

TEN DAYS IN JAMAICA

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P E E P A L T R E E

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To Charles and Madge

PRECIOUS AND HER HAIR

All Precious wanted was a boy to go to the beach with on Saturdays. She'd be strolling on the sand with a sweet-looking boy, arm in arm, the envy of all the boyless girls out there. There'd be water fights, splashing in the sea foam, she in her bikini, laughing, sea-water sparkling on her face. Then they'd watch the sun set at Ras Peter's restaurant, eating fish and festival, like tourists.

See Precious at seventeen: slender as a cane stalk, skin like caramel, full star-apple mouth. At night she tossed in bed, the sheets hot against her skin, fingers tracing the shape of her lips, travelling across her breasts and down to her thighs and the custard-apple flesh between them. Each morning she peered into the speckled wardrobe mirror, saw long legs, a narrow waist, a slender shapely body. Yet all this was nullified by a head of short, peppercorn hair that refused to grow.

The boy she really wanted was Neville Campbell, neighbour, sixthformer and school Romeo. Precious lived for glimpses of Neville. Dressed for school, she would wait behind the hibiscus bush at the entrance to her mother's yard until Neville came swaggering by. Blushing, and trembling like a periwinkle in the wind, she would fall in step beside him, he so crisp and lithe in his khaki uniform. Sometimes he smiled and said, *Morning*, but usually he just nodded and kept on walking,

gazing at the road ahead. Afternoons, after school, Precious loitered on the dusty road, praying he would pass and notice her. Sometimes he did walk by, but surrounded by a cohort of raucous, jostling boys.

Precious lived with her mother, Lucille, in a house by the main road, just before it curved downhill towards the coast. Precious resembled her mother, who was slender and handsome with a neat head of low-cropped hair which she covered with a turban of pristine white cloth. Precious had many of Lucille's features, but not her mother's practicality and common sense. The two of them lived alone, her father having migrated to America ten years back. (They should have joined him long ago: he had filed for their papers, but such matters take a long time, or so he wrote in the letters sent with his monthly remittances.) Lucille fussed over Precious, her only child, her eyeball, but she was stern, not wanting to spoil her. She had ambitions for her daughter of a practical kind: sixth form, then college followed by a respectable, well-paying job. Each night, after reading her Bible, Lucille prayed softly, on her knees by the bed: *Maasa God, please bless my daughter, let her have ambition and sense. And beg you, Lord, let her turn out good.*

But at seventeen, Precious's one ambition was to be Neville's girl. Lucille took in the dreaminess, the moping over schoolwork, the mooning by the garden gate. Boy trouble! Lucille pursed her lips. It had to be that, though as far as she knew Precious had not had the opportunity to get into baby trouble – yet.

One evening, after dinner, Lucille sat her daughter down for a cautionary word.

What wrong with you these days, Precious?

Nothing, Mama.

Is that boy Neville you making cow-eye after?

N-no, Mama, said Precious, biting back a giggle.

Can't you see he's not paying you one bit of mind? A sweetboy like him, only have time for fool-fool, flighty-flighty girls. Not a decent child like you.

Y-yes, Mama. I know.

Hanging out at the beach with her best friend Lindy the following Saturday, Precious had a chance to see the truth of Lucille's words. Further along the beach Christine Chang and Selina Brown were parading on the sand in the scantiest thong bikinis, swarmed over by boys, Neville among them.

Lindy stared at Selina Brown's swivel hips, breathed from deep in her chest like her granny did when she was vexed, and sucked air through her teeth.

You see those girls? She pointed at Selina. They're good for nothing decent. They're just fly-bait for the sweet-boys.

But Precious was wondering how they did it. Christine had no bottom to speak of, and Selina's legs, thinner than green bamboo twigs, bowed gently at the knee. But they both had plentiful hair; hair that lifted in the wind and fanned around their shoulders; hair that caressed their cheeks, tempting boys to touch it.

Precious resolved to get herself more hair.

She went first to Pauline, the village postmistress, who was also the village hairdresser. Pauline's salon was no more than shack at behind her house, but it was crammed full of women waiting to get their hair done on the day Precious stopped by.

You have to help me, Pauline, said Precious. I want long hair and I need it fast!

Pauline paused in the middle of a colouring job to run her hand over Precious's head.

Hmmm, she said, shaking her crop of bouncy bronze

curls. Not much here to work with... it'll have to be braids or African twists, or a weave...?

Precious decided on braids, the least expensive option. She saved lunch money for three weeks to pay for them, feeding on visions of herself transformed into a beauty with a head of luxuriant, waving hair. On the appointed Saturday, she sweated for hours in a plastic chair in Pauline's shack. The small room was hot, the atmosphere thick with fumes from straighteners and dyes, and the smell of body odours. Sweat trickled down Precious's face and from her underarms, but she sat patient and still while Pauline wove every strand of hair into an artificially extended plait. While Pauline pulled and tugged her hair, Precious took refuge in a day-dream of herself and Neville strolling arm in arm along the sand under the jealous nose of skinny, bandy-legged Selina Brown.

When Precious stepped out of Pauline's den into the twilight, she was lightheaded with exhilaration, despite a prickling sensation on her scalp. She rushed home to dance before the mirror, laughing and swinging her new braids. She ran to wake-up her mother, who was dozing on the verandah.

Hmm... said Lucille, who did not approve of extensions. Extensions were a vanity and therefore sinful, no matter how pretty. More trouble coming, she sighed. She pursed her lips together and frowned, then fell asleep again.

That night Precious dreamed of Neville. He was swimming with long, supple strokes, swimming through waves of hair. The next morning she awoke with a smile on her lips. She stretched, tossing back her braids, and then noticed a thin black thing on her pillow, coiled like a delicately patterned snake. She shrieked and ran to the

mirror, frantically feeling along her hairline. Oh my God! Oh my God! She wailed as more braids came away, leaving a bald patch the size of a ten cents piece above her right temple. The bald patch on her head or the braids in her hand, she was not sure which was worse.

Oh Mama, look what happened! She ran into Lucille's room, weeping like a child whose favourite doll had broken. Lucille sat by her dresser, her Bible open on her lap. She took in the situation with one glance.

