

Enith Martin Williams



Prison Bread

WHEN SHE CAME HOME FROM PRISON, SHE BROUGHT A BAG OF BREAD. The bread was different from any I had seen before. Later I would learn it was French bread, Baguette, to be exact. A Haitian warden had taught the women to make them, and they were baked ceremoniously to celebrate the release of a prisoner.

No one in the village could remember a woman, much less a child, ever going to prison before. She was given a sentence of life, later reduced to 15 years. When I was born, she had already served seven years. Despite her incarceration, she never really left the village. She was the most constant topic of conversation; all the other events simply interrupted the unending commentary at which she was the center.

Our village was small and set high in the mountains. Every day, even at the height of summer, there was a pleasant breeze, and it never got as hot as it did in the flatlands. The evening's chill meant that everyone owned at least one sweater or a warming cloth worn tightly-wrapped around the body. I awoke early each dawn to watch the slow dance of the morning mist cross the valley, leaving moist remembrances of nighttime.

Strangers did not often come to our village, and our few visitors did not linger. We were not unfriendly, but we kept our circle, and as children we learned early to keep secrets. Our rules were few and known to all. We accepted that as simple people, our lives were ordinary, and on the rare occasion that something extraordinary happened, the elders would mull it over and spit out a few comments, and then the official village response would be sent as if broadcast by radio, and that would be that. The village was an easier place to live in if difficult issues did not stick around too long.

There was only one road into and out of Chalky Hill. A wrinkled gray snake of asphalt, the Parish Council had laid it down over the bridle and footpaths used by the founding families when they first settled in the rocky, hilly interior. We were told that the elders had chosen this site for our village because it was far from the plantations and hard to get to. Double protection in case freedom was to be short lived. All the families had begun village life in wattle-and-daub houses built during work days and give back days. In between, there was work to reap coffee and pick pimento and load banana and peel ginger and mine whatever gold could be coaxed from the dark moist earth. The

more well-to-do families made additions and renovations to their structures from block and steel and cold concrete.

At a certain time in the day, when the sun is high in the sky, if you stood at one end of the road and turned around quickly, you could see daytime ghosts, spirit people trapped at the crossroads waiting for nightfall to continue their journey. They were usually old and dressed in their Sunday best and every one of them held a Bible in their right hand. It was said that they could not see you, at least not in the daylight, and they were harmless. It was on one of those days that I first saw her. She was too young to be a spirit, but I turned away and looked back again, quickly, thinking she would disappear, but she didn't. She stood tentatively in the square with her pelisse and a brown paper bag filled with white sticks. She was not a stranger; that was clear from the steady confidence of her gaze. She was looking for someone. As she walked towards me, I knew without asking who it was. It was her — she had come home.

I grew up with a guardian, a woman named Mrs. Fletcher, whom I called auntie. My mother had given me to her when I was a baby because she could not afford to take care of me. Mrs. Fletcher lived in a big house with glass in the windows — and tiles on the floor that shone like marbles. In return for her taking care of me, I ran errands for her and kept her company. She also made sure I learnt how to cook and sew and mix drinks and walk softly and sit gracefully. She even made sure I went to school, and most of the time I did not miss my mother.

Mrs. Fletcher was an important person in the village. Her husband was rich. He owned a motorcar and he worked in an office in the main town. Most days after chores, Mrs. Fletcher would entertain guests. As they settled on the verandah, it was my duty to serve cooling drinks. I kept my head down so that they could see that I was not listening to their gossip. But when they began to talk about her, I could not help myself; I listened as keenly as if her story was my own. I grew to anticipate her appearance when they spoke about her. Summoned, she would appear when the animated clap-clap of words and smooth rolling laughter faltered and the voices dipped, just a little. Then there would be a soft rustle of clothing being rearranged, and boots settled and bags and pans laid to rest, and the adults would lean in, just a little closer into each other; that was when she would come.

