

Jacqueline Bishop



Brown Girl In The Ring

NURSE COME TO MY ROOM EARLY THIS MORNING TELLING ME I HAVE a letter from my father and didn't I want to wake up and read what my father was writing to me to say as I am always going on about how my father will come one day to take me out of this mad-house just as soon as he knows where to find me. Nurse said she knew the letter was from my father because the envelope had Nelson Aiken on the outside.

I did not believe a word Nurse said, because everyone knows how she can play when she is in the mood. I think she playing with me again, saying I have a letter from my father only because she want me to wake up and take my morning medication. The letter was from my father in truth, saying he'd gotten my address from one of Mama's church sisters who he paid to coax it out of Mama. That he was coming to see me and take me out of this place if it's the last thing he does do.

And I'm crying really hard as I read the letter, thankful that for once the voices that are always talking in my head give me a moments rest so that I can understand that my father find me after all these years, and that he is coming to see me. For three whole years I have been locked up in this hospital and not a single soul come to visit me — not Mama, not Grandfather, not even the one Nadine who promised me she would never leave me and she would always be my friend. Some friend she turned out to be, and Nurse is convinced she did me more harm than good.

I wasn't always like this you know; is people do me so. I was a bright bright girl going high school in Kingston, and if you had ever seen me in my starched white uniform with the two red ribbons in my hair, you would never believe is the same Tia Aiken trapped inside of this mad-house today. But I know that whenever Daddy find out how Grandfather and Mama had me committed to this place, Daddy is going to kill the two of them for sure; it wont be like the last time when Daddy chased Grandfather down the street with a cutlass but didn't catch him. This time it will be different.

And Grandfather will surely deserve whatever Daddy do to him, because it is his fault why I'm in this hospital today. It is Grandfather fault why I get pregnant and my baby died, even though he keeps telling all those lies that he was not the father of my baby. He knows full well that he was. But that is such a jumbled-up and confused story that whenever I try to tell it, it never comes out straight. I never know where to start from in telling that story or where to end. As soon as I start

run and hide when they hear Nurse coming. Plus anything would 'fraid for someone who always come into the room with a needle in her hands. Why she must always come with the needle up in the air like that? Always telling me that I need medication to calm me down. Why she can't come and stay for a moment so that she too could see the rats. Yes, I understand that she have other patients, but still...

Me and Nadine used to be good friends you know, yes, me and Nadine was the best of friends. Before I met Nadine I was the loneliest person in the world, especially at school where I had no friends and no one played with me. At recess, best friends would play ring-games together and I would hang around hoping someone would ask me to play with them. Then I would get to be "it", I would become the brown girl in the ring. But nobody ever asked me to play. The most popular girls at school were the light-skinned girls and I wished I was pretty like those girls. I knew that if I was as pretty as those girls I would have lots of friends, and all the boys would spend their lunch money to buy me peppermint sweetie. I didn't have any friends because of how black I am. The other girls used to say I am blue-black.

There was one boy more than all the others that I really liked, a tall skinny boy that was as lean as one of the young green bamboo trees down by the river. His name was Logan Palmer. Whenever I saw him I would smile, but he would pass as if he hadn't seen me and rush after one of the brown-skinned girls. He lived in the big house on the hill. His father owned the most land in the entire parish and sat on the City Council. This man and Grandfather were good friends. Whenever Grandfather came home for holiday from his job in Cuba, this man, Busha, would drive his van up to our house and he and Grandfather would spend hours each night on the verandah, drinking white rum, smoking Cuban cigars, and talking. Once I heard them talking about my father. Grandfather was saying that Daddy was having way too much influence over Mama, putting that black-is-beautiful-rasta-thinking in her head. I crawled behind the door, listening to them talk.

"That boy too proud for his own good," Busha said, "I have a mind to bring him down to size."

"I keeping a close eye on him my own self," Grandfather said, "for I never did like him, much too dark."

"And prideful." Busha said.

"Yes, prideful." Grandfather agreed. "But you know he is from Kingston, and everybody said his parents were followers of that Marcus Garvey — fill his head with that Black pride talk, let him believe he's a natural boss-man or some such thing."

"Well," Busha cleared his throat, "There is only one boss-man around these parts, and you know who that is!"

They clinked their glasses and started to laugh.

