

*ASHLEY ROUSSEAU*

## **A Fish-Eye Country**



The plane circled the island. Popsicle-orange streetlights lit up the dark mass of the city below, mapping out streets and neighbourhoods, the land from the sea, the plains from the hills. Cities always seem so peaceful from up here, Fiona thought. She peered out the porthole-shaped window, trying to determine where Newcastle was, if she could spot the stadium. She was amazed at how large Kingston had become. It had been almost twenty years since she had been home.

“First time on the island?” The old woman sitting beside her had tried several times to engage her in a conversation ever since they took off from Boston. Fiona guessed she was in her sixties, and probably lived in the West Indian community of Roxbury. There was a red and white teddy bear and a large pack of fragrant soap peeking out of the bulging Kmart shopping bag at the old woman’s feet.

“No, I’m Jamaican,” Fiona replied. She turned back to the window. She hadn’t slept much the night before and wasn’t in the mood to talk. The plane was lower now and Fiona could see the dull scissors reflection of the lights of Palisadoes Airport on the harbour.

“But you don’t look Jamaican.” The old woman smiled confidently as if she knew Fiona was playing a joke on her, which would soon be revealed.

Fiona shrugged her shoulders. “But I am.”

“So where you were born?”

Fiona took a deep breath. “Kingston.”

“You sure you’re not American?”

“Listen ma’am, I may be white, but I’m Jamaican, okay?” Fiona zipped open her handbag and

began searching for her lipstick. She was tired of defending her right to her nationality, despite her appearance, to Americans and worst of all, to other Jamaicans.

“Oh,” the old woman said quietly. She looked down into her lap at her dark, wrinkled hands and began folding the handkerchief, she had taken earlier from her brassiere, into neat squares.

Fiona knew she had been unnecessarily short with the old woman. She glanced back at her and tried to see her again for the first time. Her mahogany eyes, with their glaucoma grey pallor, reminded her of those of a parrot fish she’d seen at the beach at Hellshire when she was a child. The fish was radiant with blue and yellow-tipped tail and fins, its body, brushed with sophisticated red streaks. But its eyes were as cloudy as dirty water.

“You know what them say: once a Jamaican, always a Jamaican—no matter where we go.”

Fiona was self-conscious about her rusty patois but at least it made the old woman laugh.

“I’m Fiona.”

“And I’m Joy, Joy Robinson. How d’do?”

The half-empty plane gently hopped a few beats down the tarmac and came to a crawl. The passengers applauded as they often did with a smooth landing in Kingston, and the two women smiled at each other.

Fiona thought back to her decision three weeks ago to visit the island. It had come on one of those dark, cold January afternoons, shortly after she had broken off her relationship with her boyfriend, Jim. She was walking back to her apartment from the T stop at Cleveland Circle and her bags of groceries were cutting their way through her gloved hands. A passing car sprayed her legs with brown city-ice slush. She thrust her head and body forward, leaning into the wind and trying to will the distance she had to walk shorter. A poster in a travel agency caught her eye, and she stopped to look at the girl in a swimsuit riding bareback on a horse through the blue Caribbean Sea: “Come to Jamaica and feel alright,” it said.

But now, in retrospect, Fiona knew it wasn’t just the promise of warmth and beauty that had influenced her decision; after all, she had been programmed to be cynical about the island’s advertising as a child of the seventies, whose middle-class parents were kept assured of their decision to migrate by frantic phone calls from friends and relatives about the escalating crime and corruption.

And, it wasn’t an attempt to forget about Jim, either. She had been running from him for some time now, although things had come to a head a few days ago when they went to have dinner with another couple at a new Jamaican restaurant in Cambridge. The restaurant had got a good

review in the paper, but when they arrived Fiona immediately recognised all the markings of mediocre food joint claiming Caribbean parentage: the red, green and yellow neon sign outside, the Bob Marley posters and the flag above the order counter, floral vinyl tablecloths and small, white China vases of silk flowers. They ordered the jerk chicken, but Jim wanted a salad which, as Fiona had warned him, was a sad looking arrangement of shredded cabbage and carrots.

“What is this Fiona?” Jim said, poking his fork into the mound on his plate. “Aren’t Rastafarians vegetarians? Shouldn’t they be able to at least make a real salad?”

