

Carroll Edwards

RHYTHMS OF LIFE



The church seemed much smaller than I remembered. The altar, the pews, everything seemed to have shrunk in the years that I had been away. The magnificent pipe organ of my youth that only Teacher Rockwell had been permitted to play now stood neglected and disconcertingly dingy, its once-splendid mahogany façade obscured by the grillwork in which it was now encased.

The service had not yet started. Restless, I wandered outside, striving to identify familiar landmarks. The cotton tree, bane of my youth, spread a majestic shadow over the graves and I could still see the thick wooden pole protruding awkwardly from its side. Local folklore had it that the pole was the remnant of a shot fired by the French when they had landed at Carlisle Bay in an attempt to capture the island from the British. It had lodged in the tree trunk, saving the church from certain destruction. It was divine intervention, the local people said.

I strolled around the graveyard, examining the headstones: *Sacred to the memory of John Jacob Beach, Esquire May 6, 1656 – January 31, 1683.* Here was another one: *Here lyes the bodie of Mary Pierce Sunderland, Beloved daughter of Mary Ellen Sunderland, who died in*

1695 at the age of 15. This tomb is erected by her disconsolate mother and relatives.

An overwhelming sense of sadness engulfed my entire body. I felt a sense of kinship with that disconsolate mother. Had grief been any different in the seventeenth century, I wondered. How had *she* coped with the death of a child?

I realized that I had played among these graves, unappreciative of the chronicles of life revealed by the inscriptions. For me, the graves had been nothing more than a backdrop to the games we children played as we waited for services to begin or, a resting place as we waited after church for our mothers to finish their conversations so we could begin the long walk home. On Good Fridays, as pastor lead the congregation through the stages of the Cross during the three hour long service, Mother would send us outside just before we started to get really fidgety, with a bag full of bun and cheese to keep us quiet. One by one, the other children would join us, and we would race around the churchyard, using the gravestones as hurdles, all the while trying to stifle the inevitable laughter, so as not to disturb the service inside.

Mannis had been aghast the first time he saw us jumping over the graves. Normally, he didn't attend the Good Friday services, but for some reason that year, he had decided that he would ('out of respect,' he told me). You can't take it so slight!" he had admonished us. "Bite you finger, bite you finger quick, so the duppy won't trouble you." It was then we realized that his anxiety had more to do with his fear of the dead in their graves, than any concern for our welfare or for that of the living sitting reverently in the pews inside.

But if you were so afraid of the dead, Mannis, why hasten to join them?

The church began to fill up as people arrived for the service. The whispering was deafening. I could see members of the congregation jostling to view the casket which had been placed just inside the tower, at the entrance to the church. Mannis' face had been left unscathed by the fire

and the undertakers had skillfully positioned his body inside the coffin so that the rest of him was barely visible. Still, they crowded around the casket, some casting furtive, accusatory glances in my direction, others averting their eyes as they passed, pretending that they didn't want to view the remains. I knew better though. Nothing as exciting as this had happened in the village in years!

"Is who find him?"

"Nuh the daughter. Mi hear say she find him tie to the coconut tree at the back of the yard."

"Then nobody never see him?"

"Tie up and douse himself with kerosene. Burn up till him skin crackle! Is the grace of God that the house itself never burn down."

"Is because him is an Indian, you know. Mi hear say them don't wait to dead. As soon as them reach a certain age, them just burn up themself."

"Them shoulda watch him."

"Nobody never expect it, especially like how him live in this country so long."

"Shhhh! See she a come!"

The whispering stopped as I approached, replaced by appropriate expressions of grief.

"Good afternoon, Selby. Remember me? I'm so sorry to hear about your grandfather. Mannis was so good to all of us."

Old hypocrites! I dismissed the thought as quickly as it had appeared. In truth, some of them had gone to school with me. I had no doubt that in their own way they, too, shared in my grief. Yet I said a silent prayer as I looked at their faces, proof positive of what I might have become, if I, too, had remained in the village. I nodded in acknowledgement and swept past the group, determined that they would not see me cry.

The rest of the family was already seated in the two front rows, every head bowed, as if in silent acknowledgement of our corporate guilt: *Why had no one realized what Mannis was going to do? Had we ignored the signs?* Without warning, the service began. There would be no procession with the casket up to the altar. Earlier, Pastor had advised us in grave tones that Mannis' body could not be brought *inside* the hallowed walls of the church. He had taken his own life, thereby committing a mortal sin. For this, the Church would not forgive him.