Calabash

I hurried back to bed then, frightened for my father and wishing more than anything else that I had a friend or somebody I could talk things over with. The next day at school during lunch break, I met her. I was by myself under the almond tree watching the red ants climbing up and down the thick dark trunk when I looked up and saw Nadine there smiling at me. I couldn't believe it at first when I see this nice pretty girl with golden yellow hair and doll-blue eyes, smiling at me. She looked just like one of the dolls I had seen in the stores at Bay. Nadine put her finger to her lips, telling me to shush and not to make a sound. I promised her I would not tell anyone that I had met her.

It did not matter to me that no one else could see Nadine, because that meant no one could take her away from me. From that moment on Nadine was my playmate and I was not lonely anymore ...

*My pretty playmate,
come out and play with me.
Bring out your dolly things
Climb up the apple tree.
All along my rain-n-bow
into my cellar door,
for jolly friends we are
forever and ever more*

Nadine and I would go to the river and I would watch the water flow over my toes. Sometimes, we would take old cans or mesh-wire with us and use it to catch groupie fish. We would set the mesh in the rushes and wait for the fishes to come swimming down in a school; all you would see is these small silvery fishes darting about in the cool green waters. If the day was very hot I would strip down to my underwear and wade out into the waters and get a nice cooling off. Nadine never came into the water with me.

You think I forget everything, right? Well I never forget that Grandfather used to work in Cuba and whenever he was home for vacation he would give me money if I let him touch me. No, is lie I'm telling. I never let him push his fingers inside me. Even my mother and my grandmother, when I tell them what was going on, say I telling lies on Grandfather.

"Don't you see how the man build up the church in the district?" Mama asked me. "Don't you see the frame picture of the man in the church when him kneel in the river water and him baptized? Why you must tell those lies, Tia? Suppose people hear you saying those things, Tia?"

Grandy could barely look at me. She acted as if the very sight of me was distasteful. She had only just recently married my grandfather, and he could do no wrong.

Most people believed my grandparents had always been married, because they had been living

together for the longest time. After several years Grandy started to nag Grandfather, saying that most of the women her age were married already, and she wanted to go to her church, that she couldn't go to her church because she was living with Grandfather "in sin." One day Granny began quarreling and said she tired of living this sinful life, all these years and no ring on her finger.

"You know I'm not the marrying type — so make up her mind what you want to do." Grandfather said to Grandy one day.

Grandy never said another word to him after that. All I heard was the pots and pans banging in the kitchen, and I knew she started cooking dinner. That night Grandy came into my room to sleep. She wrapped her huge warm body around mine, and we slept like that for one whole month.

Soon after that Grandfather came home with a wedding ring and told Grandy of that tomorrow they were going to the County Clerk Office in Bay to get married.

You should see how Grandy's face lit up when Grandfather told her that. It was as bright as any Christmas tree.

The next morning Grandy got up early. She dressed in her blue-and-white polka dot dress and her white mesh hat. Grandfather put on his black-and-white suit that he only wore to weddings and funerals. Together they caught the bus to Bay.

When Grandy came home that evening, she had a ring on her left finger. She looked so happy. She called over all her church sisters and showed them the beautiful gold ring. Now, she said, she could fully give her life to the Lord and stop living in sin. From that moment on, Grandfather could do no wrong.

Then not one day they can't let me out of this room? Not one day? Why they have to paint the walls this garish white? Nurse sometimes comes and takes me out of this room. We go down the narrow hallway to the small recreational room. What a place! All types of women there: young women, old women, black women, brown women, even one white woman huddled in the corner, hugging herself and constantly rocking. Some of the women sit together in groups, while others sat by themselves. I never spoke to anyone, and would back away, screaming, if anyone tried talking to me. I much preferred it outside. The hospital grounds where Nurse would take me, every now and again, to stretch my legs. The blue sea water rushing up to the beach. The many Lignum Vitae trees, with seats under them, where the hospital staff often had lunch. Nurse and I often sat under one of the trees and talked.

"Nurse, when am I going to go home?"

"Soon, Tia."

"But I been here so many months already!" I said, getting upset.

"Don't get agitated, Tia. Once you're calm enough you will get to go home."

The truth of the matter is, I never saw anyone who got to go home, and it was making me nervous. In fact, the only people who I ever saw leave the hospital were those whose parents came and signed them out. Since no one ever came to visit me, it didn't look like I was ever going to get home. Home. Home. I want to go home.