Jim’s friend looked as if he was poised to tell his own Rastafarian-reggae music-weed smoking-can you believe-story.

“She’s not a Rasta, Jim,” Fiona said quietly but firmly. What was she doing with this man? She smiled apologetically at the waitress with her braided hair, who was looking at this American white man from the counter like she was about to launch into a tirade of patois expletives. Fiona was glad, at least, that they were the only customers in the restaurant.

“You could bring me some pepper sauce, please?” Fiona asked the waitress. Her mother’s urging to give Jim a chance as a nice and decent boy with a good job was slipping away like the sand in an egg-timer. A plastic photo of Dunn’s River Falls on the wall ahead, caught Fiona’s eye. It was lit from behind in such a way that the water seemed to be moving, but never going anywhere.

Fiona found it disturbing but mesmerising at the same time.

“That’s Fiona for you,” Jim said to the others. “More pepper, everything so spicy you can’t even eat it. I don’t get it.”

“No, you really don’t,” she said, and shook the sauce generously over her food.

Fiona rested her bags on the icy ground, folded her arms, and stood there shivering, still staring at the girl in the poster. The girl sat upright, reins in one hand, her brown legs wrapping the horse’s belly. She had a dreamy look in her eyes and small commas formed at the corners of her mouth. She looked comfortable up there, but also a bit daring. Fiona thought that at any moment she might spur on the horse and go galloping down the beach.

It was then, that Fiona recognised in herself an un-mined envy—a red-eye, her mother would call it—that had been growing inside her since moving to America. It wasn’t the envy that was expected of immigrants like her for an education, a decent job, and perhaps, in the future, a leased car or even a house with a mortgage and shiny conveniences. Instead, it was an envy of those who could have left the island, but had stayed and made a life for themselves. Was it possible that she, too, could make peace with this place, after so many years, and all that had

happened? Fiona picked up her bags and began walking up the street.

“I’m going home,” she told her mother on the phone the next day.

“You are doing what?” Her mother’s emotion was so loud that she could have been standing next to Fiona, instead of being miles away in the kitchen of their suburban house in Worcester.

“I have some leave, so I booked a flight on the 21st. I’ll stay with Auntie Barbara.”

Fiona knew her mother would be pacing the floor, stretching the phone cord as far as the fridge, and then allowing it to curl back towards the cradle on the opposite wall. “Didn’t you hear about the woman they kidnapped last week? Or the Chang boy they murdered in Norbrook?”

“I’ll be careful Mum, but I need to go. I don’t remember it so well anymore.”

There was a long pause. When her mother spoke again, she was calm and resolute. “That country doesn’t want the likes of you, child. Not then, and not now. Don’t you dare fool yourself.”

Fiona had to bite down hard on her bottom lip to stifle the tears.

The plane door opened, and the passengers filed out slowly. Fiona stood briefly at the top of the gangway, letting the sea breeze swirl through her wavy brown hair and the humidity settle on her freckled skin. Ever since that phone call she had tried to focus on simple, two-dimensional memories. She exchanged beach stories with her old Aruban college buddy over lunch one day. She described the misty mountains to a fellow prep chef at the bistro, while they chopped vegetables. She reminisced with her Jamaican friend, Chantal, about sour tamarind balls, sweet plantain tarts and other childhood comforts, as they walked along the Charles River. But it wasn’t enough to stop the rising tide of regret about her decision. Days before her departure date, she dialled the airline’s number to cancel the ticket, and then, hung up.

Fiona inspected the terminal, which was at least double what she remembered it to be. At the conveyor belt, she and the other passengers on her flight stood waiting for their luggage. She kept looking around her, shifting her weight, and changing the position of her arms. It hadn’t been so noticeable on the plane but now she realised what was different: she was the only white person here other than the couple of American businessmen in the corner and the Chinese-Jamaican pilot, leaning back against the baggage desk. She had forgotten what it was like to be a minority, having lived in New England for so long and being accepted as a white American, until she spoke. Her mother’s words echoed in her head, “One day the pot will boil over, just look at Zimbabwe.”

Fiona saw Joy chatting to a young mother and her baby over by the trolleys and knew that Joy must feel like the odd one out too—and, she thought, probably much worse, given the stories she

had heard from her black Jamaican friends up there—in the lily-white neighbourhoods of Beacon Hill and Back Bay. “You don’t know what it’s like Fiona,” Chantal had said to her once, when Fiona and her had begun their uncomfortable, but inevitable, conversation about race and class on the island. “When you walk into a store and the sales girls hover over you, watching you like a hawk as if they think you could never have a gold card in your purse.”