Whenever Mrs. Fletcher talked about her, I could not take my eyes from my guardian. My auntie's knowledge rendered her ageless and her sturdy body would sway back and forth with girlish glee and her face would light up as she relayed the newest update. Even now I recall her mischievously twinkling bright and all-seeing eyes belying the horrors she repeated. The adults would catch themselves in mid-sentence and I would be dismissed. That was when I took to hiding under the raised platform of the house. The smell of the place was damp, old house damp from years of rain and sun and old broken furniture and old wash water thrown from the washroom and the piss of the lazy son and the dog and the occasional pig and the yard fowl that insisted on laying her eggs under there and another smell I could not put name to. Squeezed in that cramped surroundings, I imag-

ined that these same scents were in her prison cell; I somehow knew that she had no more space to move and saw no more sunlight than I did here.

When I was about eight years old the stories changed. They became darker and more dense, with a new and overheated urgency to their telling. Even in the bright sunshine of the afternoon, it became as midnight when she appeared. Her case had begun to be mentioned almost on a daily basis in the newspaper. It was reported that a great Kingston lawyer had taken her case and filed a plea of temporary insanity to the Privy Council in London. The great Kingston lawyer had been persuasive, and it was rumored that the Lord High Chancellor would soon rule. The newspapers were full of praise for the great Kingston lawyer; he was described as a great orator, and in time he would gain international prominence from his handling of her case. The lawyer had argued that the point of law that had been used to put her behind bars was not valid. He had begun a campaign in the hallowed halls of the council to convince the members that not only was the application of that particular interpretation of the law to her case unwarranted, but it also exceeded the limitations of the intent of the law.

The adults on the verandah enjoyed reading about the skill of the great Kingston lawyer.

And their pride was evident as they read about his commanding and skillful use of the English language and his knowledge of the law. They were not pleased that he was expending his genius on her. I noticed that the mood on the verandah seemed to change as the reports from London appeared more and more in her favor.

I remembered all of this as I looked at her. I also realized that in all the years I had never seen a photograph of her and no one had ever given a physical description of her. In my mind she remained the child she was when she first left the village. She was now an adult. Her eyes met mine and I recoiled from the vacant and faded gaze that shot past me to look at my baby. Her own eyes filled with the hot tears of remembered pain, and she walked past me without either of us saying a word.

After that first day, I did not see her much. I no longer lived with my guardian and so I did not hear a lot about her. I knew she had moved in with them, and the older people muttered and talked amongst themselves about payback and good and evil. Whenever we saw each other a wordless exchange bonded us close. In the village, I continued to hear the gossip going around again about her. But it had lost the sweet satisfaction of the telling. She was back with us now. Solving her mystery was no longer possible.

One day as I washed by the river, the wind picked up and the first drops of rain began to fall from the sky that been overcast all day. I had not wanted to come, but I had to keep the baby's nappies clean. As I grabbed the dried cloths from the bushes, another pair of hands joined mine. She did not speak and I was too shy to. We worked quickly I gathered the white squares and crushed them into round balls to throw into the washbasin. She took them from me and separately, and indi-

vidually folded them into neat triangles. I would learn that this was the fold for unbaked croissants.

After that day by the river, she would seek me out whenever I was alone. I would be walking to the shop alone at night to get some gripe medicine for the baby, and she would appear beside me, and keep my company as we walked by the churchyard with its harmless dead and the dark corners with the living devils. I would be working in the field reaping crops for pay or tending our kitchen garden or picking up rat gut from the coffee fields, and she would be there. Quick and efficient, she taught me much about getting through unpleasant work. So silent was she at first that many times I would imagine she still lived in my head, but then we would begin to talk and she was real. In the beginning we would share simple exchanges about the day and the heat and the breeze and the rain and the size of the mangos and the need for rain and the sweetness of the apples. We never spoke about ourselves, at least not personal things, but our bond grew strong.