You see where vanity lead you? Lucille sat Precious down and started undoing the remaining braids before they too fell out. But the hair the braids were attached to came away in Lucille's hands like dandelion fluff, exposing the smooth, reddened expanse of her daughter's scalp. Precious watched in the mirror, tears welling, chest heaving, wishing she were dead.

That day Precious stayed home from school. She tossed on her bed, clutching her head in passionate regret, imagining the snickering and whispering awaiting her next day. She spent a sleepless night trying hard not to visualise Neville reacting to her baldness, though a small inner voice tried to tell her that he probably wouldn't notice. The next morning, Lucille pulled her out of bed and stood over her while she dressed. Then, with a length of white fabric, Lucille wrapped a neat turban around Precious's head.

I can't go to school like this! Precious wailed.

Is either this or your bald head exposed to the entire school! Lucille said, and pushed her out the of the door.

Laughter rippled through the classroom as Precious entered, the focus of all eyes. *Precious born again!* Voices whispered, giggled and smirked. *Precious got the spirit, like her mother!* Precious paused in the doorway. A spirit did rise up in her at that moment; a spirit

straightened her spine, lifted her head and lit a fire in her eyes. She scanned the room and the whispering ceased. Then, smiling as though in a trance, she glided through the silence and sat at her desk, ready for class to begin.

★

Sister Homelia lived in a solitary, tumbledown house in a hollow at the bottom of the hill. She was hardly ever seen in the village because she was too old and feeble to make the steep uphill climb. Yet everyone in the village knew of her skill with plants and herbs, and at some time in their life, most villagers found their way through the bush to Sister Homelia's house.

After school was let out, Precious headed downhill through the woods, climbing over fallen branches, dodging hungry mosquitos and flies the size of bees. There was no fence around Sister Homelia's garden, no gate or garden path, only a trail of hardened earth leading up to a listing front door.

The door opened before Precious had even raised her hand to knock.

Come in, girl, come in. Sister Homelia stood in the doorway leaning heavily on a walking stick, beckoning with her free hand. She appeared younger than Precious had imagined, her dark skin smooth and glossy, her figure slim as a girl's. But her neck crooked slightly, and her head drooped, wobbling from side to side, like a ripe jackfruit about to fall. Her faded eyes peered at Precious, neither friendly nor hostile.

Precious stepped out of the sun into a sparsely furnished room musty with the smell of drying leaves and fresh earth and recently boiled bananas.

S-sorry to trouble you Sister Homelia, Precious began, but the woman interrupted.

Tell me, girl, what you want? She pointed to two chairs by a table under a small, curtained window.

It's my hair... Precious sat down, and Sister Homelia hobbled to her side, extending a crusty hand to touch her head.

Is that chemical foolishness you put on your head? As if to point up the folly of such things, Sister Homelia raised a hand to her own braided grey hair.

N-no... it was extensions.

Aahmmph! The old lady made a rattling noise deep in her throat. And now you want something to help it grow again?

Y-yes Sister. And I want it to grow long... long down my back like Christine Chang...

God give you the hair you have for a reason, don't you know that girl?

But no boy wants a girl with picky hair... like mine was.

Aahmmp! Well. If you want that kind of hair you'll have to do exactly as I tell you.

I'll do anything! Anything!

Ahmmmp!

Sister Homelia hobbled into an adjacent room, returning in a few moments with a brown paper bag.

Put a spoonful of this in a dish, mix it with some oil. Then... She bent towards Precious and whispered in her ear.

You not serious, Sister? Sweat beaded Precious's forehead.

The old woman nodded.

Start when the moon is dark and put it on every night until the moon is bright.

Every night?

Yes, every night. Then when the hair begins to grow,

you mustn't let water come near it. Not bath water, not rain water, not sea water. You hear me?

But it going to stink terrible! Precious wailed.

Aahmmph! Do you want hair, or don't you? Sister Homelia hobbled over to the door, the tap tap of her stick sending echoes through the room. She opened the door wide, and stood in the doorway, her head gently bobbing from side to side.

Can nothing else help me?

Nothing I know of.

Sister Homelia pushed the door shut.

As she scrambled through the thicket, Precious's mind was a tangle of thoughts. Could the mash of dried stuff in the brown paper bag really help her hair grow? Would it be worth the awful smell, the inconvenience? A nightly application of stinky mess and then a shampoo every morning for two whole weeks! And without her mother finding out? Who had time for all that and household chores and schoolwork besides?

But as Precious drew back her hand to throw the paper bag in the bushes, a vision of Neville arose before her: Neville smiling, so tall and alluring her breath caught in her chest, her pulse picked up speed. *Choh, you too lazy, girl, and too coward!* a voice admonished in her head. *Nothing worth having comes easy!* She sighed, and sighed again, acknowledging the wisdom of the voice. Then she stuffed the paper bag in her backpack and resumed the trek home.

★

On the night of the new moon, Precious crept out to the bathhouse after Lucille had gone to sleep, the bag of herbs in one hand, a kerosene lamp in the other. By the flickering lamplight she scanned the ground for the additional, unmentionable ingredient and was relieved

to find a fresh pile, lying not far from the bathhouse door. Squatting on the bathhouse step, she mixed the slop in a worn enamel mug normally used to scoop up rainwater from the tank. She used a paintbrush to apply the slop, which trickled down her neck in thick brown streams, soiling her nightdress, so that when the operation was over she had to bathe again and wash out the nightdress. Back in her room, unable to lie down lest her messy head leave stains on the pillow for Lucille to find, she sat crosslegged on the bed and leaned her back against the wall, sleeping fitfully until dawn. She woke at cockcrow with a crick in her neck, but leaped up and ran to the bathhouse to shampoo her head before Lucille awoke. The night after, she used a plastic bag as a headwrap, to contain the latrine smell of the potion and keep the mess off her pillow. During the day, she wore a turban with such nonchalance that younger girls at school began to emulate her, establishing a trend known forever after as Precious's style.