Fiona’s aunt and uncle were waiting by their car at the curb. She recognised them immediately, even though it had been five years since her aunt’s last visit to Boston. Every year, the annual photos were exchanged by her mother’s sisters and brothers. Her mother would put them on the mantle above the glowing electric logs for the Christmas holidays, but then throw them out, come January. Fiona imagined, though, that someone must keep them, compare each year against the next: who had gotten fatter or taller, who looked happier or more miserable, who had life treated better or worse.

Her aunt and uncle also stood out in the crowd of waiting relatives and friends because of the striking image of her aunt’s petite body and pale skin against her uncle’s large, dark frame. He was holding her tenderly as she leaned back on his chest. She seemed to be laughing at something he’d said. Fiona waved to them.

“Hi sweetie,” Aunt Barbara said, breaking away from her husband and embracing her.

“Hey Auntie.” Fiona rested for a moment on her aunt’s shoulder and closed her eyes.

Abruptly, out of the shadows, a ragged man came up and offered to put the bags in the trunk.

“I tell you before, go ’way!” her uncle said.

“Here’s some money, I don’t mind...” Fiona was digging into the pockets of her jeans.

“No, baby. Don’t give them nothing. Them too damn lazy,” her uncle replied, swinging Fiona’s bags into the back of his SUV and slamming the door shut.

Fiona felt confused: why not take the help and give the beggar a few dollars? But she wasn’t sure of herself, and put the incident down to the general suspicion Jamaicans held of each other, which she had witnessed in her own parents and others, even in America. Fiona imagined that if her uncle felt the beggar was unworthy and a ginnal, the beggar probably thought her uncle was a sell out, a black busha, an uptowner with no care for the poor; accusations that both men could probably refute with evidence to the contrary. Already, Fiona could see that such a conversation would never happen, however, in this class-stricken country.

“Come honey,” her aunt said, ushering Fiona inside the vehicle. “Tell me about my sister.”

On the drive home, Fiona tried hard to focus on answering all of the questions about her parents,

as well as on asking the appropriate ones about her aunt and uncle's life. But she was distracted by the sights outside the car: the dust billowing out of the cement factory; the soldiers on the roadside holding their big, automatic guns; the children kicking stones under the streetlamp; the vagrant lying by the overflowing garbage dumpster. And then, further uptown: the slick office buildings and the American fast food outlets, the BMWs and Benzes, the billboards for private security services, and the high walls of elaborate houses. And finally, the darkness of the pot-holed road leading up to her aunt and uncle's house in the hills, past the lean-to bars, and landslides not yet fully cleared, to the imposing automatic gates of their property.

"Fiona, you okay?" Her aunt stood holding the car door open for her.

Fiona got out. "Just a little tired, I guess."

In the middle of the night, Fiona sat up in the dark of the room coughing and reached for her inhaler on the bedside table. What was she doing here? Why did she think it had gotten any better? She didn't even know if she wanted to be Jamaican anymore. She switched on the lamp and looked around the guest bedroom at the heavy floral quilt, the pale pink carpeting, the matching drapes and the faux gold fittings. It reminded her of the interiors of the brownstones on Commonwealth Avenue back in Boston. Sometimes, if she got off early enough from work at night and it wasn't too cold, she would go and sit on a bench in the park that ran down the avenue parallel to the elegant homes, and look through the windows. There would be a brass tabletop lamp, a bushy houseplant to one side, some bookshelves in the background, a man smoking a pipe in a brown leather arm chair and his wife making dinner, perhaps, in the kitchen. Fiona would only stay a few minutes, and then catch the train back to her small apartment where she slept on an old futon and shared a bathroom with a roommate.

Fiona looked up at the tray ceiling and her aunt's fancy chandelier. She wondered if she would have lived in a house like this if her parents had stayed. Fiona thought back to the first few years in Boston when they lived with a cousin of her father's; how her mother had worked as a receptionist at a dentist's office, while her father, who had left Jamaica as a bank manager, took a job selling shoes at a department store. Her parents were comfortable enough now, but they didn't have a boat and a weekend house on the North Coast, and a gardener and maid, like her aunt and uncle did. "Isn't life funny," her mother had said to Fiona recently. "Daddy cut Barbara out of his will when she married Douglas—he used to say to Barb 'your black hurry-come-up is here' when he saw him at the gate. And now Douglas has more money than Daddy ever had."

