

DOG-HEART

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P E E P A L T R E E

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This is a work of fiction. Except for historical figures, all characters are imaginary. To the best of my knowledge, there is nowhere in Kingston called Jacob's Pen or Nevada and no schools called Nightingale All Age, Holborn Preparatory or St. Stephen's. I have taken liberties with geography – a reader who knows the city of Kingston will not find the layout of streets accurate.

This book has been a long time coming. To my husband Fred, my son Jonathan, my friend Celia and my teacher David – I'm grateful for your faith in its uncertain progress.

For my mother

...You still had
this burning
desire
to set sail
even though
(now and always)
and despite
what long ago
the fortune teller
said –
“I see something great
in your hand, something noble” –
you were
rudderless.

Olive Senior, *Gardening in the Tropics*

JACOB'S PEN, KINGSTON
JAMAICA

The three boys stood by the zinc fence in the shadows, waiting. The tallest of the three had one arm and a massive torso. He was about seventeen; facing manhood. He could see over the fence and he gazed out into the night. The second boy was thin with wiry arms, nappy hair and scars on his face. He might have been fourteen or twenty. The third boy was the smallest of the three and had suffered a recent beating – one eye was still swollen half-shut and his mouth was split, but healing. His head was bandaged. He was almost fifteen and had not yet learned the still watchfulness of the other two. He seemed exhausted, shifting from one leg to the other, squatting and getting up, rubbing his wrists as if to restore circulation.

Across the dirt yard, a group of men sat on the verandah of a slab-roofed house. There were lights on in the house, but the men on the verandah sat in near-darkness. The door into the house was open and behind the men, women moved around, putting food on a table. The voices of the men rose and fell. The waiting boys could not hear all they said but they heard the men curse and they heard the word “blood” many times. The men smoked ganja and drank white rum, except for one man who sat apart from the others. He spoke little and did not drink or smoke. His hair was styled like a woman’s with plaits and beads, dyed reddish blonde; he looked no older than the boy with one arm who waited in the yard. He wore two sets of earrings in each ear and a heavy gold chain around his neck. He was the don of Jacob’s Pen and he would soon make a decision about the three boys.

Two older men stood in the corners of the verandah, their eyes moving from the three boys in the yard to the don and back again. They wore loose shirts over the hand guns stuck in the waistbands of their trousers. It was their job to ensure the safety of Merciless, the young don, and to carry out his wishes. Those wishes could include the summary execution of the three boys that very night or simply an invitation for the boys to join the men for curried goat and reasoning until the early hours of the next morning.

“You know Lasco from time,” one of the seated men said. “Dese two, mi no know. Di one wit’ di one hand, Boston – him is from Nevada – mi hear say is A.K. chop him hand clean off. Him tek it like a man, so mi hear. Di odda one, Dexter – dey call him Matrix – him a fryer. Bloodclaat Babylon pick him up inna raid last month. Him mek bail by a white man; one lawyer. Is dis new bwoy mi nah check for. Mi hear say him have big man frien’. A pure crosses dat.”

“Is not di first wi a deal wit’ fryer,” another man said. “We know what fi do wit’ dem.” The light from the room behind him framed his dreadlocks and he took a hit of a large spliff. The smell of marijuana and roasting breadfruit wafted out of the house and the boy who had been beaten fidgeted more urgently. A thin, brown dog walked from behind the house and lay at the front steps of the verandah, looking up at the men.

“Plenty heat dey ’pon us now, all di same. Nah make sense do tings bring Babylon a Jacob’s Pen again,” said a third man, sitting completely in darkness.

A silence fell and the men looked to the don. “Mi hungry,” Merciless said. “It late. Make di bwoy dem eat wit’ us. Dem can sleep inna Jambo house down a street. Tomorrow wi deal wit’ dem.”

The next evening, the boys had to perform a task their lives depended on. They were fryers – young aspirants – to Merciless’s Racehorse Gang. They had eaten and slept well for the first night in many and were grateful to the don. They thought little about what they had to do. The boy who had been beaten, Dexter, had been given a gun and shown how to use it. A white

Nissan Sunny had been provided; only the one-armed boy, Boston, could drive. The car should have been automatic – they had told Merciless this – but the Sunny had a gear stick. The don had been uninterested in this problem. “No worry,” Lasco had whispered to Boston, “mi will change gear. We practice down a di river firs’.”