After two weeks of nightly applications, Precious's hair began to grow. It so grew fast, by a week later a thick fuzz had sprouted all over her head. Two weeks later, a fluffy cap of tight, glossy curls covered her scalp, and four weeks later the hair touched her ears. The hair continued to grow, and each night she stood before the speckled mirror and unwrapped the turban, face rapt, blood fizzing, heart dancing in her chest. She had more hair than she'd ever had before. She scrutinized it in the mirror, turning this way and that as though uncertain it was really there. The nightly unwrapping turned into a game of surprise, for as it grew the hair seemed to change. Fuzzy at first, then curly, it eventually grew as straight and heavy as Christine Chang's. But even as she rejoiced at its length, Precious wished the hair were

curly: its straightness made her face look flat, her eyes too small, and her scalp flaked and itched so badly that she was driven to raking her fingernails hard over the scaling skin.

When the hair hung past her shoulder blades, Precious decided the time had come to show it off. She planned its first appearance for the day of Ras Peter's annual fish fry, which drew crowds from nearby villages and tourist resorts along the coast. Neville and his posse would be there, along with all the local youths, who would loiter by the sound system, ogling tourist girls, and quaffing cans of chilled beer.

The night before the fish fry Precious braided the hair so it would wave by morning. She took a warm-water bath, she pumiced her feet and rubbed her skin all over with cornmeal. She painted her nails with an orange glaze sneaked from Lucille's dressing table. Before falling into bed, she ironed her favourite shorts and orange linen top and hung it on the wardrobe in readiness, like a soldier preparing for battle.

She lay awake that night, hearing harmonies in the chirrups of night creatures and the deep rustlings of leaves. She rose before daybreak and padded softly to the kitchen. She made peppermint tea, taking care not to rattle the kettle or make a noise that would wake Lucille. She felt special that morning, tender and full of promise, like a hibiscus bud about to unfurl its petals and reveal its velvet heart. She took her tea out to the back of the house and sat on the doorstep. The tree-covered hillside and the plain below were still covered with soft swirls of mist.

Let the day be fine, Precious whispered as rosy glimmerings of sunrise crept over the horizon. Then she laughed, because it was August, when rain never fell.

Please let Neville be there, she prayed, though she

knew that only serious illness or injury would keep him away.

What if something goes wrong? But it was hard to imagine what could go wrong, other than rain, or Neville not showing, but fear of the unimaginable swooped like gas in the bottom of her belly. What if something did go awry? What if all her effort failed, all the longing failed, all the potions and the headwraps of the past three months proved to be effort wasted?

Set your mind on the best! As she spoke Lucille's favourite affirmation she felt a power in the words that she'd never felt before. She straightened her spine, and shook out the hair that was both her charm and her weapon.

★

When Precious emerged from her room dressed for the fish-fry, Lucille thought she was seeing a vision in orange, swathed in waving black hair.

Oh my Lord! Where did that hair come from? She shrieked, then clapped her hand over her mouth, ashamed of her outburst.

It's all mine, Mama, come feel it. Precious proudly offered her head for her mother's touch.

Precious, is it a wig?

It's mine, Mama. Sister Homelia helped me grow it. And Precious waltzed out of the house leaving her mother collapsed on a lounge, wailing and clutching her head.

Precious waited for Lindy, leaning against the front gate, hair blowing in the light breeze, like a model.

Lindy froze in her tracks and then shrieked with laughter.

Precious, you mad or something? You mean you waste your mother's good money on a weave?

Lindy stepped to left and to right, surveying Precious's hair, arms akimbo.

Precious stared at Lindy in amazement. She had expected admiration, even envy, but not disbelief and no, not laughter!

It's all mine. Come, feel it. She offered her head to Lindy's sceptical tugs.

So how you get it to grow so long, so fast?

I got some herbal tonic from Sister Homelia. It worked good, eh? Don't you like it? She felt suddenly uncertain, her confidence wavering.

Jesus, said Lindy, wide eyed. Now I know you really mad!

The walk to the beach was not the triumphal approach Precious had anticipated, though by the time she and Lindy neared the fish fry, her spirits had began to rally. She's just jealous! Precious told herself, touching her hair. She tossed her head, swinging her hair, and pressed on towards the excitement up ahead, leaving Lindy to follow.

There were cars choking up the beach road, their stereos and radios blaring. Louder still, the bass throb of Ras Peter's sound system made a visceral wall of sound. As she moved across the sand, Precious inhaled the salty wind that carried the aroma of frying fish and the scent of rum and lime. She scanned the faces on the beach with a pounding heart. Local people were outnumbered by folks from neighbouring villages and there were tourists strewn baking on the hot sand. Let's get some fish, Lindy was saying, but Precious was not hungry. She was too close to her quarry to rest for food. And she was perspiring under all that hair. She needed to find Neville while the hair was still wavy and before she dissolved in sweat.

She saw a huddle of young people by the mountain of speakers along the beach. Shading her eyes from the sun, she made out the tall silhouette of Neville and set off towards him, her pulse beating in her ears louder than the sound system's bass throb. As she drew close to the group, two people broke away, holding hands. As they came into view, Precious froze. They were gazing into each others' faces and smiling. The girl was clearly foreign, pale and blond-haired, in a tourist's uniform of bikini briefs and a tight tank top.

Despite the heat, Precious began to tremble. She clutched her throat to stop the wail that rose from her belly and wanted to take flight on the sea breeze. Neville with a white girl! Tears spiked with anger welled in her eyes and the bitter taste of failure settled on her tongue. Not even Sister Homelia could help her now. What was she to do with Neville and the girl advancing towards her? Should she keep walking, meet them face to face, and ignore the smirk in Neville's eye? Or should she take her shame back to Lindy, who no doubt was waiting to laugh her to scorn? Her face was burning in the acid yellow heat of the sun, and her scalp itched with such intensity that she craved the cooling touch of salt water on her head. She looked longingly at the sea.

Neville and the girl were almost in front of her and she could hear their laughter rising on the wind, blending with the sea gulls' mocking cries. Precious turned on her heel, almost running towards the water. Without stopping to take off her outfit, she plunged into the sea, cleaving through its gentle waves like a large orange fish. She swam until she felt light headed, then paused to catch her breath. Treading water, she looked back towards the beach, hoping that Neville and the girl would be diminished by distance. Instead, her eye fell on a

floating black mass glistening like oil spilled on the aquamarine surface of the sea. Legs pedalling frantically, Precious reached for her head. Her scalp felt clean, satin smooth to the touch. She bobbed in the water, clutching her head and gasping deep breaths until her mind became calm and her body felt light, as though relieved of a weighty burden.