"Well, there you are, I thought you were lost," her aunt said. She was writing in her chequebook

at the kitchen counter. “Sleep well?”

“Mmm,” Fiona lied.

Aunt Barbara stood and put her small handbag under her arm. “Listen, I’m late for my meeting with the caterers, but Andrea will get you whatever you need, okay?”

“Hello,” Fiona said to the plump woman by the sink whose short, straightened hair framed her face. She looked old enough to be Fiona’s mother.

“Yes, Miss Fiona.”

“No, it’s just Fiona.”

There was an awkward silence. Andrea went back to washing the dishes.

“That’s how it is here sweetie, you forgot?” Aunt Barbara whispered to Fiona, kissing her on the forehead on the way out.

Fiona didn’t reply. She picked up the newspaper and skimmed the headlines. She knew it made no sense fighting her aunt, but neither was she prepared to be part of this subservience charade.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and took it out to the poolside overlooking the green cascading hills of the valley. Fiona had forgotten these intense crayon colours from her childhood: the blue-formica sky, the white-napkin egrets, the hot tap-red Poinciana trees.

She got up and her sarong slipped down her legs onto the terracotta tiles and she walked over to the deep end and dove into the sunlight-marbled pool. She closed her eyes and glided through the cool water, letting the bubbles encase her body.

There it was, waiting patiently for her at the bottom of the pool, like a remora sucker-fish on the floor of a fish pond: The two men had walked in through the open door of their home in the outskirts of Kingston. Fiona’s parents had been expecting friends for dinner. The men’s dark features were flattened by the brown pantyhose they wore as masks. One held a small gun, the other a machete.

Her father saw them first, he was at the bar pouring red wine. He lunged at them and they flung him against the glass coffee table. Blood sprayed the cream sofa.

Fiona was dressing in front of the mirror in her bedroom when she heard the noise and her mother screaming. She didn’t know what to do. She ran to her door to lock it. One of the men was already there. He looked at the young girl half-dressed in a pale yellow skirt, her nipples the colour of honey.

Fiona’s head popped out of the water like a cork. She waded over to the pool’s white apron and rested her chin on her hands. The tears clouded her vision and rolled down her face and into her

mouth. She tasted their salt.

“Hello? Mrs. Walters? The gate was open.”

Fiona turned in the direction of the deep male voice coming from the front of the house. “Who’s that?” She hauled herself out of the water and looked around. There was a tingling at the back of her skull.

“It’s me...” The man appeared from the pathway at the side of the house.

Fiona grabbed the towel from the lounge chair. Her heart was thumping in her throat. “What do you want?” She wrapped the towel around her so that it covered all but her knees and feet below. Fiona’s eyes darted from the approaching man to the house.

“Don’t fret. I don’t bite, you know.” The man smiled.

Fiona felt like she did when she used to get high at college; the man’s words were those of a faraway voice in her head, not of a flesh-and-blood person standing in front of her. “What?” she said.

“Just a joke. I’m David Richards from Sunshine Disco.” He put his hand out.

Fiona spotted the heavy, gold chapparetta bracelet, shining against his dark skin. Slowly, she gave him her hand.

Fiona looked at him steadily now. She connected the knowledge of her uncle’s sixtieth birthday party with needing a disco and tried to regain her composure. “I’m Mrs. Walter’s niece, Fiona.” She gave a half-smile and wiped a wayward lock of hair away from her face, anchoring it behind her ear.

“My pleasure.” The man seemed to be studying her, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Fiona,” he repeated. “I like that name.” He turned to look at the lawn beside the pool.

“Your aunt said I should come and look at the area where she’s going to have the party.”

“She’s not here. I’ll have to get Andrea for you. I’m only visiting.” Fiona bent over to pick up her sarong off the floor.

“You don’t need to do that. I’ll wait.” He sat down on her lounge chair.

Fiona ran her fingers through her wet hair. She adjusted her towel, tucking the top end in, tighter around her breasts.

“Where you from?”