Dexter was nervous and wanted to talk about escape routes. “Yout’ man, you a watch too much TV,” Lasco told him. “Is only a white woman. We look for one old one. She nah have no gun.”

To gain entry to Merciless’s crew, the three boys had to commit a crime. Reports of the crime had to appear in the newspapers, so the don would know his orders had been carried out. Within a week, the boys would either be wanted men or dead. They had not expected to live to adulthood anyway.

PART ONE

DEXTER
Car Park Runnins

Been out here long-long, since around seven, beggin. Mumma, she don't know how it hard. If I go home now, she going beat me, say me wut'less. She don't understand plaza runnins. People don't like see boy inna plaza; girl, now, they don't get chase like us. Not many girl out here all the same. But we boy, me and Everton and Shelby and Noel, we get chase all the time. Don't matter if you small like Lasco, you still get chase. One time, a security guard catch Lasco and hold him down inna car park and beat him bad-bad. A foreign white woman, she come over and she tell the security to leave that boy alone. The security say, "Ma'am, you don't understand dem boy. Dem bad, dem bad, them bad so 'til. Dem must beat like mule or donkey. Ghetto pickney *must* beat." The white woman say she going call the police, and the security, he laugh. "Lady," he say – him stop call her Ma'am now – "the police will beat him harder than me. Dem boy, dem t'ief and cause pure trouble. Management say we must run dem *every* time we see dem."

There is a white man with the white woman and him say she must stay out of what don't concern her. The woman say it concern her; this is a chile being beat up. The man say they on holiday, don't know about things in Jamaica, come away, Lawra, or some name like that, come away, him say. All the time this going on, Lasco him just stand there, him don't cry. Him tough, Lasco. Where him come from make you tough like coconut. Him mother name him after powder milk, then she take him to Maxfield Park Children Home and leave him. Him run away from there before he reach ten. I know something bad-bad happen to him, but I don't know what.

Me, now, I try make sure security and police never catch me. If them catch me, I bawl livin eye water and beg them not to beat me. Me say me hungry. Me say me need money for school shoe for my little sister. Most time them don't trouble me. I know one security name Sinclair. Him say him like me because I mannersable, always say, *Good mornin* or *Good evenin* and call him Sir. Sometime him will give me a ten dollar or a twenty dollar, if him have them in coin. Plenty shop only want paper money now, say not takin coin, especially not the red coin, the ten cent and twenty-five cent. But enough coin will buy patty and soda over at the gas station; so Sinclair, him give them to me if him have them. Him say him get a boy-chile 'bout my age, but I know him think I is nine or ten. I small. I am twelve last birthday.

Sometime I get coin from boy who pack inna supermarket. They hustlin to take bag a food to car and drop the coin-them. I find them stuck inna asphalt. I have to careful how I pick them up, if the supermarket boy see me, them will beat me and report me to security. They hate us car park boy, even though some a them was car park boy before.

Lord, me hungry. Sinclair not on duty tonight. Best chance I have is stayin round here in the shadow, behind expensive chiney restaurant, and wait 'til movie house let out. Plenty rich people go to movie and when them come out, them don't like see young boy inna car park. This don't work every time, because when it late, uptown people scared and go to them fancy car quick-quick. Car park a dangerous place for them.

You have to pay mind to the movie showin too. Uptown people like movie 'bout love, they don't come out for show with kung fu or plenty black people. They come for certain kinda black people, like that one Morgan Freeman with all the mole on him face, or Denzel, or that nice-nice gal Halle Berry. Wesley Snipes, Eddie Murphy – now, uptown people don't come to see them so much. This movie tonight is about some kinda sun, a Tuscan sun, never heard a that. I think plenty uptown people will be at this movie.

Uptown people can be black, brown, white, chiney, coolie or syrian. All a them have cell phone nowadays. Them start

phonin soon as they come out of the movie and then them don't see us car park boy. Woman-them look at us, though, except the very young one. The best kind a woman is not too young, white or chiney, the kind that look like she have pickney already. Syrian woman have hard heart, always tell you get a job. Black woman now, them hard to read. Some a them look sorry for we, but some just get mad.