The merciless sun burned down hot as a naked flame. To cool off, Precious dove underwater, surfaced, and dove again, repeatedly, like a fish escaped from a net, enjoying its freedom.

FEVERGRASS TEA

When she first moved into the house, she used to lounge on the verandah at sundown, sipping pineapple soda while the sun slid behind the mountains in a haze of purple flames. But in a matter of days her evening idyll was disrupted by one destitute woman, the first of a steady trickle of needy locals who, sighting her on the verandah, pushed at the rusty iron gate, braving the overgrowth of thorny bougainvillea, to bang on her door and beg.

Tell me, Yvonne, who's to blame? Margie her cousin and neighbour demanded when Yvonne complained. Who in their right mind would put their hand in their pocket and give that old drunken wretch Isilda *ten whole dollars* for no reason at all? Privately, Margie had thought Yvonne's charity typical of the show-off behaviour of returnees who came home from America with dollars flowing from their pockets. Three months after her arrival and many supplicants later, Yvonne was less generous. These days, as soon as she heard the creak of the gate she would call out: Sorry! Nothing to give away today!

The day Donovan pushed at her gate and entered her yard she did not call out. Something about his height, the

muscular arms, the way his thick hair sprang back from his forehead, stilled her tongue.

Mornin, ma'am. He paused by the step and greeted her with a courteous nod. I'm Donovan. I live down the road, just past Chin shop. I pass here often, you know, and I can't help noticin that this yard need some attention. His voice was soft, his speech deliberate, and he looked her in the eye.

I do yard work. I can clear up this mess for you.

Oh. Yvonne raised a hand to smooth her braided hair. Well, yes, it really is a mess. She wished she were wearing something more stylish than baggy cotton pants.

I've been thinking of hiring someone to cut the grass.

I figure three days' work go fix it. His glance took in the drooping mango trees and the unkempt hedge of crotons with branches that waved in the breeze.

For a moment she pondered the wisdom of hiring a total stranger. She took in the bright white T-shirt and well-fitting jeans.

You don't look like a gardener. Her eyes narrowed.

Don't worry yourself, miss, he said with a lopsided smile. I been chopping yards from I was a little youth. This is nothing. I live in this district for years. Everybody know me. Ask Margie next door. She'll tell you.

So you know Margie? Ah. OK, then. What's your fee?

He named a sum she thought pitifully small. He was asking less for three days' labour than she charged to cut and sew a simple blouse, but that was how it was in that part of the island. Men and women chopped cane or tended fields, from dawn to sundown, for a few dollars a day. It was backwards, yes, but nothing she alone could do about it. She accepted his price. They agreed he would start work the next day, and with the briefest of nods he turned on his heel and strode away.

Yvonne went back indoors, intending to start work on a wedding dress for the daughter of a local politician, but her mind was racing too fast to concentrate, buzzing almost. This couldn't have anything to do with the yard man. Maybe she had made her morning coffee too strong. She sank into an easy chair beside the wide window overlooking the miniature forest that passed for a front garden. When Donovan finished clearing it she would be able to see beyond the head-high hedge of crotons, across the valley to the panoramic stretch of the Blue Mountain ridge. She eased back in the chair, one hand travelling under her T-shirt to finger the crescent-shaped scar in the crease beneath her left breast. The scar was raised and still tender to touch, though the breast that covered it was numb. The scar would heal completely, in time, the specialist had said, and she would quickly grow accustomed to the saline-filled sac that had replaced her diseased breast.

Yvonne thought of Leyla, her mother, who had taken time off from her job to nurse her through the weeks of chemotherapy. Now that she was well again, Yvonne felt ashamed at how completely illness had robbed her of adulthood, of how abjectly she had depended on her mother's care, a scared, needy child again. Leaving New York was as much about getting away from Leyla's coddling as about recuperating in the sun. Margie had come up with that idea. She had made all the arrangements; found the house, helped Yvonne to settle in, even found customers in the village, so Yvonne could earn a little money as a dressmaker. The small house was cheap to rent, and close to Margie's much larger home. It suited Yvonne, even the riot of plant life overtaking its grounds. Nature's vitality was everywhere. She heard it in the day-long noises of restless crickets, in the nighttime warbling

of contented blackbirds. She saw it in the fluttering blue swarms of morning glories, measured it in the exuberant growth of every flower, shrub and tree. It was like food taken in through the senses. Yet at night she was lonely. She still ached for Martin, her ex-lover. He had promised he would visit, but she doubted he could face her after their long-distance break-up. She missed her girlfriends, going out for a pizza and a movie, the morning banter of colleagues at the studio over coffee and a bagel. There was Margie, of course, and she was lively company, but she was married, with three children and a teaching job. She had little time for entertaining her cousin.

Donovan came the next morning, before sunrise, while Yvonne was still asleep. She woke to the rhythmic *chop, chop* of his machete, and dressing quickly in shorts and a ribbed cotton top, she went outside to watch for a while. He was cutting back grass that had grown shoulder high, wielding the machete with fluid motions of arm and torso. In the pale grey light of early morning, he was a graceful, almost ethereal figure, absorbed in the work, unaware of her gaze.

She breakfasted on grapefruit, papaya and Earl Grey tea. She offered him a cup, calling out from the front window. The steady rise and fall of his cutting arm paused. He looked up, mopped the sweat from his face with a piece of old towel.

No Miss, no thanks, he said, and returned to work. She drew back from the window, piqued by his refusal, and wondered at his curtness: had she violated some local code of conduct with an offer of tea?

She took her mug into the tiny room at the back of the house where she had constructed a makeshift work table

from an old door covered with a plastic sheet, and stacked-up wooden crates. A portable sewing machine took up one end of the table; the other was swathed in white satin, marked up and ready for cutting. She picked up the scissors, but the view from the window distracted her: a gently sloping hillside clad in coconut palms, their branches shimmered by the wind, their leaves refracting light. After New York's concrete grey congestion, the aquamarine sky and rich greens had a sweetly narcotic effect. How could she possibly miss the bustle of Seventh Avenue and the studio where she had pored over a drawing board for ten, twelve hours a day, six, sometimes seven days a week? She didn't miss those interminable hours. Had those long working days lowered her resistance to disease? Had stress made her ill? Had she been weakened by a diet of coffee, fast food and exhaust fumes?