“I’m Jamaican. But I live in Boston.” She rubbed one leg against the other. The water was dripping down from her body and forming a sizeable puddle on the tiles.

“Then you’re a yardie.”

“Something like that.”



He got up and came towards her. Her chest tightened. She wanted to go inside now. She wished her aunt or Andrea would appear.

“You think you could do me a favour and hold my tape?” He pulled out a measuring tape from his shirt pocket and gave her the chrome end.

“So, you been out to any sessions or anything yet?” He was walking away from her, stretching the yellow tape out, across the lawn.

“No, I plan just to take it easy this trip.” She knew what was coming next.

“It might be fun. I bet say an uptown girl like you, never flex with a man like me?”

All of a sudden, Fiona felt dizzy. She remembered how that man had grabbed her and shoved her down onto the floor; how he had rested his weight on her flat chest, crushing her; how his rough fingers had shoved their way down into her yellow skirt.

“So, wha’ you say, Fiona?” David was scribbling measurements on a piece of paper.

Fiona let go of the tape. It raced across the grass and snapped shut like a startled soldier crab in David’s hand. Fiona strode toward the house and slammed the French doors behind her.

That night, Fiona dreamt of riding bareback through the sea on a chestnut horse with a white star on its forehead. The horse was galloping, rising and dipping with the waves like a carousel horse on a pole. With each movement, a hail of silver fish with opaque eyes jumped up, and over, the horse’s mane. At one point, Fiona could see herself: her arms outstretched to the world. She was completely naked with only a thread of yellow seashells laced through her wet hair.

The next morning it rained. Outside was like a charcoal drawing with the thick mist in its varying hues of gray pencilled in around the house, and the hills beyond shaded in wide sweeps of dull black powder. The sound kept Fiona in bed. Rain in Boston had always been different from here, where the unrelenting water fell off the roof and pounded the ground, charting rivers in the rich, dark earth. Her grandmother used to say it was God watering his plants with a bucket, not a hose like in other countries. Fiona missed her grandmother, who had died a few years after she and her parents had moved away. It was what she hated most about leaving, how her family had been scattered like seeds across cities and countries to grow in different directions.

She tried to imagine what her grandmother would think of her now. No longer the fresh-faced little girl whom she would squeeze tightly, for a moment, making them one. No longer spirited and carefree, like the girl on the horse in her dream. Fiona hugged the pillow and faced the wall. There was a knock on the door.

“Fiona, it’s me. Sorry, but it’s after eight and I need to go pick up some things for the party tonight. You said you wanted to come.” Her aunt’s voice was soft and reassuring.

“Come in.” Fiona sat up in the bed, and pulled her large t-shirt over her knees. She watched her aunt walk towards her. Her curly blond hair bounced with every movement of her head, and her green eyes shone against her tanned skin. Her aunt’s sculpted arms reflected the thousands of laps Fiona knew she’d swum in the pool over the years and, in adornment of that effort, several diamond tennis bracelets dripped like raindrops from her wrists. Fiona pulled her own dishevelled hair into a makeshift ponytail.

“Listen, I hear David came by yesterday. He’s a nice guy, we’ve known him for a while. I hope you didn’t mind. I should’ve told you he was coming.” Aunt Barbara frowned, only now showing her years. “When I came back last night, you were already asleep. Andrea told me that you looked a bit upset after he left.”

“She said that? No, no, I’m fine.” Fiona focused on the floor, trying to hold back the tears. Remember, you’re one of the lucky ones, she told herself. The men had panicked when they heard the police car drive up. “Really, I am.”

“You sure? Your mother said you’re still a bit...”

“I’m going to get ready now, alright?” Fiona hopped off the bed and headed toward the bathroom.

They left the house almost an hour later. The sun had come out, drawing back the curtain of clouds and revealing green vistas all around the car. Billowing bamboo hung precariously off the mountains in the valley, mounds of mango trees hovered in between. Banana plants staked the sections which had been cleared for farming. The morning light shimmered off the guinea grass like a silk dress covering the bulges of the hill.

Fiona dared occasionally to look down the precipice on this narrow road connecting Peter’s Rock to Jack’s Hill, and then to the city below. She often met the eyes of children on the dirt paths which led to their small houses, clinging to the hillside. The children would invariably be barefoot: the boys wearing shorts only, and the girls, dresses, they’d outgrown. Sometimes they would be carrying a bucket of water; other times, a younger sibling in their arms.