Foot bottom hurtin. Barefoot on hot asphalt all day is hard. Need two pair a shoe. Have only one pair and Mumma say it can only wear go school. When school over, shoe come off. Then Mumma send me to plaza to beg. I like this plaza, Sovereign it name, because the boy-them are small and you don't have to fight. One day, I did go down by Half Way Tree and one big boy beat me 'til I vomit. After that I stay here in Sovereign Plaza, even though the pickins slim sometime.

Movie lettin out now. People laughin. That good; mean them not thinkin 'bout gunman on them way to them car. You have to think about gunman all the time – them everywhere – like rat, lizard, cockroach, mosquito.

Trick is not to scare people, so them have to see you comin. Sometime that make them turn back and walk down a different row of car, but you have to take you chance, for if you surprise them, they angry for sure.

I get up and walk out a the dark. I pick a woman and a man to beg. Would be better if the woman was by sheself, but uptown woman don't go to movie alone. The woman is right age, a brownin, not so young. She wear jeans pants and a T-shirt with writin on it. When I get close, I see the man is young, maybe her son. Him more fair than she.

“Good evening, Miss, Sir,” I say. “Beg you some money for school.”

“No, thank you,” the uptown boy say, quick-quick, and him push the woman to one side. But she see me and she stop.

“What you doing out here so late?” she say.

“Miss, have to get money for school.”

“What's your name?”

“Miss, Dexter,” I say. Is my pet name. My real name is Raymond.

“Where your parents?”

Too much talkin now. How it work, if them don't give you money right away, prob'ly not going to. People from the movie walk 'round three a us. People look. Shoulda ask some other woman.

“Miss, don' know my father; my mumma, she at home with the other pickney.”

The woman make up her face and look vex. “How old are you?”

“Nine,” I lie. Better them think you young. I don't even tell teacher at school my right age.

“Where you go school?”

“Miss, Papine Primary.” Another lie.

“How many brothers and sisters you have?”

“Miss, one brother, one sister.” Want to get away now. This woman not going give anything and other uptown people leavin. I hear car door slam and engine start up. Look like tonight is night for hungry bed and beatin from Mumma. It rough.

“What you do for fun?” the woman say. For fun? This woman strange. I know I must not tell her about jumpin on back a pick-up truck at traffic light and t'iefin a ride from downtown, or cuttin up seat on the bus with Lasco knife. Must not tell about the time police corner me and Everton and make we climb one chainlink fence. While we up there, them lick us with a piece a two by four and them laugh. After – this is the fun part – we stick ice pick inna them car tyre. Must not tell how we find one old can a spray-paint and write badwords on the wall a the First Methodist Church in Jacob's Pen, or pull down poster for dance we car park boy can't go to.

“I play draughts with my brother,” I say. Draughts better to tell about than domino, even though domino need more brain and countin. Uptown people think domino for rum head and wut'less corner boy. “We make a board from old cardboard and use bottle top for men. I teach him, my little brother – me, I is the best draught player around.”

The woman smile a little. The boy say, “Come Mom, it's time to go.” Him pull her hand. So is her son. Him wearin the

new kind a high top sneaker. The woman just stand there. The boy shake him head and start take out a wallet from him back pocket. *Yes*, I think. Maybe him will all and give me a hundred dollar. I look at him shoe again. They new, but not new-new. A little old, cool lookin, you know. Is shoe like that I want. Prob'ly never will get though.

“Where you live?” the woman say.

Now I frighten. What she want know for? “Miss, Bell Town,” I lie. Bell Town is a next community to our own.

“If I want find you, how I find you?” the woman say.

“Miss, just ask for Miss Arleen. Everybody know her. She my mumma. We live top a steep hill, near the bus stop.” Lie upon lie.

The woman nod her head, yes. She step forward and she make up her face again; this time I know is because she smell me. She put her hand under my chin and she make me look straight-straight at her. “Do me a favour,” she say, as if she talk to a big person. “When you grow up, don’t send your children to the plaza to beg.”

“Yes Miss, for sure Miss,” I say, word-them all jumble up. Don’t like to look at her. At school, teacher say you don’t show respect if you look straight at a big person. I frighten a these two, want to get away. Maybe the boy is older than him look and is police.

