

## *Robert Edison Sandiford*

### MISTRESS

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He started to go mad the day his wife left him, taking their child Lord knows where. Nobody knew when she left him, not exactly, but everybody could see that was what happened. But let me not get ahead of myself. There is much to this story, most of which I don't truly know. We would see him on the side of the road, selling papers from a shed cluttered with bundles of yellowed *Nations* and *Advocates*. It used to be he sold other goods from his front door. That's when he had a shop, of sorts, and people would buy bug spray and matches and limes from him. Back then, the clutter extended no further than his verandah. But since she gone and left him, it's as if there's no one left to hold it all back or keep it in check, all those old papers piling up and spilling out. Selling papers was always his main business, he couldn't compete with the shop across the road. He was an odd man—this man whose wife left him, I mean, not my husband, though he, too, could be funny. But I'm getting ahead of myself. My husband used to always tell me I was getting ahead of myself—even though I'm much calmer now. This man whose wife left him had a laugh like a squawk, and he would laugh out loud at nothing at all, it seemed to me. He might have been going doltish even then. He dressed like a pauper, in shiny, mismatched clothes that were either too tight or too loose. But he was no fool. He wrote his figures with a pen in the palm of his hand when tallying a bill for a customer, and sent the paper money every day down Fontabelle way by one of the Silver Sands minivan drivers who raced past his shop morning, noon and night. He was a smart businessman; he just couldn't compete with the shop across the street, not without a deep freeze or a licence. And his wife was ugly. There's no other way to say it. She was ugly

enough to drive any man mad. She had a mole growing over half her head where her hair should be. But he married her anyway. *It's them women without airs that does know all the tricks in bed to bewitch a man.* That's what my husband used to always say. But I am getting ahead of myself, I've got to stop getting ahead of myself. Their child was too sweet, though unmannerly, proof that the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree. At first, we didn't see her, his wife, not for a long time. I don't know if anybody asked after her. I know I didn't; it wasn't any of my business. But I heard what the people in the development were saying. *She gone to 'Merica. She gone to spend time with she sick aunt. She gone an' lef' he—he beat she, and de child, too.* I heard all the stories; not one sounded like the truth no matter how close to the truth it came. She and the little girl gone missing, and for all we knew they could be dead in a gully somewhere, and people making up stories.... This was after a long time. Nobody would ask the man where his wife and child were. They just took it for granted. So one morning, on my way out to get my paper from him, I make up my mind. Now I know he can cuss me, tell me I am too malicious, to mind my own business. But I wake up, make tea, make up my mind because my husband's not in yet, and I want to know.... People think I've got it good, neither chick nor child, and a big house in the heights and terraces, and I suppose I do. He doesn't beat me. He gives me money. We still have sex once in a while. I haven't gone to fat like most of the old girls I went to school with. But still I feel sad and lonely because people think I got it good, and they don't know because they don't ask. If I had a child as sweet as that man's rude one, I might be more tired and cruel but less sad and lonely. And I have this feeling, too, that I won't be seeing my husband again, and in fact he didn't come back.... I'm getting completely ahead of myself, can't help it now. I think to myself there's nothing wrong with asking a question. Sometimes, there's everything right with asking a question. Maybe I should have asked more when I was a little girl, then I would know why men and women don't behave any better even when they're full-grown. That may be all that man—the man with the wife and child gone missing, not my husband—needs, is to have someone ask him where his whole world went, and if it went when he wasn't looking or right in front of his eyes. So I put my keys in my nightgown pocket and walk right out the front door, leaving the stove on and the door open for my return. When I get to his shed, I ask for my paper—he was never one for small talk. But

now I have to ask him something which small talk would make easier to ask. And I take the paper, and I look at him and at the house behind, exploding with misery, and I am there digging in my pocket for coins instead of keys, and the words catch in my throat like sand. And do you know what he says to me? Do you know what that brute who isn't my husband does before you all come and get me? He holds my hand, so: *Nah, Mistress, he says. You keep it. I can't make you pay no more. Mistress, you done pay enough for both of us.*