She'd been happy enough in her tiny apartment on 8th Street. She stayed there twelve years, the last with Martin. Martin. His face interrupted her reverie, a quiet ache taking shape in her head. His forehead seemed always creased with worry: worry about problems at work, about money, and later on, about her health. In the end she had asked him to move out. She couldn't bear him to see her so altered, so weakened by surgery and medication. Till you get well, he had said, and she agreed. He had driven her to the airport, had held her and kissed her face. He'd promised to fly down for a few days soon, real soon. He called the morning after she landed, and every evening for a week after, then less and less frequently. It hurt that she could see his face so clearly, yet he felt remote and somehow irretrievable, part of a past unblemished by disease. Tears pricked her eyes. She blinked and shook her head, forced her attention back to

the fabric on the table, took a firm grasp of the scissors and resumed cutting.

At 4 o'clock, as she was pinning sections of the dress together, she was summoned to the verandah door by a tap on the grille.

I finish for today, Miss. Donovan had changed into his regular clothes, jeans and a T-shirt. He gestured towards the now neat lawn. I'll be back Thursday, same time. He nodded and walked away.

On Thursday Donovan worked late into the evening, pushing himself to complete the job until darkness stopped him. Yvonne had downed tools at sunset. She was stretched out on a lounge, a novel open on her lap. As he approached the verandah to take his leave she noticed with a twinge of conscience that he walked with a tired droop.

Donovan, she said, rising to meet him, why not rest a minute and have a cool drink? Or some tea?

Abruptly, without a word, he turned and retraced his steps down the path, the mashed-down backs of his workshoes flip-flapping against his heels. He stopped near the gate beside what looked like a huge clump of long, coarse grass and cut a fistful of blades with his machete.

What's this? she said when he handed them to her.

You don't know fevergrass? His eyebrows rose. Don't you know how to make fevergrass tea?

I don't. It doesn't grow in New York. Yvonne laughed.

Leaving his shoes by the doorway, Donovan followed her through the living room to the sparsely equipped kitchen at the back of the house. She sensed him taking in the freshly painted walls and polished floor tiles, and noticed he trod gingerly, almost on tiptoe, as though he were trespassing.

In the kitchen, she reached for the shiny new kettle which sat on the stove, but he stopped her.

You make this tea in a pot, he said.

Feeling ignorant, she took an enamel pan from the cupboard and handed it to him. He half-filled it with water and set it on the stove to boil.

I probably had fevergrass tea as a child, before my parents took me to the States, she said. I'll probably remember when I taste it.

He rinsed the leaves, twisted them into a thick coil and immersed it in boiling water. A rich, delicious aroma rose, filling the kitchen with a perfume of lemon and roses.

It smells good, she sighed, inhaling the fragrance. She handed him sugar, which he spooned into the pot, and two mugs which he filled with the pale, green-gold liquid.

And it will do you good. Donovan handed her the mug with a slight bow, as if it were a gift.

Good in what way? she asked, leading him back to the verandah.

In every way. This tea good for the head, good for the heart.

Yvonne threw back her head and laughed.

Is not lyrics, trust me. Ask anybody, ask Margie, she will tell you. Fevergrass cure for all kind of ache and pain.

Then it's just what I need, she said, raising the mug to her lips.

They sat silent for a while, sipping tea in the dark to a syncopated chorus of croaking lizards.

Tell me, Miss, Donovan suddenly asked, how come you leave America and come to live alone up here in this lonely old house, in this lifeless place?

Why do you want to know?

It seem strange...

I... I'm taking a break from New York, she said. I was... overworking. I needed a break. I can rest here. It's so peaceful, so beautiful. And hardly lifeless! Listen to the croakers! Look how everything grows so fast; it's uncontrollable!

That's not the kind of life I meant, he said. I wondering, where is your husband? He leaned closer and Yvonne caught the odour of sweat, damp earth, cut limes and decomposing leaves.

I don't have a husband.

What, a pretty lady like you with no husband? What's wrong with men in New York? He smiled, revealing large, yellowing teeth. She began to regret offering him tea.

I used to live with someone...

Ha, I knew...

We broke up over a year ago.

Oh, he said, looking grave. Then he nodded, as though all at once, he knew everything worth knowing about her. It rough when things mash up like that. Believe me, I know. Best make a fresh start... if you can, eh?

Yvonne didn't respond. In the silence that followed, the piercing song of a solo bird trilled above the hum of insect noises.

I use to live in town, in Kingston, Donovan announced suddenly. When I finish high school I moved to Kingston to work for my uncle. He own a lumber yard in Meadowfield and I go to learn the business from him.

Meadowfield! The place where they're having all that gang violence? I saw a report about it on the news just the other night. That must have been tough!

The violence wasn't so bad in those days. People had jobs, a young man could make a decent living. I stay by my uncle five years, learnin the business and savin money. My plan was to get away from Kingston, to come back here and start my own business. I wanted to be my own boss, and not work to make some other man rich.

He fell silent, gazing off into the dark.

So what happened to your plan? She scanned the wide set of his eyes, the curve of his jaw, as though these features could reveal whether a man was honest or a cheat.

He hesitated, then took a mouthful of tea.

Go on, she urged. You can't stop halfway through the story!

Well, he sighed. I come back and rent a small yard, a space near the market. I start tradin and business go well at first but then – you know how it goes. People mash up everythin. People takin things on credit and never payin. People stealin your goods when you're not lookin, your money when you not lookin. Before long the business crash and I in debt up to my eyes.

What do you do now?

Any work I can get. Yard work, farm work, any work... His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. There's no money here. A man can barely make a livin, barely feed his children. It can kill a man's soul.

Yvonne noticed the deep grooves on either side of his mouth, and realized he was older than she'd thought.

How old are your children? she asked, gently.

Ten and twelve. Two fine boys. They're in foreign, gone with their mother.

There was not enough light to read his expression.

Is five years now since I last saw them.

That must be hard...

Is a whole lot easier than havin them here and not havin food to give them.