The car got to the junction with the main road. It was the first time in many years that Fiona was seeing the city in daylight. She registered the neighbourhoods of white concrete houses capped by their brown tile roofs; the shiny high-rises sticking out of the business districts like pointed fingers; the grey thumbprint of smoke drifting over the city from the municipal dump; the airport on the arm of land embracing the harbour. Only four more days to go, she thought.

“Auntie, why didn’t you leave?”

“You mean in the ’70s?”

“Yes.”

“It was really your uncle who refused to leave...said he wasn’t going to any white man’s country to be battered around.”

Like her own parents, Fiona thought. But she knew it was also that her aunt and uncle had escaped unscathed, and that her uncle had cashed in on the fear of all those who had been scared away by the ruling government’s socialist leanings; buying up property at fire sale prices from those who’d left without warning, in the middle of the night, with US dollars stuffed in concealed compartments of suitcases, in the bottom of their shoes, in their underwear, swearing never to return.

“What about you Auntie?”

“I would’ve gone. I still would. This place gets stressful, you know.”

“How?” Nothing about her aunt’s lifestyle seemed stressful to Fiona. She didn’t have to work and she was attended to hand and foot.

“The crime. And sometimes I wished I lived in a place where I wasn’t such a target, where people weren’t begging you all the time and harassing you so much. Do you miss Jamaica?”

“Yes and no.” Fiona felt annoyed with her aunt but she also knew that she was stereotyping her and people like her, as foreigners often did. She wondered how much she should say. “There are things about Jamaica I miss, and others I hate. But I can’t seem to get rid of it. It’s complicated.”

“Kind of like a man, eh?” Aunt Barbara joked, trying to change the subject.

“I guess.” Fiona thought back to the first time she met Jim at a friend’s Labour Day party. She was drawn to him immediately. He was telling one of his stories to a group who stood around him entranced, laughing and egging him on. When the music was turned up, he started a congo line and pulled Fiona behind him. She protested at first, but gave in when he placed her hands firmly on his waist. They ended up dancing past midnight around a bonfire, the sparks shooting up like the firefly peenywallies of her Jamaican childhood, lighting up the moonless sky.

Fiona and her aunt were late coming home. The car was full of baskets of flower arrangements to be placed on the tables. Fiona grabbed a few and set off down the lawn. The place was buzzing with preparations. Some guys with Sunshine Sound written on their t-shirts were connecting the wires to the huge speakers. Fiona found herself looking for David. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so cold to him; after all, it wasn’t about him. She got up enough courage to ask for him, but

they said that they didn't think David was coming tonight.

Fiona went inside to change but decided to lie down for a few minutes. When she awoke, it was past nine. She hurriedly got dressed and went outside and joined the sea of brown and black faces dotted with a few white ones. Some of the guests seemed to know who she was, even though Fiona didn't recognise anyone. She ordered a glass of wine at the bar and felt the lingering looks of a group of her uncle's friends wash over her. She adjusted her black strapless top and smoothed a fallen curl. She was taking a long sip of her drink when she heard David's voice behind her.

"Fresh meat, they call it."

She turned to face him. "And what do you call them?"

"Sleazy, usually."

"But no one's ever called you that right?" Fiona felt the anger surge inside her.

"No, but they have slammed the door on me a few times." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"That's not a surprise."

"Yeah, I know," he said, and took a gulp of his beer. "Listen, I'm sorry about yesterday, I didn't mean to offend you, it's just I thought you might like to get out, see a different side of Jamaica, while you're here."

She steadied herself by leaning back on the bar. He was right about that. Hadn't she come back to get reacquainted with this idea of a place she called home? Fiona watched David shaking hands with a passing guest, the two of them sharing a joke. From this angle, Fiona could study David and his long, perfectly curled eyelashes without being noticed.

When his friend walked away, David turned to face Fiona again. "So, like I was saying, have you even been to the beach yet?"

"I don't know you, David." Fiona was being honest about how she felt, but she was also playing with him now, enjoying the attention, and the control.

"Alright, I give up. But tell you what, see that old white man staring at you," David said, indicating across the party towards a short man with a moustache who kept glancing at Fiona. "I give him 30 seconds to come over, and you, all night to get rid of him."