Mannis had lived with us from as far back as I could remember. My first memory is of a small, wiry-looking Indian, silver grey hair peeking out from under a brightly coloured turban and a long hooked nose jutting out beneath piercing black eyes which twinkled out of his wrinkled, cocoa-brown face. In my mind, he's always dressed in khaki: frayed shirt buttoned half way up revealing a white merino underneath, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, slightly crushed pants, one leg caught up by a bicycle clip, revealing very skinny feet thrust into brown leather sandals. My father said it was because he had worked on the sugar estate all his life and didn't know how to dress any differently.

Everyone said that Mannis had been a champion cane cutter. They boasted of his speed and dexterity with the cutlass in the days when sugar was king. To me, he was my grandfather, the one person in whom I could confide when my parents were too busy to listen. Every morning, rain or shine, we would leave the house promptly at seven to walk the three or so miles it took to arrive at the school gate for the start of classes at eight o'clock. He never wore a watch yet every afternoon, at exactly three o'clock when school ended, he would be there, waiting to walk

me back home, along with all the children who lived near our house. Most times we competed for the bag of sweets which he always carried and would distribute readily, once we could answer his questions about our school work. Years later, I discovered that he himself was illiterate, yet he could always tell when the answer was incorrect.

Then of course there was the protection that he provided when we were passing the cotton tree. Mannis said that it was over 100 years old. It was an enormous tree, with a trunk that was solid and thick like the trucks that transported the sugar to and from the factory. At times, the branches spread out dark and impenetrable, extending all the way across the road, casting murky-looking shadows on to the ground.

We children would become increasingly quiet as we approached that section of the road. Mannis had warned that duppies lived at the foot of the cotton tree. “Always bite you finger and count one, two, out loud when you passin’,” he hissed. “Duppy can’t count pas’ three, so they will stand there waiting for the ‘three’ and that will give you a chance to run and get ’way from them.”

“After two: one, two!” he would shout. And we would run as one, determined not to be the one to be caught by the cotton tree duppy.

Once Teacher Rockwell passed as we were running by, and told my mother what we were doing. She had scolded Mannis roundly, embarrassed that he should hold her up to such public ridicule. “You think ah sending the child to school for you to be filling up her head with foolishness?” she fussed. Behind her back, he winked at me, and we shared a smile. *She doesn’t understand*, we agreed silently.

Shortly after this, I was sent off to school in the city. The morning of my departure, I woke up early, unable to sleep. Outside, the cock crowed incessantly, as if heralding a major event. The trees were still shrouded in darkness although the early morning sun was beginning to touch their crowns. I raced through the front door and saw that Mannis was already up, feeding the pigeons.

I helped him for a while then we sat in companionable silence as the sun peeped around the corners of the house, hinting at the new day ahead.

“So, is your las’ morning, Selby,” Mannis finally said.

I laughed nervously.

“Promise you won’ forget me.”

I looked at him, uncertain. Suddenly, he seemed very frail.

“Come. Give me a hug and tell me goodbye.”

Suddenly fighting back tears, I clutched him tight. “I don’t want to go. Don’t let me go, Mannis!”

But he only smiled. “Is so life go, child. You can’t stay one place. Everybody have to move on.”

Richard was sitting in the living room when Selby returned from the funeral. He watched in silence as she opened the grill, walked slowly over to the entrance table, and set down the car keys. The years had been kind to her, he thought. She had put on a little weight but still had that tall, athletic build which he had found so attractive in the early days.

He remembered their first meeting well. He had just returned from New York and his

mother had insisted that he attend a play being put on by one of her charities. Richard had agreed reluctantly, prepared to be bored. As they entered the theatre, he had heard a woman laugh, a deep throated infectious sound that soared above the chatter. It turned out that she was a friend of the playwright's daughter and had been away in England. She was home for the holidays but would return at the end of the summer to finish up her law degree.

“So will you sue me when you graduate?” he had asked facetiously.

“Well that tie is definitely a crime,” she had laughed. “Hi, I’m Selby Whittaker.”

She was wearing blue: an off- the- shoulder blouse that emphasized her long, slender neck and the smooth, chocolate brown of her shoulders. Her calf length skirt swirled as she walked, emphasizing long, elegant legs. Richard tried to think of something else witty to say, but failed. She laughed again, fully aware of the effect she was having.

He had pursued her with a determination that had surprised even him. He found himself making excuses to call her at odd moments every day. He delighted in the sound of her voice, her laughter. They talked for hours on end, days passing into weeks as the summer sped by. “We’re made for each other,” he said, reaching over, caressing the dimple on her cheek.

“Get over it! It’s summer, Richard,” she laughed derisively. “I have another two years. I can’t focus on that now.”

