

*Marsha E. Coburn*



## The Duppy Coconut Tree

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**Y**OU COULD ALWAYS TELL WHERE MAM'HALIA HAD BEEN by the naked footprints, since she never wore shoes, and the circular imprint of the staff she always carried. To my ten year old eyes Mam'halia was the blackest person in the world. She was a small woman, with hair river-stone white, and from her ears hung heavy beads and silver hoops, which stretched her lobes by at least an inch. On her crooked fingers she wore big silver rings, and heavy bangles, some copper, some gold on each wrist. Almost all her teeth were gold. No one knew how old she really was. She said that as a child she had been one of the last slaves to come over from Africa and that she was the first and only female to be born into her family for six generations. I was the only female born since she...though that's not what Mama said.

We lived together, Mam'halia, Mama and I, on land Mama had inherited. I spent lazy days playing with the flowers and hard fruit of the huge Barringtonia or duppy coconut tree, as most people called it, that grew right up against the front room of our house next to the porch. Some days I would chase ground lizards over the large sloping backyard and load my lap with guineps, redcoat plums and sweetsops until the day a rock had come flying at me from behind the cracked gravestone of a long forgotten relative. Mama had to cut out a patch of my hair, all bloody and matted, and apply white rum to the gash above my temple.

"Is duppy Mama? They don't want me playing in the yard?"

"Shush chile, my relatives wouldn't hurt you."

But for a long time afterward I played only in the part of the yard where Mama could see me.

We saw Mam'halia mostly on weekends when Papa was home from cutting cane. He came up from the plantation early Saturday mornings and left after dinner on Sundays. On Saturday evenings he sat on the porch while Mam'halia squatted on the giant roots of the Barringtonia. They would sit in silence until Mam'halia, puffing her cigar, the lighted end inside her mouth, would begin to speak.

"Grandnephew, yu nuh see mi staff? God vision me and I carve it out of wood from a tree like this one we under, just like Him tell mi. Two snake twine-up together, them head a top and them tail a bottom in a point. We come from a proud line; the fiercest tribe in Africa, but your woman weaken yu. She and the unnatural looking pickney she have. It not right. Black people can't have white pickney, that's why you nuh get nuh more, she blight the womb. And you don't see how the

lickle gal always sick? You may as well stop feed her.”

She would always say things like that knowing full well how her words traveled on the cool evening breeze through the leathery leaves of the duppy coconut tree and into the kitchen to Mama and me. Mama’s mouth would tighten and her black eyes flash, but she would remain silent until Papa came inside.

“Mass Rueben, you know I don’t like when Mam’halia say those things. Is not any body fault Hope look different ...”

“Lawd Esther, Mam’halia is an old woman, you can’t follow everything she say.”

“I don’t trust her, especially after all them things that happen.”

“Cho woman, you always bring up that. Them was nature, even Nurse Bailey say so.”

“Nature? Three gal baby just dead like that and them did born good? Hope only alive today because she never born here and was staying at Aunt Rose till now. You can believe what you like, but I is a mother and I know Mam’halia have something to do with it. She is one wicked old woman and I don’t want her living here.”

From my hiding place behind the cabinet turned cater-cornered in the kitchen, I would see Mama’s tears and watch Papa’s clumsy attempts to comfort her with his big arms around her shoulders. He would implore her to see the honor of having his grandaunt live with us because of her great age and spiritual gifts. To Papa and the people of our district Mam’halia was a healer and a prophet.

Poor Papa. In those days we never said much to each other, but he always remembered to bring me parcels of paradise plum sweets wrapped in brown paper. For the longest time Mama was all I had. I often asked her about the dead babies, what their names were and where they were buried. But she would only shush me and say I asked too many questions. She baked puddings, made peanut and coconut cakes, gizzadas and roasted corn to make asham, all of which she sold from a glass case set up on our porch. Except when I was in school, she took me everywhere with her, or at least tried to keep me within sight. One day though, I slipped into the neighboring yard to see the newborn piglets and Mam’halia pushed me into the sty. I still have the scars on my legs where the sow bit me. Mama sat on the steps with me on her lap, rocking and humming and wiping my cuts and tears with her big apron. She hugged me tightly and I hugged her back.

“Mam’halia push me Mama.”

“Hush...she think she can kill off all my pickney but in the Bible, Esther saves her people.”

We never told Papa; Mama had said it was our secret.



THEN THERE WAS THE DAY MAM’HALIA caught me in her room. Our house, except for the zinc roof, was made entirely of pine and Mama kept it immaculate. She often told me the story of how Papa had built one room and carried it by truck from his district to hers as part of his marriage

proposal. He had gradually added the other rooms at an angle, so that the first room remained slightly in front, then the porch which connected the two ends of the house and, finally, the lattice work which allowed cool air to pass through the rooms. Somehow that first room had become Mam'halia's. It had only one window and standing on the roots of the duppy coconut tree I would polish the outside of its dusty pane with my fists, peering into the dim interior which seemed as ancient and mysterious as Ma'halia herself.

