



SAMPLE


CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

Island Voices

A collection of Caribbean short stories



CONTENTS

Introduction	x
Map of the Caribbean	x
 Raya <i>Otancia Noel</i>	6
Yankipon <i>Fabian D Smith</i>	13
Six O'clock <i>Nardia J Grant</i>	31
My Pink Cocoyea Broom <i>Sherena Christmas</i>	42
Escape <i>Rosetta Thomas</i>	52
Rent Money <i>Sharnna Archat Edmondson</i>	66
One an Drive <i>Jodianna R Clarke</i>	76
Mount Sheol Private Hospital <i>Geon Codd</i>	87
She Wore Red to the Cremation <i>Stephanie Ramlogan</i>	96
Memories of the River <i>Claudia Allen-Williams</i>	104
Bush Tea <i>Akhim Alexis</i>	111
Heaven Help Us <i>David Hamilton</i>	123
Remember Me <i>Dianne Loton-Franklyn</i>	138
Creatures in the Ackee Tree <i>Kathleen A Chaitoo</i>	147
Meet the authors	159
Also available	164



RAYA

Otancia Noel

IT WAS THE hour that the dead man birds' calls could be heard and she waited to hear the shrill piercing sound of the whistle, an indication of the time to leave. Her grandparents were asleep upstairs and downstairs with her were her four siblings. The grandparents' son, the revolutionist, was in jail and her mother in the city, taking care of his needs. But life wasn't always like that ...

Life was serene in the countryside of Irie. Mother was always at home, Pa and Ma were usually on the estate across the river. And father? Well, he was never at home; only God knows what he was doing. Mother thought that he was a truck driver or maxi-taxi driver at that time. When he was not on the job, he was in town with the Ismal Party.

Ten-year-old Raya and her siblings walked to and from school with other children from the neighbourhood, kicking crapaud, picking gru gru bef and paddu, ringing the house bells and running off and harassing the dogs and cats along the way. Being the eldest grandchild of the renowned estate owner in the village, she always had to be a little less adventurous than the other children, because some macco would see and then Ma would give them a good cut arse when they got home. She always thought that the villagers were telepathic. How else could they see, hear and know everything and report to Ma before the children could even think about doing the things? So, after school she did not stray much like the other children; she and her siblings went home and basically played the afternoon away on their grandparents' estate. There was

always something to do on the estate besides the things that Ma wanted them to do that never got done. The estate was like an enchanted forest with acres of flowers like orchids and anthuriums; fields of fruit trees; cocoa and coffee fields; Ma's variety of herbs and spices; massive groves of bamboo lining the river bank; teak, palm trees and the majestic towering cypress and silk cotton trees scattered across the land. Nestled inside this forest were her grandparents' two-storey four-bedroom concrete house and 'the old house' with its large porcelain ancient-looking bathtub which she and all her siblings fitted into quite comfortably. This was the two-bedroom wooden house where her father and his nine siblings had grown up.

Some days they had a treasure hunt, other days a picnic. They climbed the pommerac and mango trees. They fished in the river or just fed the caimans – well, the argument was always about 'it's an alligator, no, we only have caiman', her older brother Raul, the serious one, usually insisted. Sometimes, they caught small river crabs and boiled them in milk pans on the river bank. They never ate these but whenever their English or Yankee cousins visited, they would usually offer them this traditional delicacy, assuring them that they ate this all the time.

Of course, when Ma caught them they had to help feed the chickens, the ducks, the pigs; grind spices and help to make the fruit preserves from plum, mango, sour cherry or whatever fruit was in season. And they had to listen to Ma's stories about how life was easy for them, how hard it was 'back in the days in Grenada' when Ma was a little girl getting up 'before cock crow' to do all the work on the cocoa estate then walking for miles barefooted through the estate and 'crossing the river' to go to school. Ma would then launch an attack on 'nowadays children', who she swore were spawns of the devil.