“Timing means nothing. Marry me when you’re through,” he said, arms outstretched, as she caught the plane back to England.

“Oh! Richard! You are such a romantic!”

He smiled. “So you’ll marry me?”

We had been married for five years when I became pregnant for the first time. We hadn't really planned it that way. I was busy establishing my law practice and Richard's consultancy was really taking off. There just didn't seem to be the time. As luck would have it, the pregnancy was uneventful so I was able to work right up until the time that Nathan was born. He was a delight - a cheerful baby who gurgled happily whenever anyone came into focus.

I returned to work when he was six months old, despite Richard's objections.

"It's not as if you have to work," he said.

"Richard! I love what I do, remember?"

"More than your son?"

"That's not fair. You're still working, aren't you?"

"That's different."

The September that Nathan turned three, he caught two colds in quick succession. The months of July and August had been particularly hot, with temperatures reaching into the high nineties. The slight breeze that surfaced every now and again only made the situation worse, like a fan circulating hot air in a closed and windowless room.

Everywhere that Selby went, conversations turned inevitably to the heat, until she felt like screaming to the skies to let loose some rain, a hurricane even, anything that would cool things down and give people something else to talk about. In response, September dawned dank and dreary. Soon, it began to rain, a steady, unrelenting downpour that refused to let up, drenching everything, fraying nerves.

Nathan was increasingly fretful. He had suffered through the heat but now the rain seemed to be saturating his body, evidenced by the mucus that streamed incessantly from his nostrils. When he developed a cough, Richard insisted that they take him to the hospital. “No temperature. It’s just a cold,” the doctor told them. “It’s normal at this time of year.” He prescribed cough syrup and antibiotics. Behind their backs, he exchanged a smile with the nurse. New parents! He dealt with them all the time.

By Christmas, life had returned to normal and we decided to spend some time with Mannis and my parents in the country. Richard had negotiated a good deal with his business partners in Miami and called to say he would return home early to celebrate. My case was scheduled to end on the Tuesday before the holidays and we agreed that we would leave that same afternoon, so that we would arrive at my parent’s house in time to put up the tree before Christmas Eve. I finished packing late Monday night then looked in on Nathan, hoping he would sleep long enough the next morning to allow me time to review my notes thoroughly before going off to court.

I was up by daybreak. From the doorway, I could see that Nathan was fast asleep. If he slept for another hour or so, I thought, I would have time to complete my final arguments. Some time later, the shrill sound of the telephone interrupted my thoughts, and I glanced at the clock, amazed at how much time had elapsed. I raced over to the phone. It was Richard. He had taken a taxi and so I wouldn’t need to pick him up from the airport.

“How’s Nathan?” he asked.

“He’s fine” I answered breezily. But it suddenly dawned on me that the house was very quiet.

“Hold a second,” I said, and ran upstairs.

The room was still dark so I pulled back the curtains to let the light in. We had spent a lot of time putting the room together. We had listened to the advice of the interior decorator who told us that a child’s room was much more than a room. *“It’s a castle, a sailing ship, a rocket, an oasis of imagination, and a refuge”* she had trilled. However, since Nathan was so young, Richard had argued that we needed to give him time to develop his own personality. In the end we had compromised, using colourful walls and bedding, investing in stackable furniture and keeping the layout simple so that he would have a large play area for his ever growing collection of toys.

“Come, pumpkin, time to get up!” I laughed. He looked so peaceful lying there, his arms tucked under his head, legs spread wide in that pose that I loved, the blanket a tangled mass beneath him. I reached down to the bed and lifted him out.

“Good morning, my darling!”

His skin felt cold and clammy.

“Nathan?”

His head lolled back, lifeless.

Later Richard would tell everyone that he had found me on the floor of Nathan’s room motionless, curled up in a ball in a corner of the room. “She never came back to the phone. She never called a soul”, he told them. “I had to rush them both to the hospital.”

Everyone was struck by the horror of the situation.

In the days that followed, I tried to explain that I had been in shock, unable to react, that I

was paralyzed because I realized that Nathan was already dead. But Richard was unyielding.

“Did you check on him when you got up?”

“I did. He was asleep!”

“How do you know that?”

“He wasn’t sniffing or anything.”

“Did you touch him?”

“No.”

“Did you check to see if he had a temperature?”

I was silent.

“But you finished working on your case, right?”

I stood, head bent, condemned.