Grandfather would not stop touching me. Every day I was more and more afraid. Grandfather pinched me on my breasts, sometimes even pulling on them, saying he was helping my breasts to grow. God, it was awful! Grandfather would breathe really hard, like some strange wild animal.

Although Mama and Grandy must have known what was going on, must have seen the touching and the pinching, neither of them said anything. Grandy spent all her time with her fingers outstretched, looking at her wedding ring, and Mama seemed as if she always had something on her mind.

I was so afraid of what Grandfather would do next, that one day when Daddy came to visit I couldn't take it anymore, and told him what was going on.

At first I thought Daddy was upset with me, because he pulled away so fast. He started walking back and forth, mumbling to himself. What had I done?

"I will kill him." Daddy said finally, in a very quiet, resolute voice.

"I will kill him," he said a little louder, getting angry.

"I am going to KILL him," Daddy roared, rushing out of the house to the back yard for a *machète*.

I came to my senses and dashed into Grandfather's room and told him to run because Daddy was coming to kill him. I didn't want my grandfather dead, and neither did I want my father to face the hangman. And whoever knew that Grandfather could run like that? He took off down the road, Daddy hot on his tail. Grandfather ran straight to Busha Browne's yard, which was when Daddy stopped chasing him.

Daddy turned around and came back into the yard. He held me tight. A small crowd started gathering outside our gate. Grandy locked herself into the room, and Mama was cursing both me and Daddy about the unnecessary shame and embarrassment we'd brought down on her. Daddy just kept holding me tight.

"Let me tell you this one more time, because I don't know if I'll have the chance to tell it to you again," Daddy said, stroking my hair, "I always want you to know that your Daddy loves you. You remember that always. Ok?"

I nodded my head, yes. I was crying so hard, I believed I would die for sure.

Busha Browne came shortly after that with a jeepload of men. They cornered Daddy, beat him up, and put him in jail.

Calabash

You see, when I was born I was a nice brown-skin girl, but the sun burn me up and that's why I'm black now. What a ugly color black is, *eeh?* Why God had to make such a color? You hear them again, those damn blasted people in my head. Telling me that I'm black and ugly; that I'm useless to society and better off dead. Like I tell everybody, this is not the real me. The real me is covered up under all of this blackness. The real me is a nice brown skin girl.

*Brown, girl in the ring
Tra la la la la
There's a brown girl in the ring
traaaa — la la la laaaa,-
Brown girl in the ring
Tra la la la la
There's a brown girl in the ring
Traaa — la la la laaaa.
Spin and take a partner
tra la la la la
spin and take a partner
traaa — la la la laaaa*

Nobody never pick me for "it" you know, no, nobody never pick me for the brown girl in the ring. And I never cry about this at night when I come home from school. And I never see a little girl curled up inside me covered up with sores. No, none of this never happened.

You see my mother, she is the prettiest woman in the world. Her skin is black like coal and her eyes are black-black too. Mama rise before sun everyday and go and milk her cow. Industry — that is my mother name. Mama tie her head with a bright red handkerchief, and her green and yellow market dress is full of banana stains. And the way Mama kotch that basket on her head and walk down that hill to catch the early morning bus to market. But you think life is a hill though why I must always be trudging up and up? But life may well be a hill you know.

You see that damn rat bothering me again! Look how him side teeth growing long! What you saying, Mr. Rat? You're going suck out all of my blood? If you think I'm going to just sit here and let you suck out all of my blood you can guess again. Stop right where you are, Mr. Rat! Stay right there! Do not take one step closer to me! Anyway, see Nurse coming here, a needle can take care of anything. Think you badder than needle stick? As soon as you get that needle in your arms watch and see how darkness going cover you like volcano ash. Yes, stay right there Mr. Rat, until Nurse come.

No Nadine, I not going play with you anymore; if you don't let me comb your hair. I can drops curls well good you know, Nadine, and the way your hair silky and golden the curls will look just beautiful in the sun, and all the boys will chase after you. Then Nadine, why my mother must always tell me to stop talking to you? Why she must keep saying nobody in the district don't name Nadine Kong? Why when I tell her that you carry me to the river to paint pictures of my naked body, she must say is nasty thought filling up my head causing me to act so strange?

Nadine, remember that time you set up the easels and tell me to sit with my back to the river, across from the wild Red Ginger plants? Lord, what a plant fiery red! It red like the handkerchief Mama wear on her head. Prostitute red, Mama call it. Mama say anybody that can have a whole dress make out of that color must be a streetwalker. Then Nadine, what is a streetwalker?