So why didn't you go with them? She frowned. Was he a delinquent father, a negligent spouse?

I didn't have papers.

Then why doesn't their mother send them to visit you? Or why don't you go just for a visit?

He laughed and his teeth glistened in the dark.

Why don't I visit? He laughed again, a harsh sound. My wife send me money for the fare over a year ago. She send invitation, bank statement, everythin. I took everythin to the US Embassy, stand in line one whole day, fill out form, go back next day, go back the next week and what happen? No visa. Up till now, no visa.

Yvonne sank deeper into her chair, drawing back from his bitterness. She wished he would finish his tea and leave. She had enough sorrow of her own, she didn't need to share his.

Just last week I went back there and fill out new forms. I don't know why I bother, though. Is just a waste of time. But a man have to try, eh? He picked up his mug and drained it in one long quaff.

Is time I go home, he said, looking around for his shoes. I should finish up the back yard next Tuesday, easy. It will only take an hour or two more.

Yvonne got up to open the grille and switch on the verandah light so he could see his way out of the yard.

Within minutes of Donovan's departure, she heard the gate creak open.

Good evenin, good evenin! Margie's voice preceded her slender form up the garden path. Margie! Hey, girl!

Yvonne felt herself flushing, as if she had been caught misbehaving. She wondered how long Margie had been concealed in the yard.

Come on up, come take a seat!

I'm not sitting down for long. Donald soon come home for dinner, and I soon have to put the boys to bed. Margie flopped into the chair facing Yvonne. I see you met Donovan.

He says he knows you.

Margie crossed her slim legs. Her figure and face were youthful, almost girlish, in contrast to the thick, purplish veins curving across her calves, the legacy of three pregnancies.

Everybody here knows Donovan! He's a decent enough fellow... but I hear he love women too much.

Is there a man on this island who doesn't? Yvonne shrugged.

True... but he have a wife and some family problem... you know the kind of thing.

Actually, I don't.

What I'm trying to say is, you don't want to get too involved!

I'm not getting involved, I'm giving him work.

Maybe so, but... one thing can easily lead to another, eh? You didn't grow up around here; you wouldn't understand how a man like Donovan operates.

I don't understand what you're hinting at, Margie.

All I'm trying to tell you is, you have to be careful of people around here. Margie's voice dropped to a whisper. All of them looking for something, especially from somebody like you, coming from foreign.

What's *really* bothering you? The fact that he does manual work? That people around here will disapprove of me drinking tea with a yardman? Folks round here sure are backward!

I only mention it cause you're not... Margie faltered under her cousin's glare. Never mind. I done say what I

come to say. Donald must be home by now, waiting for his dinner. I gone. She sprang to her feet, patted Yvonne's shoulder and hurried away, leaving her cousin fulminating at this fresh invasion of her privacy.

Around sundown on his third day in the yard, Donovan summoned Yvonne to inspect his handiwork.

You didn't know you had so much hiding under all that bush, eh? He had chopped back the croton hedge, pruned the bougainvillea and cut away the mango tree's overhanging branches. Yvonne trod gingerly over the spiky brownish crabgrass, making politely appreciative noises as Donovan pointed out a bed of stunted Easter lilies, the remains of a small rockery and, at the centre of the newly-made lawn, a cluster of straggly poinsettias.

Hmm. She looked around, not sure that she liked the yard now it was shorn of its lush overgrowth. I suppose it *is* a lot neater.

Donovan glanced at her face.

You miss the flowers, don't you? Don't worry, I'll make them bloom again for you.

That's quite a promise, Yvonne said, laughing.

Just a few hours a week, and you won't believe how everything will thrive!

I should have seen this coming.

Don't feel obliged –

Half a day, once a week, you say?

If you can afford it.”

Oh... I suppose I can, she sighed. OK. She offered him her hand. “It's a deal.

He squeezed her hand in both his, thanking her repeatedly. She pulled away, embarrassed, saying it was nothing, really. She headed towards the back yard to see what changes he had made there.

On the afternoons he came to work, Yvonne sat on the verandah, tacking segments of dresses together or taking up hems. Sometimes when he was done, he rested on the step and they discussed the garden's progress. She discovered that Donovan was a mine of information about people in the village, most of whom he'd known since childhood. He was knowledgeable about the parish as a whole: its characters, its history, its places of danger, its beauty spots.

He must have sensed that Yvonne enjoyed his conversations, for he fell into the habit of stopping by just to wish her good day. Once, when she was out, he left a sack of jelly coconuts, husked and ready for piercing, propped up against the verandah door. Another time he left a bag of luscious, crimson otaheiti apples. The next time he arrived for work he was cradling a bunch of tiny apple bananas. He offered her the fruit with a small, solemn bow, and she warmed with pleasure at the delicacy of the gift.

One Friday morning as she was loading her dusty VW beetle in preparation for a trip into Kingston, Donovan appeared at her gate dressed in neatly pressed slacks and a short-sleeved white cotton shirt. He asked for a ride into town. He had an appointment at the US Embassy: more visa matters, he explained. Of course, she said, she could use some company on the road.

They climbed into the ancient car and set off on the road to Kingston. The road wound steeply into the valley, past acres of orderly banana groves, through dense emerald woods, levelling out alongside the glistening waters of a sweeping, sleepy river. The morning air retained a hint of the night's coolness, and though the sun was not yet high, its light played on the river's surface in a quivering, dazzling dance.

Do people here know how lucky they are, surrounded by all this beauty? Yvonne said.

Lucky? Donovan frowned. He had been deep in thought, as if inwardly rehearsing for the interview at the Embassy. Lucky? I call winning the Lotto lucky! Or getting through with a visa first time... He paused, looking wistful, contemplating the unlikely possibility of such luck passing his way. Then he shrugged and said:

There are places close to your house prettier than this. You ever swim at Strawberry Fields?

I haven't, but I'd like to, she said, thinking how seldom she went to the beach, how much she'd like to go someplace new. She felt Donovan's gaze on her face.

I need to see more of the island.

But you need company?

I guess so. She caught his glance for a second, then looked away.

Nothing more was said until they approached the outskirts of Kingston and hit a cloud of exhaust fumes from an unexpectedly long and sluggish line of traffic. All thought of beaches vanished from Yvonne's mind, replaced by the need to concentrate on the line of vehicles stretching as far as she could see.