That day as I rubbed the window it creaked open. More excited than afraid I climbed in and sat on the red chenille spread that covered the high, wide bed. Next to me a Bible lay open to the book of Psalms. I breathed in the smell of Bay Rum, Eucalyptus Oil and Tiger Balm that hung heavy in the air. The bed swallowed most of the space in the room; a rocking chair, a mahogany wardrobe and a long table covered with a white lace cloth, occupied what was left. On the table, three red candles stood guard, stuck in their own wax to the table cloth, around a large picture Bible with gold-edged pages. Under the table were jars and bottles of potions which Ma'halia made herself to use in her healing. Pictures of the Sacred Heart, the Madonna and the Last Supper hung on the walls along with plaques and crosses of all types. My eyes swept the room again and there was Mam'halia standing in the doorway, gold teeth gleaming on her wizened face. The staff towered over her and her white frock flapped around her meager frame.

"Duppy gal?"

Hot urine pooled beneath me even before she struck the first blow. My cries and Mam'halia's curses brought Mama and several people to the duppy coconut tree.

"You must be a mad woman!" Mama screamed, flying at Mam'halia with her arms raised.

Maas Georgie, new to the district and married to one of the women in the yard, was the only person besides Mama who dared challenge Mam'halia. "You can't beat a child with that heavy stick..."

"Child? Is a duppy!"

"Stop the foolishness Mam'halia, my mother look just like Hope and see me?" He thrust his muscled arms forward, "Black as tar."

"But we don't know where you come from. Could be hell. Me Mahalia Burke travel the length and breadth of this island and me never see no human look suh." She held her staff high over her head. "Two snake... the woman and her gal pickney. My family have no use for them."

Later Mama and I lay curled in her soft bed, enveloped in the fragrance of rose water. Her strong brown arms, stark against the paleness of my skin, cherished and strengthened me.

"Mama, how Mam'halia can love God and be so wicked? Don't God say love one another? Don't God love me Mama? Don't is God make me?"

"Yes Hope, is God make you and Him love you. Me love you too, and a mother's love is the best love."



MY FAVORITE TIME OF DAY WAS LATE EVENING when Mam'halia was out in the town square holding her prayer meeting and all the other houses in the yard were quiet. Under the Barringtonia Mama would sing her childhood songs and tell me Anancy stories, or we would ask each other riddles and play hand games. If we stayed out late enough, we would watch the large white flowers of the Barringtonia bloom, their fragrance briefly filling the air, for by the morning they would have fallen to the ground, leaving behind only the hard inedible fruit.

After playing one evening, Mama left me alone in the house to go visiting. I watched her as she dressed, straightening the scarf on her head and tucking the thick black plaits under. She wore her pink sweater with the pearl buttons down the front that Papa had bought her during the early days of their courtship.

While she was gone, I sat in the big mahogany rocking chair that dominated the parlor. Papa's chair. He had not been home for two weeks but had sent money with one of the other workers. I didn't think he would stay away much longer as he always said that Mama was the best cook in the world. I rocked as I watched the shadows dancing in the flickering lamp light on the walls. It felt strange being in the house without Mama, I had never been in the house alone. I rocked and thought. Rocked and sang. Rocked and sang and thought. About going to school in the city. My teacher was sure that I would pass the scholarship exam when I was twelve and, I had heard her telling Mama, that I could board at the Catholic school there. I loved school, but I did not want to leave Mama. She would have no one to protect her if I went and I was sure Mam'halia would follow me there and I would have no one to protect me either.

But I thought about it anyway and wondered if the children in the city would treat me kinder than the children in my district did. There were only a few children who were brave enough to play with a dundoos. The boys' favorite name for me was "imanimal monkey" while the girls often chanted, "Black is beautiful and White is corruption."

Looking at my skin I hoped that it would darken as I grew older and thought that maybe I could dye my hair. I looked in the polished mirror that hung in the room and tried to imagine myself with black hair but couldn't. I tried to imagine myself with dark skin but couldn't do that either.

Night came. With no streetlights and no moon that night, it was pitch black outside. Mam'halia's meeting was long over but neither she nor Mama had returned. I pictured them coming up the road, the gully on one side and the rocky hillside on the other. I worried about them crossing the ravine on the old, narrow footbridge that everyone used as a short cut from the town square. The bridge sways and the loose wooden slats creak underfoot. It was always easy for someone to miss their step and fall. Many drunks had died that way over the years. Especially on moonless nights. I thought of Maas Georgie and his kindness to me, and of his mother whom he said was also an albino. Maybe Mama, Papa and I could move to her district...

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Calabash



I STIRRED AND FOUND MYSELF IN MAMA'S ARMS; nice and warm and safe. The fragrance of the Barringtonia, through the open window curled around us in Mam'halia's bed. Half asleep I heard her singing softly as she stroked my head.

"Everything alright now Hope. Your father will come home to stay and, when this little one born it will live... just like you." ☺