The woman take her purse from a little school bag she carry. She put five hundred dollar in my hand. Me can’t believe it, no way at all. Nobody ever-*ever* give me five hundred dollar. “Miss, thank you; Sir, thank you,” I say.

“Go home,” the woman say.

I think about this woman sometime. I sorry she can’t find me, because I tell lie ’bout where we live. Maybe she woulda help; you hear such things happen. Maybe I shouldna lie. That five hundred dollar last one long time. Mumma, she smile when I bring it home. ’Course – this a the bad part – now she expect it again.

SAHARA
Summer Lion

“I’m gone, Mom!” Carl yelled, going through the front door. “I took a thousand dollars from your purse!”

“Wait, Carl! What time will you be home?” I walked quickly to the door, which Carl had left open in his hurry to leave. *A thousand dollars?* I wonder if he’s on drugs? Carl was almost at our gate and already had his Walkman on. I’d have to run if I wanted an answer to my question. Just then the phone rang. It was Carl or the phone. He was almost sixteen. It was Monday – that meant tennis after school and he’d drive home with Mark. I would find out about the thousand dollars later. I locked the front door and hurried to the telephone.

“Hello?”

“What’s happening, Sar?” It was my friend and business partner, Lydia.

“Nothing much, Lyds. This is early for you.”

“Are you coming into the restaurant soon?”

“By nine.”

“Could you be there a little earlier? Londel wants to make his callaloo dish for lunch and I’m expecting Kemar to bring in the callaloo at eight-thirty. You know if we’re not there, he’ll just go and flog it in Coronation Market.”

“Sure, I’ll try.”

“Thanks, Sar.” Lydia sniffed. She must be crying again. “How was the movie?”

“Sweet. Carl hated it.”

“Well – what did you expect? It was *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

How come Prince Carl went with you at all?” Lydia and Carl don’t get on – it’s one of the few areas of tension between us. She thinks I’m way too soft on him.

“He’s buttering me up because he wants an iPod to replace his Walkman. Says he’s a social pariah because he’s still using a Walkman.”

“So – was anyone there?” Lydia said, sniffing more audibly. What she meant: was her ex-boyfriend Paul there with his new, twenty-two-year-old model girlfriend named after somewhere in Africa – Zimbabwe? Kinshasa?

“No, Lyds, Paul wasn’t there.” I knew why Lydia was calling – first, to find out if I’d seen Paul and secondly, because she wouldn’t be at work on time. She hadn’t been at work on time for months. “But let me go now, we’ll talk later,” I said. “Gotta run if I’m to be in Liguanea by eight-thirty.”

“Okay. Let’s have lunch then.” This is our joke – we never have lunch together, because we’re generally running around with lunch orders.

“Sure,” I said. “What time will you be in?”

“Dunno, Sar.” Lydia sounded choked; sniffing was progressing to full-blown crying. Fucking Paul. Fucking men. Mostly I was glad I no longer had one.

“By ten.” I held back my sigh. Lydia hadn’t been pulling her weight at Summer Lion since the break-up.

We’d been friends since prep school. She’d come up to me after my father left, while the rest of my schoolmates were still treating me as if I had a communicable disease, linked her arm through mine and said, “Come and play jacks.” We walked onto the verandah of our prep school where girls sat in circles like fallen flowers, their uniform skirts spread around them. “Move over, Rebecca,” Lydia said, to the most popular girl in school. I’d loved Lyds from that moment.

I had to hurry – no time to clean up our small Mona house. Carl had left his dirty plate on the floor again. I locked up, checking the windows at the back more than once. The patio furniture was piled up in a corner of the kitchen – there had been a recent spate of robberies in Mona. More or less everything left

outside was being stolen – garden hoses, furniture, buckets, clothes on the line, potted plants. I just hoped my car wouldn't be next. It was an old VW, the yellow paint fading, but it did the job and a new car was out of the question. I hoped its battered appearance made it unattractive to thieves.

Outside, the sun blazed down. It was March, dry time. Fires burned every night on the hills behind Mona and what passed for a lawn in front of our house was brown. My neighbour was burning garbage again. There were water restrictions and dust hung in the air. As I drove out, I made a mental note to catch some dishwashing water to wash the car on the weekend – I could barely see through the windscreen.