She knew then, that this was the dare she had been unconsciously waiting for. "And, suppose I prove you wrong?" she said.

"I'll take you to the beach tomorrow for the best fish you've ever had." David turned and walked back over to the turntable.

He was right. Within seconds, the man was standing beside Fiona, ordering a drink from the bar.

“You must be Barbie’s niece?” the man asked.

She glanced over at David, who was laughing at her. “Yes,” she said.

They shook hands, and he began asking her the perfunctory questions about her parents, her job and her life in America—questions she would answer several times that night. She felt him working up to asking her to dance. “Excuse me,” she said. “I think my aunt is calling me.”

Fiona spent the remainder of the night being shown off by her aunt and uncle, as though she was the child they never had. They introduced her to their close friends and to distant relatives, whom Fiona had forgotten; they mentioned her in their speeches; they made her cut the cake with them. Every now and then, Fiona met David’s gaze. She felt relaxed for the first time since she had arrived.

Later in the night, though, Fiona found herself alone on the outer edge of the party. She was jarred by the sight of security guards and their dogs patrolling the perimeter of the property. In that moment, she was transported back into the dark, under her bed, where she’d hid when the man left. She had lay there, silent, facing the door. At first, she hadn’t responded to her mother’s calls coming from the other side of the house. She had watched her mother’s bare feet approach the bed. “Fiona! Fiona! Where are you?” her mother had screamed. “Dear God, they’ve taken her! Someone please...help me!” Her mother dropped to her knees and held her head. “This fucking country...” her mother had cursed. It was then that her mother had seen her child lying in the darkness, hugging her knees to her bare chest.

“What you doing out here?” David asked. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Fiona was relieved to have David by her side this time.

“I played this just for you,” he said. Maxi Priest’s “Don’t Turn Around” was blasting from the speakers. “Want to dance?”

“Funny,” she said, and started towards the dance floor.

“So, Hellshire tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yeah, alright then.” Fiona saw her aunt looking curiously at them and Fiona smiled at her.

The beach had more shacks selling food than Fiona had remembered from her childhood.

Walking by one, she could see a woman cooking fish in her large, make-shift wok of sizzling oil.

Out on the beach, a herd of goats traversed the sand, rummaging through the fish bones and scraps, while small children chased each other in the shallows of the sea.

“Here, okay?” David said, motioning to a pair of wooden benches on stilts as tall as bar stools.

The benches were in front of a shack with a hand-painted sign that said, “Cherry’s Place.”

Fiona spread her towel and, taking her weight on the heels of her palms, hoisted herself up onto the bench. She was still in her shorts and button-down blouse. David was already in his swim shorts.

“You coming in?”

“Soon,” she said.

David jogged off into the water. Fiona was relieved to be alone for a few minutes. She had been trying to think of a way out of coming to the beach today, since she’d agreed to it last night. Must have been the wine, she thought. But now that she was here, Fiona was glad she had come. The place was alive with people enjoying their day off, lying on the sand, swimming in the water, drinking beer, eating fish. Fiona could hear the animated offerings of the vendors criss-crossing the beachfront: “Peppa swims!”; “Nuts! Wrigleys! Rizzlas!”; “Icicle and nutty buddy!”; “Red Stripe! Guinness!”

Just then, one was by her side. His brown eyes were bloodshot, his jet black hair uncombed.

“Yow, Princess Di, I’ve some ’tin for you today, you know,” he said, shoving an open box of sundry items at her.

“No thank you.” Fiona turned away to look for David in the sea. A fisherman’s boat named “Give Thanks” had pulled up down the beach and David was among the crowd of prospective buyers and curious children surrounding the boat to inspect the catch.

“Me really like you, you know...you well sexy,” the man said, grabbing his crotch.

“Get the fuck away from me!” Fiona jumped off the bench and headed toward David. She could feel pure, crystal defiance, the colour of the nearby sea, fuelling each step.

At the water’s edge, Fiona sidled up to David, who was talking with the fisherman. David held a shiny red snapper by its tail. Its flat, clear eyes were punctuated by black full-stops encircled by what looked like silvery mercury.

“Look at those eyes,” she said.

“So you know about fish?”

“Yeah, I know.” She knew that you never eat barracuda caught in the full moon. That the roe of a king fish was the sweetest. And that, no matter how beautiful a fish looked from the outside, if its eyes were not clear it was either old or rotten.