‘No respect, no manners, Lord Jesus!’ Ma would say as she rocked back and forth while doing whatever odd job she would be doing at the time. You couldn’t even think about bringing one of those spawns into the estate yard, Ma would say. ‘Stick to yourself. Is four ah allyuh. That is enough, and don’t ask the neighbour (who was a good walk away) for some salt even. Don’t take anything from anybody in school or otherwise. Forget allyuh father and he religious nonsense.’

These were some of Ma’s life lessons that she chanted to us on what seemed like an hourly basis.

But let me tell you about Ma. She was a strong woman, wise and proud. She worked very hard to achieve all that she had on the little island of Irie, which she had come to at the age of seventeen and worked first as a servant. Then she married Pa who came from Grenada a year after her. Pa, on the other hand, the product of a mulatto mother and white father, was the typical laid back womaniser and socialite, but he did his part. Ma kept him in line. Pa couldn’t work as long or as hard as Ma, and he often lamented about ‘the hot sun on my white skin’ but the grandkids usually clung to Pa. He was ‘our salt fish grandpa’, who would let us get away with murder. Ma sometimes left the house while they were still dreaming, with her cutlass, a flask of coffee and a piece of bake. She came back when they were dragging in from school, with a feed bag of yam on her back and another bag on her head with plantain or some other produce from the land.

Ma’s significance, sacrifice and strength were only recognised by Raya and her siblings years later, when they were adults and decided to go to the fields on their own. That morning they prepared themselves, well-armed and dressed for the part in all their safety gear for gardening. Well, they came home with one piece of yam about the length of a six-month-old baby’s arm and bites from an army of ants and all other insects that they

couldn't name. Now, mind you, this was after they spent the entire day digging, cutting and even drilling for yam, eddoes and dasheen. The next day they couldn't even get out of bed due to fever and allergies. Her brother Saud looked like a potato that was left in the oven for too long and he had to walk around for the next four days looking like a ghost covered in calamine lotion, since he also suffered from Pa's white skin disease. Imagine, Ma did all that work on her own and collectively they couldn't achieve what she did single handedly in one day.

The serenity of life in the countryside was broken a few days after Raya's twelfth birthday in August of 1987. The prodigal son, who had begun to spend even more time with the Ismal Party over the past year, had finally convinced his wife to leave the estate with their kids for the greater cause in the city.

Ma was distraught. 'Let him go by herself,' she said to Mother. 'Don't leave here with meh grandchildren to go between all them mad people.'

But love prevailed and life went on to teach them a lesson that left a scar on the skin's surface but an open wound beneath that ran deep within the network of blood capillaries and nerve endings in their family.

Life in the big city of Port-de-Irie was very different for Raya and her siblings. For one, there was no great expanse of land to frolic in but she and her siblings made do with the dunks and jamon trees on the compound and the big drain at the back of the compound with the mangroves that stood at the far southern end. They lived community-style with about 20 other families, in an apartment complex on the eastern side. There were two sets of communal bathroom and toilet facilities for everyone on the compound, of course with the exception of Jacob himself, who had his own bathroom facilities within his large apartment.

Mother now followed the prodigal son around and became an active member of the Party, so Raya was now the house manager. There was a school on the compound and a small grocery. Most times they did not venture outside of the compound yard. Raya and her siblings spent countless days at home alone or just running around the compound with the other children after school. There were some structured activities like a karate class, a baking class for women, an educational class and a religious class. The compound was life and life was the compound. School was there, everyone was there, and there was an increasing number of ex-gang members, nobodies and homebodies, coming and going, living and passing through daily, monthly, yearly.

And over the next three years Ma's voice travelled long and far. During those years she lamented about the condition of her grandchildren whenever they came home for holidays, sometimes with ringworms in their heads, or with bad manners. Raul was getting even more serious and bringing 'all kinda stupid book with gun and knife in the place.'