One day my old guardian drove to the house. She had come to speak to my mother. Without thought I crept into a secret place to listen to the conversation. Our house was low to the ground, and so I sat on the floor beside the open window. My guardian had come to warn my mother that I had been keeping company with her. She told my mother that she was not a good influence on me and that I should be protected from her. My mother laughed, hard and bitter, and then she told my guardian that her concern was too late and that there was nothing left in this world for me to be protected from. My mother said I knew all the secrets of the world; she said I had been betrayed and had learned how to protect myself.

Shortly after that, my mother left the village to seek work. I was alone with the baby in the one room that was our house. I did not miss my mother because I had her. Our time together became more open, and finally in the late of the nights as the stars blanketed the sky and the moon lighted the dark to daylight, she told me of her time in that place. She started from the beginning and I learnt that we both had much in common. Her experience differed in one important way from mine — she had been a stranger to the village. Our uncle, Mr. Fletcher, had taken her in when she was just a toddler. She had been left one Saturday evening with a small bag of clothes outside the gate of the market. She knew her own name, but knew her own mother only as Mama. Her new parents were kind in their own way; she had enough to eat and a bed to sleep on. She remembered that she cried herself to sleep every night, until one night Mr. Fletcher came into her room and rocked her to sleep.

Of the event that sent her to prison, she spoke about the pain and the aloneness. She remembered the anger when he would bring her the cloth to tie down her belly and his insistence that she allow him to give away the child when it was born. In prison she had been treated kindly by the other women and mothered by many. They had known the truth of her actions. She had acted as a child and broken a toy she did not want that had been given to her by someone she hated.

I told her then about me, about how I learnt about her and the stories and about the time our

uncle, Mr. Fletcher, discovered my hiding place under the cellar. I remembered it as yesterday. One day, as I listened to the hum of voices above me, the scent in the place changed. I turned my head and saw my uncle watching me. He had entered from the other side of the house. He had been searching for me. I did not speak, and he did not mention it to my guardian. From that day on before going to my hiding place, I always made sure my uncle was not around. Having to secure his absence meant that I sometimes missed some of the news about her.

Another day, after I had seen my uncle drive off, I went to my spot. My auntie had visitors, relatives from abroad, and I knew that it would not be long before she appeared. I settled in and started to peel an orange I had just picked. My sharp fingernails had just pierced the smooth skin of the fruit when I felt something on my leg. It was a hand, a firm hand, a man's hand. It was my uncle and he had a knife. He took the orange from me and peeled it, a skillful movement of round fruit and sharp steel. The peel did not break and he looped the necklace of rind around my neck. He sliced the top off of the orange, perfect and round, and put it into his mouth and sucked it, then he put it, the same spot he had sucked, into mine. I wanted to bite his hand.

I could not move. He held me captive as my auntie told the story I had come to know by heart. She explained that the yard girl who had lived with them was the very same person the great Kingston lawyer was working to get released from prison. Her new voice, heavy and leaden, spoke of how the girl had given birth in this very house, and how she, my guardian, had not known that the girl was pregnant, and how the girl had cracked the newborn baby's neck and left the mess in the washroom for my auntie to find. My auntie then went on to explain, in hushed familiar tones, that her husband had begged her not to turn the girl over to the police but that she had done her Christian duty and given the girl to the authorities. She was not pleased that this man, the great Kingston lawyer, was going to get her off.

I heard all this as my uncle's body pressed mine into the cool hard ground. I inhaled the scent of the damp, the stink of his sweat, and the dust and the mildew, and that other faint unfamiliar smell became stronger until the thick cloud of its strangeness threatened to suffocate me. I would learn later that what filled my lungs that day was the black stench of betrayal.

I asked her finally about the bread, and she showed me how to make it. I look back now at that time and marvel at the vicissitude of faith. She lives with me still, and even though neither of us had another child, our home is filled with the laughter and happiness of girls making prison bread for sale.