David and Fiona ate on a wood-planked table inside Cherry’s Place. David had known Miss Cherry for many years and, soon after they sat down, she came round front and hugged him.

Fiona was amazed at how at ease David was with anyone he came into contact with.

“And who this nice girl, David?” Miss Cherry said, wiping her hands in her apron. She was a stout Indian woman who smiled often and laughed loudly.

“My friend, Fiona. A yardie. She’s a cook too,” David answered.

Fiona smiled with Miss Cherry. “Your food is delicious...I can never make the pickle right, when I’m up north.”

“Well, you must take some back.” She sent her nephew to the kitchen for a bottle of the orange Scotch bonnet pepper and white onions soaking in vinegar. When Fiona offered to pay for it, Miss Cherry refused. “It’s brawta my child, from one cook to the next.”

Fiona thanked her, and the couple turned back to their plastic plates full of fried snapper and doughy festival.

“I used to love this, you see,” Fiona said.

“As a child?”

“My father always brought us here.” She dug her feet into the sand beneath the table and let the cool grains slip between her toes.

“When did you leave?”

“ ’79.”

“How come?”

“Oh, long story.” Fiona sipped her soda. “We had a break-in.”

“Well that’s one thing that unites all of us,” David said, and launched into a story about his cousin’s family.

Back out on the beach, Fiona spotted a scrawny dun-coloured horse covered in old scars, being ridden by a young man along the shoreline.

“What’s he doing?” She turned on her elbow to face David. She had finally removed her shorts and blouse. At first, in her swimsuit, she’d felt insecure. God, I’m so white, she thought. But passers-by seemed not especially to notice her, the sun felt good on her body, and, gradually, Fiona relaxed.

“He brings his horse out here and people pay him for rides. It’s sickening. They should put it down.”

“That’s what made me come here,” she told him. “Although that isn’t quite the horse I imagined.” Fiona described the poster to David and how it had made her want to come and see if she could make amends.

“So, how you feel now?” he asked.

“I don’t know. There’s so much beauty in this place and in the people, but there’s also so much about it that troubles me too...that I can’t just accept now.”

“Why would you have to?”

“I guess.” She lay down flat on her back and cupped her hands over her eyes to shield herself from the sun. “You ever think of leaving?”

David shrugged. “My uncle could file for me. And yeah, sure it’s tough, more so for others, than for me...but this, this is home, girl.”

She sat up again and looked at him. He was watching some children jumping the choppy waves as they folded over at the shore. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, it was a beautiful day.

Fiona looked out through the window of her uncle’s car. She had always liked this part of the drive to Ocho Rios, down through the quiet, pastoral scenes of Claremont. Fiona was thinking about yesterday, and how gently David had kissed her on her cheek when he dropped her back to her aunt’s house. But Fiona had made up her mind not to try to hold onto him, to box up what they had and take it home with her, like a tourist would a smooth, pink conch shell.

“Later, then,” Fiona had said, getting out of David’s car.

“Yes, my girl, later.”

In truth, she wasn’t sure when she would be back, but at least she felt she had stitched together a freedom, which she’d not felt before, to come and go. For now, she was looking forward to going back to Boston, to seeing her parents and friends again.

They were passing through the tiny district of Chalky Hill. The terrain had become more uneven with sudden drops down into tree-filled valleys. They passed some of the old-fashioned wattle and daub homes. One had a bauxite-red zinc roof and white doily fretwork in which Fiona spotted an old lady sitting in a rocking chair on the front veranda. She thought about her own self there, in thirty or forty years, rocking away, happy to watch the world pass by.

The car sped on and rounded a bend. “Look, Fiona,” her aunt said, pointing at the first sight of blue since leaving Kingston. “The sea.”

The North Coast laid itself out across a hundred and eighty degrees like an open fan. The land rushed down under the crumbling colonial stonewalls and modern barbed-wire fences, across acres of sugar cane fields, roads and houses, to the blue pen line of the sea’s edge. From there, the sea unfurled its shades of lapis and indigo until it touched the ruffled hemline of the hazy horizon.



Here I am, it seemed to say. I will always be with you, no matter where you go. This is the deep root of your love.

“Yes,” Fiona said. “The sea.”