*I was walking down the street one day
when I look up and see a boy
Hey Frankie!
Do you remember me, Frankie?
Do you remember meeeee!*

You see how I can sing though! And Mama didn't have to burst my lip when I sing that song. All that blood. Blood. You know I 'fraid bad for blood, Nadine? Then Nadine, why when you bend over the river I don't see your reflection? You smart, *eh* Nadine, not to have a shadow. How you do it? Whisper in my ears and tell me the secret. You know I used to hide from my shadow, Nadine? I used to hop from tree to tree and hide from my shadow when Mama send me to the shop to buy something. I used to curl up and hide behind bush and stone, and I used to get 'fraid when my shadow go before me, or if it get bigger than me. Mama box my ears one day and say my shadow is not something to make fun of, and suppose somebody thief my shadow, then what would I do? So where your shadow, Nadine? ... Nadine? But is where that girl gone?

What you mean, who I'm talking to, Nurse? You don't see the man in the comer in the full white with the Cuban cigar in him mouth? Something wrong with your eyes, Nurse; you don't see the white man in the comer with the blue eyes? (Is jealous she jealous you know, she can't believe a white man could love me.) Well, is me him come to visit Nurse, and not you, do you mind? No, I don't want that needle into me hands. If you come in here, Nurse, and try to put that needle into my hand it going to be war. Yes, go and get the Security Guard, for I don't know what kind of security him providing. All the women that "escape" while that Security Guard on duty.

You hear them again, those damn blasted people talking in my head! Telling me how ugly I am. Why you all don't stop it? Logan Palmer did not say I was too black and ugly for him! Logan Palmer

never said any such thing! As we were saying sir ... Logan Palmer was the best looking boy in school you know, and he loved me. Yes, I could see through the taunts and name calling — “Blackie, Blackie, Black bud” — that he loved me. He just never knew how to show it. And that time, after I get up my courage and tell him how much I like him, and him fling that stone and burst my head, him never did mean it. When I went to school the next morning with the white cloth tie around my head, the school children gathered around me, laughing and singing: “Blackie, Blackie, Black bud!”

After they took Daddy to jail, I never did see him again. Grandfather said no one was to mention his name. There was an incredible strain in the house. It was like we were all carrying Daddy around inside us, but was forced to hide him. One day out of the clear blue, Mama started to cry, and she said to me, “Chile, I does miss your father real bad. Even though we were not on the best of terms, and even though he is a real Kingstonian, and you know how those city people believe they know everything, I cannot help but remember that we had us some real nice times together. He was the first man who look on me, black and ugly as I am, and tell me that I was beautiful. I never believe a word he said, but it sure was nice to hear somebody say it.” Mama’s lips began to tremble, and her eyes got real red.

“I couldn’t put away the Nadinola skin lightening cream like he wanted me to do and when I think we part over some foolishness like that I... I...” Mama didn’t get to finish her thought for Grandfather came and she dropped the subject and never picked it up again.

Grandfather cried when I couldn’t take it anymore. Grandfather put his head in his hands, hunched his shoulders, and just cried. In all my life I had never seen a grown man cry. Grandfather said nobody loved him. That he wanted somebody to love him. Could I just please love him. I was twelve years old. When I saw Grandfather crying like that, I felt sorry for him. We were under the apple tree, a little way from the house. Was I really twelve or eleven years old? Grandfather said, if I loved him I would let him touch me. I would let him put his thing inside me. I will never forget the day, the first day that he put his “thing” inside of me, for it was that day that the voices started to bother me.

After that I started getting bigger and bigger. None of my clothes could fit me anymore, and I was going out of my mind with worry. I was in high school in Kingston. A scholarship student. A bright girl. I wanted to stay in school. When I was at school, I was away from my Grandfather. But Mother Superior sent for me, and I knew exactly what she was going to tell me. She wasn’t angry at me, she just said it had come to her attention ... I stopped hearing what she was saying, for the more she talked was the more I felt that there was no oxygen in the room, and I could not breathe.

"So you must understand, we cannot have you in your condition in our school," she said.

Then she reached over and touched my arm, and asked: "Child, who did this to you? Tell me, who did this to you?"

I felt as if cotton was stuffed down my throat and I couldn't talk.