Sunday morning, Donovan tapped on the verandah grille at eight o'clock. He wore a sky-blue shirt and beige polyester pants, a rolled-up towel under one arm, a bulging plastic bag in his hand.

Is a perfect morning for Strawberry Fields, he said as Yvonne unbolted the grille. What you think?

I'm sorry – I have a *pile* of work to do.

The day's perfect for the beach. The sun not too hot and the breeze just right. You could do your sewing this evening.

Yvonne fingered the strands of an unravelling braid. Then she laughed and threw up her hands. Yes! *It is* the perfect day! She hurried into the bedroom to rummage for a bathing suit.

Could she get away with a bikini? She pulled a favourite black two-piece from a drawer. Would he notice that one of her breasts was smaller than the other? She pulled on the bikini bra and scrutinized her reflection in the mirror, turning left, then right, and grunted, satisfied with what she saw. She pulled denim cut-offs and a white lawn shirt over the bikini, wrapped an Indian cotton scarf around her braids and stuffed sunscreen and oil into a Bloomingdale's beach bag, snatched her sunglasses from the dresser and hastened back to the verandah.

I have jelly coconuts. Donovan held up the plastic bag to show her.

But we need something to eat! Yvonne hurried to the kitchen, threw two mangos, two avocados and a packet of plain crackers into the beach bag, then hurried back to the verandah, ready.

As she started the VW, Margie's face popped up in Yvonne's head. The engine stalled. Should she be doing this? Then: Why not? *Why not?* She re-ignited the engine. What harm could come from an outing to the beach? She turned to flash a smile at Donovan, who settled back in his seat and strapped on his seat belt.

The road to the coast was punctuated with holes the size of trenches and sudden, sharp bends. Donovan attempted to start a conversation, but gave up, silenced by Yvonne's absorption in manoeuvring the car away from potholes. He spoke only to give her directions. They'd get to Strawberry Fields by a sharp turn off the main road, he explained, but the first turn they took led to the high, wrought-iron gates of a private house. The

track was too narrow to turn; Yvonne had to reverse back to the main road.

Are you sure you know the way? If you're not, we should probably turn back.

Is only one wrong turn, Donovan said. You always give up so easy?

Yvonne bit her lip so as not to snap a sharp retort.

Anyway, there's the turn. Yes, that is it.

Yvonne was relieved to see a faded wooden sign pointing the way down a narrow turning, but as the aged car bumped and rattled along a seemingly endless, rock-strewn dirt track, what remained of her good spirits faded. By the time she pulled up under a clump of sea almonds, her head ached, her nerves were frazzled and she wished she were back on her verandah, alone. She stepped out of the beetle, slammed the door shut and leaned against it, trying to calm down. Donovan eased out of the car and reached into the back seat for their bags.

You look like you need a swim, he said, and frowned when Yvonne did not reply.

Yvonne followed behind as he led the way through a grove of sea pines to a tiny cove that was no more than a fringe of trees and a horseshoe of white sand embracing an expanse of sparkling azure water.

Tell me if you ever see any place as pretty as this, he said, with a proud gesture of his arm.

Yeah, it's pretty, she said offhandedly, and watched his face fall.

She spread her towel in the dappled shade of a palm tree, settled herself on the towel and began smoothing oil on her legs. Donovan spread his towel a cautious yard or so away. He sat fully clothed, knees drawn up, staring at the sea.

Their silence was disturbed by the sudden arrival of a

youth. He jogged out of nowhere and halted in front of Yvonne, one hand buried in the pocket of torn-off nylon sweatpants, the other outstretched, palm facing the sky.

Mornin, Miss, I'm hungry Miss, beg you a few dollars to buy breakfast?

Donovan jumped to his feet in a flurry of sand and lunged towards the boy, a stream of curses spewing from his mouth. The boy fled, disappearing through the trees.

Did you have to react like that? Yvonne jumped to her feet. Did you have to be so aggressive? The sudden, hostile outburst alarmed her: did he have a violent streak? Had he beaten his wife? Was that why she left him?

You don't understand these youths around here. Donovan kissed his teeth and sat again. They're good for nothin but beggin and stealin. Not one of them would consider doin a decent day's work for their money.

That's a bit harsh, isn't it? Yvonne loomed over him, hands on hips. Aren't you the one who's always saying how hard it is to survive around here, how there's no work, no money? She glared down at him. For a moment he glared back.

Besides, she continued, it's annoying when they beg, but it's not a crime. All they want is a few dollars. I don't mind handing out a few dollars now and then. It's the least I can do.

The least you can do?

Yes, the least I can do! To make up for having so much more than them.

He laughed at her, a hard, incredulous bark. Yvonne turned her back on him and strode towards the water, wondering what had possessed her to come to this deserted place with a man she barely knew, a man with nothing but disappointment to his name.

The morning sun was pale, but hot enough to bring a film of perspiration to her face. She removed her shorts and shirt and waded into the turquoise sea. Water brushed her skin like a cool caress as she strode in up to her waist. She scooped it up in cupped hands and rubbed her skin with it, like a balm. She lunged forward and swam breaststroke, pushing and kicking the water until she tired and paused to catch her breath. Only then did she think of Donovan sitting alone on the beach. She felt a surge of remorse. She stood up and turned to call out to him, but slipped on a large sea-stone and teetered backwards, and fell flat on the seabed.

When she surfaced, spluttering, she saw Donovan wading towards her, fully clothed. She beat the water with flailing arms and squeezed her eyes shut to ease the sting of salt. When she opened them, Donovan was beside her, lifting her. She let her head rest against his chest, feeling thankful. She breathed in the fresh-washed smell of his shirt and the deeper, earthy smell of his skin. Back on the sand, he put her down on the mat, but she held on to him and pulled him down beside her. He drew away with a quizzical frown, but she pulled him against her and he didn't resist. She kissed his face and he kissed her back, then she was tugging at his pants and wriggling out of her bikini with no thought of the symmetry of her breasts. They lay on the straw mat, her hands roaming his skin, her legs wrapped around him, holding him deep inside as they rocked and swayed to the rhythm of the waves.