Ma wanted to know exactly what was going on 'up in that place in town'. Her lamentations fell into the river and swam away with the tide. And as Ma predicted, 'who doh hear does feel'. The revolution came exactly three years after they had left the countryside. Raul was killed in action and the prodigal son was jailed.

Life moved fifteen-year-old Raya, Mother and her siblings back to the countryside. This was after they had spent two months in a 'shelter' for the wives and children of the revolutionists. It was like coming into a whole new world again. Life as it stood already held challenges for Raya, being on the brink of womanhood, and now it was even more challenging after the bloody revolution. It was not as easy as one might think to make the necessary adjustment into public school and

mainstream society, especially with the whole revolutionary thing hanging like a black cloud over her head.

People were curious about her and her family after this episode in their lives. Everyone wanted to know what happened: as if she was in the city totting a gun and killing people, rather than cowering under her bed when the soldiers came and took her family and the other women and children from the compound while her father and his gang were fighting for the cause. She just remembers that it was a Friday like any other Friday. There was the midday religious sermon, then most of the men got into a few maxis that were on the compound. They were going to their usual Friday gathering in the square or so she and many others thought. But by the time all the birds were finding their nest and the television in the hall was turned on for the usual Friday evening movie, they saw on the screen Jacob flanked by two men – one who looked quite a lot like Raul – in army gear with guns.

Jacob's now famous words resonated across the country, 'The country is now under siege. Please keep calm and follow the orders of our troops. I repeat, please keep calm and follow the orders of our troops,' and the rest was history.

After this, by nightfall, the army swooped down on the compound firing their guns and loaded everyone into buses taking them to the shelter. When they were finally released from the shelter, Raya even had her own police entourage to and from school. Soldiers and police raided her home constantly and life was chaotic. And she often wondered what the point was, seeing that Father was already locked away and Raul, her only brother, was dead. Pa was a ghost after the revolution and Ma, well she was just Ma.

Anyhow, bit by bit Raya got back into society. She made friends, had a boyfriend, wore the latest fashion and did all the

other trivial things teenagers did. But then there was another challenge rearing its head. She and Mother now had varying views and ideas on life, on religion, and on the do's and don'ts. Mother, who was not home most times, practically handed the helm of motherhood to Ma and more so to Raya, in order to take care of Father and his band of 'for the cause' brothers. Raya's responsibilities were a bit too much for a teenager who just wanted to do normal teenage things like wear jeans, go to a friend's house or to a birthday party. Mother disagreed with everything Raya wanted to do. Ma agreed and sometimes disagreed, but Ma was willing to find a common ground. Since, as Ma put it, 'She is old enough and if she don't want to be in allyuh thing then leave she.' Mother was not putting up with that so whenever she was around it was 'do as I say'. Raya began to resent Mother because of the fact that Mother had followed Father to town and he got them into the mess that they had been in, then Mother brought them back to a world that Raya had been alienated from. Raya saw herself as struggling to find her place in this world and not wanting to be in Mother's and Father's world. Now Mother wanted to control her, while not being there to support her through the struggles.

This new dilemma led Raya to make a decision.

She stands on the edge of the darkness clutching her bag pack. It is the hour that the dead man birds' calls can be heard and she waits to hear the shrill piercing sound of the whistle, an indication of the time to leave. Her grandparents are asleep upstairs. Downstairs with her are her four siblings. She looks back at her sleeping siblings. She knows that she will miss them dearly, but as Raul always said, 'The wind always blows change.' The shadows of ghosts from the past taunt her. As the whistle blows, she wipes the drops from her eyes and steps out.



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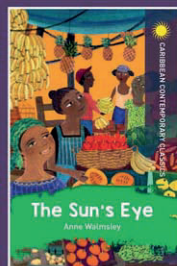
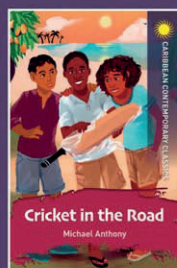
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