And you can still hear the baby crying, right? That baby started crying as soon as Sister stopped talking, and it cried for the long months that I was home. Although it was not born yet, the baby just kept crying and crying, adding even more confusion to the voices in my head. I wanted to find a place to go where the voices could not get to me, and that's what I was trying to find when I climbed the apple tree. Is fall I fall out of that apple tree, I wasn't trying to jump. I didn't see Nadine at the bottom of the apple tree saying, "Jump nuh, Tia, jump nuh I'll catch you, just jump, Tia." I never jump and break my hands and foots and start bleeding out that baby. No, I never jump and stop that baby crying. Mama never slap me in my face when I was in the hospital and ask what kind of idiot I am to be jumping out of the apple tree knowing my condition. Granny never ask me how I could be evil and wicked to be telling all those lies about her husband. The Nurse and the doctors never tell me to just forgive and forget what my grandfather had done. No, none of that never happened.

What you say, I have a visitor, Nurse? Then who could this visitor be? Let me just reach under this bed for my slippers, put on my dress, and put some rouge on my cheeks.

OK, Nurse, I'm right behind you down this narrow hallway.

Daddy! Oh my God, it's Daddy! It really-really is Daddy. Daddy you really come like your letter said you would. Just you look at you, Daddy, your hair starting to gray, but not too much; you tall and dark the same way, but much skinnier.

Then why you crying Daddy?

And why you crying too Nurse?

(Is my fault why they're crying you know!)

Nurse stop that, you making me feel ashamed, telling Daddy all about what a wonderful young lady I am.

Then, Daddy you bring all of these fruits for me: tangerine, naseberry, custard apple, and star apple.

Then, Daddy, why you crying so hard? Of course I am still your little girl.

Daddy, between me and you, is people do me like this you know.

Then, Daddy, what wrong with me causing you to cry so hard?

Don't mention my mother or her generation to you?

OK, Daddy.

You going to take me out of this place if it's the last thing you do?

OK, Daddy.

Then, Daddy, you bring all of these things for me, for meeeeee, Daddy? Panties, brassieres, slippers, nightgown, lotion, hair oil, comb, and, shhh! pads!

And you pay Nurse money to comb my hair.

It sure is nice to see you, Daddy.

When I see my blood that first time I think I was deading for true you know, Nurse. I think everything Grandfather tell me would happen to me if I told anyone what was going on between us, began to happen for real.

"Tia", Grandfather said, "You see what happened to your father when you told him about us."

I listened to Grandfather with my heads bowed, playing with my toes.

"You see how much power I by myself have, Tia — you will never see that father of yours again."

This time my eyes filled with tears. More than anything else in the world I wanted to see Daddy again.

"Well," Grandfather continued, "if you open that mouth of yours and talk about us to anybody again, I will make sure that something bad happen to your mother and your grandmother. You hear me, Tia? Something bad, bad, to both of them."

I swear the man turned into a snake before my eyes! I swear he changed form.

And it hurt the first time you know, Nurse, it hurt so bad.

Nurse, why you have to twist and pull me head like that simply because you combing it, it hot you know!

Yes, I want to look good for when my father come back, but you have to take it easy with my hair. Yes, I know is my own fault why my hair is like this now, and yes I agree that you tried to comb it several times last week, but I wouldn't let you, still, please have little mercy!

Yes, that is much-much better, Nurse.

And Nurse, why Daddy was just there looking on me, shaking his head and crying?

"Look my daughter, my nice-nice chile, just you look what those heathens do to my child. But never you mind, Tia, because if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to take you out of this place. I'm going to take you home. I'll take care of you now Tia."

You know, when I was a little girl I wanted to be a painter, Nurse. You know, if I had some paints now what I would paint? I would paint a dark skin girl in a light blue dress with big red ribbons in her hair. I would give my painting to my Daddy. You think him really coming to get me like him say, Nurse? I promise to take my medication every day, and I won't give Daddy any problems.

Calabash

Yes now, Spanish Town, Nurse never believe me when I tell her that the black buds mean hurricane. See it there now, see the sea-water rising, see the storm coming. Shhh! Daddy, how you get into the room? You bribe that Security Guard. Ok Daddy I'm going to collect all my things and I wont talk anymore; Ok, Ok, I'm only going to take only the most essential things with me. Daddy, you are soaking wet from that rain outside — Ok, Ok, not another sound, not another pip you'll hear out of me, Daddy, except, can I be "it", Daddy, can I be the brown girl in the ring?