They left the cove at sundown, driven away by swarms of spiteful sandflies. Back on the road, Yvonne took the narrow uphill bends with exaggerated turns of the steering wheel, whooping with glee as the beetle's tires screeched on the broken-up Tarmac, laughing at Dono-

van who strapped on his seat belt and urged her to take it slow. She let him out by the entrance to the lane that led to his tiny wooden house, one of a cluster of fragile-looking dwellings set back from the main road, behind a clump of trees. Less than half an hour later, he appeared at her door with a six-pack of Red Stripe. Together they foraged in Yvonne's refrigerator and found a bundle of callaloo, some onions and tomatoes which Donovan washed and chopped and set to cook in a large skillet, while Yvonne warmed a pot of rice left over from the previous day. They ate out on the verandah in the fading light, and afterwards sprawled in the two loungers, not talking much, sipping beer and tracking the moon's progress across the sky, until sun-drunk and love-weary, they fell into Yvonne's bed.



They had been lovers for a few weeks when Yvonne woke one morning, a dream fragment repeating in her head: Donovan striding down Seventh Avenue, smack in the middle of the road among buses, trucks and hooting cars, wearing a torn shirt, mud-smearred cut-offs, and down-at-heel, mashed-back shoes. She turned this fragment over and over. It was asking: Is there any future in this? She hadn't told him about her illness: what would he say when she did? What would he do? She sat up in bed and scanned his face on the pillow by her side. He slept on his back, one arm dangling over the bed's edge. He frowned in his sleep, and his lips twitched as though engaged in a silent debate. Yvonne threw back the sheet that covered him, exposing the soft mound of his genitals, and long, sinewy legs. Skin the colour and texture of bark, and across the shins a network of shiny,

satin scars, upfront and visible, not concealed by discreet folds of skin, like hers. His skin told a story of labour and toil; hers tucked its sorrows neatly away.

So, you think you get a good bargain? Donovan was watching her through bleary eyes.

Bargain? She drew up the sheet and snuggled against his side. I pay for your labour, not your body, she said.

Yard work, bed work, it's one and the same, he said, pulling her close.

You can't mean that! She slid over him.

Well, this kind is sweeter, he acknowledged, reaching his arms around her.

And this kind is free, she added, touching her mouth to his.

When more weeks passed without even one visit from Margie, Yvonne concluded that her cousin knew Donovan was sleeping over and did not approve. She suspected that the entire community was gossiping, but she was too happy to let such narrow-mindedness worry her. How did Donovan feel? He belonged here, he knew these people, he was a married man, even though his wife had been absent for years. Did he mind his private life being public knowledge? She raised the matter with him over a Sunday morning breakfast.

People will talk, yes. What you expect? He shrugged, more concerned with piling ackees and green bananas onto his plate. Then he said: Listen, Yvonne. You remember the time we went to Kingston? You remember I went to the embassy to reapply for a visa? Well, the papers come through! I get the visa!

She reached across the table to squeeze his hand. Honey, I'm glad for you. When did you hear?

A few days ago.

And you never mentioned it?

I never said anything because... well because... He sighed and set down his fork. He put his elbows on the table and dropped his head on his hands.

Because of what?

Because I don't know if I can go.

What do you mean? I don't understand you. You have the visa, you have the money for your ticket...

The money I have is not enough, he said, raising his head. It not enough. I have it over a year now and I spend some of it. I need two hundred US more to make up the fare. His voice faded to a whisper. Can you lend it to me?

A cold mass settled on Yvonne's shoulders. She sat still in her chair.

So here it is, she said eventually. So that's what all the tea-drinking was about. And the otaheiti apples. And Strawberry Fields...

I never plan for this to happen, Yvonne, believe me! He reached across the table for her hands, which she pulled away and buried between her knees. If you can help me, if you can lend me the money, I'll pay you back.

How, Donovan? How could you pay me back on the pittance you earn? How do you even know I have the money to lend you? Yvonne was on her feet, shouting.

You come from foreign, don't you? And you've been flinging your money away on beggars... His voice trailed off. Suddenly his brows snapped together. You mean, you don't have the money...?

Yvonne stared at him across the table. His posture, slightly hunched and pleading, was a cliché, a banal picture of neediness. She felt no sympathy at all.

Donovan, she said, what happened to your pride?

She stood and turned her back on him. She strode into the bedroom, snapping the door shut behind her. She

was trembling, though the morning was hot. She climbed into bed fully clothed, drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, but the trembling would not stop.

She fell into a shallow sleep and woke to a feeling of warmth, as if Donovan's body was stretched spoon-like against her back, his arm thrown across her waist, the way they always slept. She turned to touch him and touched instead a vacant space. She jumped out of bed, heart pumping. There was no sign of him in the living room or in the kitchen. Breakfast was still on the table, his food abandoned, her own plate empty. Her belly gripped with a pain sharper than hunger. Tears stung her eyes.

She began to search for her pocket book, almost in a panic, and found it in its usual place in a corner of the bedroom. She fumbled for her chequebook and a pen. Dropping on the bed, she wrote a cheque for two hundred dollars, then crossed out the two and replaced it with a three, breathing a loud sigh of relief as she searched for an envelope. She pulled on a pair of sandals and hurried out of the house, heading towards the lane where Donovan lived. She half-ran down the road, oblivious of the heat burning down on her head. She wasn't sure which of the small dwellings clustered along the dusty track was his and asked a boy passing her on a rusted bicycle if he knew Donovan. The boy pointed to a neat-looking house fringed with white and red hibiscus.

She knocked on the unvarnished wooden door, but there was no answer, so she bent and pushed the envelope underneath. She imagined his delight at opening the envelope and seeing the cheque. Straightening up, she felt a surge of happiness, imagining him smiling with relief. She wouldn't linger, she would hurry back home

since she still had work to do on the bridesmaids' dresses for the politician's daughter's wedding. She would keep busy until Donovan came by.

He must have jumped over the garden gate while she was at the sewing machine because she didn't hear the gate creak open. He must have crept up the path to the verandah. He must have pushed the envelope hard under the verandah grille, for it lodged against a chair leg, insignificant and crumpled as a discarded tissue. She found it at sundown when she'd gone outside to sit and wait, not knowing he had come and gone.