barry, most of the Young Ladies' Society of Antigua (membership = 4) did too

Candaisy wanted him, Drusilla as well, and she's officially the prettiest, Asseleitha's too weird to want anybody, Merty was always hitching up her skirt whenever he was in the vicinity

you never said nothing, because nobody tells Miss Merty what to do and doesn't get an ear-bashing for their effort, best friend or no best friend

at the wedding reception Drusilla told you the reason Merty caught your bridal posy was because she leapfrogged

on to the girls in front of her to get it and they ended up
with torn stockings and scratched knees as a result

you wondered why they was scrambling all unladylike on
the dusty ground when you spun back round

don't worry yourself, Miss Merty, you'll find someone,
like that Clement, who's got his eye on you and seems like
a nice boy and one day you'll come to England too

you all drew blood and pressed thumbs and swore that
you'd never be separated for long

so here you are

swinging and kicking your bare legs out and getting a
little breeze to them in the sticky heat, your nightie sticking
to your underside

the moon throws a shadowy glow on to the sweet meal
and rubber trees, the bougainvillaea and jacaranda, the date
palms

you starting to feel a bit dozy, but you still got a
hubble-bubble of new and old feelings that won't settle
down and

everybody on the whole island sleeping 'cept you, and
those noisy crickets and tree frogs that never shut up at night

you look up at the diamanté sky, stretching yonder into
infinity

you wonder if you goin' miss it when you travel and then
you correct yourself: you taking the sky with you to Eng-
land, Sweet Girl, sky's not goin' nowhere you're not

you never left the island before except for trips to Barbuda
next door, and that don't count and you've rarely ever left
St John's, all you know is a few miles' circumference around
it, your little island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea

it frightening because the world suddenly seems so huge,
with all of its billions of people out there

and you leaving without Mommy too, who won't leave Papi, no matter how much you and Barry beg her come with you

you start to swing slower, softer, a rhythmical lull, like the lullabies Mommy used to sing you when you was little

soon you will float back to your husband, who will stretch out his long, strong arms, all sleepy, and pull you into him – warm and safe

Mrs Barrington Walker, you not only a respectably married woman but you can't believe that just now you almost lost *it*

but he didn't put it in, just rubbed himself on top of you asking if you was all right, then he shuddered, rolled off and turned away, curling into himself, his broad, strong, manly back glistening against the white cotton sheet

you wanted to trace the ridges of his backbone with your finger

lick off the moisture at the nape of his neck and taste him, slip yourself around his chest and see if your fingers met the other side

make him put it inside instead of being so considerate and not forcing himself, because you ready for it

but really, Mrs Walker, the question you got to ask is is it allowed for a wife to touch her husband spontaneously or does she have to wait for him to touch her before duly responding?

you goin' ask the Young Ladies' Society about it – Merty will know

one thing is obvious: Barry's a real gentleman, unlike some of the boys round these parts, who can't keep their things in their pants and their hands away from girls' privates

Merty first did it years ago with an American diplomat

who approached her outside the cathedral after church,
gave her a real American dollar

and she earned several dollars that way since, swore you
to secrecy, Drusilla's done it with Maxie, her older boy-
friend, Candaisy has almost done it but not quite

Barry was always play-punching and teasing, and when
you danced you was all over each other physically, but he
never pestered *that* way, not once, not even French kissing

Hubert had a proper feel-up once you'd been courting
seven months, and he was a swot who wore spectacles and
stuttered

poor Hubert, crying on the beach in full view of every-
body when you finished with him, but it also annoyed and
embarrassed you so much you dropped the American
ice-cream he'd just bought you on to the sand and walked off
without saying goodbye

you agree with Barry, who says Hubert is James Stewart,
but *he* is Rock Hudson

no contest, right?

the swing stops and you glide, yes, glide, like a swan in a
pond across the wooden floor in your bare feet

you pass through the corridor and ascend the wooden
staircase, your bare feet avoiding the squeaky bits

there he is, asleep facing the door, you creep in and sit
cross-legged on the hard wooden floor in your new,
grown-up nightie, short and frilly and flirty to show off
your *married woman's* cleavage

you cup your breasts in your hands, all high and nicely
heavy, like two buoyant bags of water, and you wonder
when he will touch them

you want him to feel how bouncy they is, because at six-
teen they've not yet begun to deflate, although Mommy

(the *doom monger*) has promised you it will happen soon,
because you got too much weight in them and before
you know it they be drooping and swaying instead of
bouncing

she said it might even happen tomorrow or next week
what will it feel like to have him hold them up from
behind?

he better hurry up, that's all
his mouth is slightly open.
you want to close it, because insects might get in
you almost stroke his cheek, but what if he wakes up and
asks you what you doing?

his left eye twitches, which shows he dreaming about
what must be uppermost in his mind now he a newly mar-
ried man

yes, he dreaming about you, lady
you tiptoe around the bed and slide up beside him, care-
ful not to touch him

you close your eyes and transmit into the back of his head
what you plan to be dreaming about this night

you goin' all telepathic on him, you goin' make him
dream what you dreaming

you have *magic* powers
. . . a real thatched cottage in the 'Dales' with fat cows
mooin' around the green hills, not the scrawny cattle you
get round here

your *husband* wearing a shirt, tie, braces and smoking a
pipe in the garden sunshine, sitting on a stripy deckchair
doing the *Times* crossword

your children playing hide-and-seek in the apple and pear
orchard with Lassie the dog

running around barking happily and

you in the kitchen prettying up your face with fresh lipstick and a clean red-and-white-stripe pinafore over your tight-tight black pencil skirt

and on your feet, high-high heels that give you the sexy walk of Marilyn Monroe, even though you baking scones ready for a spread of real Devonshire cream with the jam you just made from fresh damson and

you goin' serve it up with real English tea in bone-china all laid out on the garden table on the crazy-paving *patio* just in front of the lawn

and you got a rockery and an herbaceous border and robins, yes, robin redbreasts chirruping in the trees

and somewhere over the dales and hills and far . . . far . . . away . . . the mangrove cuckoo and the lovely yellow oriole land just now on your windowsill

the fork-tailed flycatcher hovers around the roses

the hummingbird is hovering around the orange tulips, and there, there over there, flies a brown ibis into the very English sky

you see an iguana scurry across the lawn, and a gecko darts up your rosy kitchen wallpaper, and a crocodile pokes its head into the kitchen from the garden and

you look over by the pond with water lilies and see a red-foot tortoise and a leather-back turtle emerge wearing top hats and singing *you goin' rock, rock, rock around the clock*

and you sit down to tea with a family of purple flamingos, and oh, oh, oh, fire, fire burning bright in the cream teas of the night

just when you think you not slept a wink with all of this activity goin' on, you wake up and feel the full blast of morning sunshine coming through the wide-open windows and on to your face

and that witch Loreene is banging on the door like she
goin' break it down, calling you to breakfast

and when you open your thick, heavy, sticky eyes and
turn over, you see Barry must-a got up already, because he
gone

yes, Carmel, he gone already, down to breakfast without
waking you up and waiting for you so you can go down to
your first breakfast together as husband and wife