Summer Lion – the vegetarian restaurant owned by Lydia and I – was a short distance from Mona right in the middle of Liguanea. It was a great location. Lydia owned the land; she'd inherited it when her mother died. She sometimes received offers for the real estate, but so far hadn't been tempted. The only problem was parking, but as many of our clients walked or used public transport, the small parking lot hadn't affected us too much.

I was the restaurant manager; Lydia the cook. I had loved coming up with the concept of Summer Lion – the thatched huts under an enormous guango tree, the communal seating, the concrete floor with imprints of leaves set into the cement, the faintly applied lion silhouette on our menus and wall hangings. We changed the colours every year, the menus every day and we used only Jamaican produce. Over the last few years this had become a challenge – globalization meant it was now easier to buy seedless grapes than mangoes from local vendors.

I was responsible for the buying, the staffing and the accounts. When I told people that Lydia “just” cooked, she'd scowl and say Summer Lion would have failed in the first year without her. It was true – she was a genius in the kitchen, read cookbooks like novels and her recipes were all originals. We kept our menu limited and our prices low, so we had a mixed clientele of working people in Liguanea and those who arrived in monster vehicles, affecting grassroots cool. They came because the food was good, plentiful and cheap, but

complained about the lack of air conditioning and the shared tables.

As usual, Liguanea was choked with traffic. At the Matilda's Corner traffic lights, a young boy came up to my open window and shoved a grubby bit of paper at me. "For school," he mumbled. I fancied his eyes searched out the location of my handbag, which was safe on the floor in the back. "Sorry," I said. "Can't help. Go to school, son." He cut his eye at me and sauntered off to another car. The streets of Kingston were often full of children – children erupting from schools, children walking three abreast in the road, children begging. I thought about the boy last night after the movie. He'd looked so young and it had been so late. I'd got an impression of bright eyes and intelligence. I wasn't sure why I'd given him money – I didn't usually give children money – it encouraged them to be on the streets. I'd even asked where to find him – why? Bell Town, he'd said. Bell Town wasn't far from Liguanea.

It was three before I sat down at the computer. I tallied up the day's sales, glad it was over. We didn't open for dinner so my days were intense, but short. The restaurant was doing well, but would never amount to wealth. I would be thirty-three in a few months and sometimes middle age seemed way too close.

"How'd we do?" Lydia said, coming up behind me.

"Pretty good. The otaheiti apple/lime juice was a hit – we ran out."

"Let's have our tea."

This was our ritual. We never had lunch, so when the lunch rush died off and before we closed, we sat and had a cup of tea and a slice of whatever bread Londel had baked – banana nut, pumpkin, sweet potato, carrot. We also offered a tea of the day – today it was lemongrass. We carried our tea to the hut near the trunk of the guango tree where it was cool and furthest away from the traffic fumes on Hope Road.

"You okay, Lyds?"

"I guess. Just wonder when the pain'll stop."

I was silent. There was nothing to say. Paul had gone and that

was that. He'd been cruel and Lydia was hurting and there was no way out but through.

I cast around for something else to talk about. "I gave five hundred dollars to a boy in the car park after the movie last night."

"That's a lot. Whyever?"

"Dunno. He was sweet – big eyes and a bright smile. Felt bad, Lyds. He was out there begging and Carl and I were coming from the movie, where Carl probably ate more than he does in a week."

"There's a million of them, Sar."

"I know. I found out where he lived."

"*Why?*"

"Dunno. Thought I might try and help."

"Are you nuts? What could you possibly do for this child? His mother probably has a violent criminal for a baby father and you'll be the next one found in a gully with your throat cut."

"I know. He was a nice looking boy, that's all. Respectful. Hopeful."

"Miss Sahara?" Londer called from the kitchen window.

"Yes, Londer?"

"Kemar come back – say we shorted him for the callaloo."

I sighed. This was a weekly ritual with Kemar – he claimed the carefully weighed callaloo had been wrongly tallied and an outrageous sum was still outstanding. He usually got a few hundred dollars out of me. "Soon come, Lyds," I said, getting up.

"Take your time. Wouldn't want my wallow interrupted." One of Lydia's many saving graces – she has a wry sense of humour.