“You’re young, you’ll have other children,” Mannis said. But we didn’t. It’s not that we didn’t try. I became pregnant on five different occasions over the next four years. Four ended in miscarriages. Dr. Metcalfe, my obstetrician, advised me to stop trying after pregnancy number four, a particularly difficult period which saw me lose the baby at six months, three weeks and two days. When I turned up four months later, pregnant again, he was appalled. He claimed that I wasn’t giving my body a chance, that the pregnancies were affecting me physically and emotionally. He even appealed to Richard to be ‘more responsible, more careful’. However, Richard merely shrugged his shoulders. “It’s her choice,” he said.

Dr. Metcalfe offered to refer me to a specialist, but I refused. In my heart I *knew* why no

child could survive in my womb. Richard's bitterness about Nathan's death had so corroded our bodies that *nothing* could take root.

Selby threw herself even more deeply into her work, determined to be made a partner in the law firm. Richard's consultancy flourished. As time passed, they entertained frequently and attended all the major events on the social calendar. If either one noticed the absence of any real emotional involvement, neither one mentioned it. There was no time, no need for introspection. Occasionally, when a colleague celebrated the birthday of a child, Richard would remark in Selby's presence, that they were both wedded to their work, that children were not important to them. He said it with a smile, defying any contradiction, and they both agreed that children would not allow them the lifestyle that they enjoyed. At other times, when friends visited and commented on the elegance and quiet of their home, he would joke "That's why our marriage works. It's because we have no children."

The words cut deep, searing her very soul, but in time, Selby learned to ignore the pitying glances and laughed along with him. They had found a way to survive.

Richard coughed slightly, and Selby started.

"Oh! Richard! I hadn't realized you were here."

"Or, you wouldn't have come home just yet?"

A flicker of irritation crossed Selby's face.

Richard took a deep breath. *We used to love each other*, he thought.

"I'm tired, Richard. It's been a long day."

"I can imagine."

"How did you get in? I thought I had taken back the keys?"

He ignored the comment. "So how was the service?"

In times past, this would have been the cue for him to reach out and hold her close. She would have been hesitant at first. It was almost as if she feared that putting her thoughts into words would somehow prevent her from savouring the event to the fullest.

Richard had learned to wait. He would continue to hold her, stroking her shoulders slowly until she was perfectly relaxed. Then the words would come tumbling out as she described what had happened: the people, the setting, and her impressions of the event. Richard had loved those moments. Selby was an excellent raconteur and by the time she finished, oftentimes he would be rolling with laughter. Afterwards, her mood would change and it would be her turn to draw him close. The lovemaking then was phenomenal. *What happened to us?*

"So what do you want?" Selby started across the room. Her heel snagged on a crease in the carpet and she stumbled. Instinctively, Richard reached out and caught her hand. Their eyes met. Selby pulled away sharply. Richard could see that she, too, remembered. For a brief moment he toyed with a fantasy of pulling her down to the floor and his heart quickened in anticipation. He glanced across at Selby but her expression was cold. It reminded him of the purpose of the visit.

"What is it?"

"I want a divorce."

I have always loved this room. It was on the eastern side of the house, so it received the morning sun, but in the afternoons, it was very cool. Richard and I had spent months selecting the furniture to ensure that it was just right. I had wanted an area where I could unwind after work; he had wanted to listen to his music. We had selected cool blues and earth tones for the plumped up cushions which covered the wicker furniture. The huge sisal map on the floor had been made by an old man that Mannis knew. We had spent hours driving up into the Cockpit Country to find him. "I know where him live" Mannis had told us stubbornly, flatly refusing to ask for directions. In the end, though, the result had been well worth the effort.

I sank deeper into the cushions, trying to find some soothing music on the CD player, striving hard to conceal the consuming anger that filled my belly and made me want to slap him in his face. *This room was created to promote harmony*, I thought. *Such disrespect! What on earth could have possessed him to bring this up now, in this room, after the funeral?* My continued silence was making Richard uncomfortable. I could see him willing me to say something, anything, to become angry, so we would fall into our familiar pattern of recriminations, so that he could justify what he was doing.

"Who is she?"

I was proud of how coolly I asked the question. It came out offhandedly, as though it really didn't matter whether he answered or not.

"You don't know her. A business associate."

"Oh! A young girl!" *God, my life is such a cliché*, I thought.

He hesitated. "No. In fact she's about your age."

My stomach churned. I wouldn't even have the satisfaction of ridiculing his choice.

The plaintive sounds of a saxophone filled the room. Ace Cannon was playing "*The End of*

the Road'. I turned to Richard. "Mannis is dead. Do you understand what that means to me, how it makes me feel?"

He had the grace to look embarrassed.

I was suddenly weary of the whole charade. What had Mannis said? It's a lesson of life.

Everyone has to move on. I got up, picked up my bag and walked to the door.

"Let yourself out, OK?"