



Jamaica Remembered

By George Graham

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*In the afternoon in Jamaica
When the sun stood still
And the sea lay down like a lamb,
When the leaves barely trembled
In the promise of a breeze,
And even the bees hummed in a lower, slower note,
I used to lie under a poinciana tree,
Veiled and dappled by shadow,
Dreaming of big cities and success.
Now, I sit in my office (in my Yves St. Laurent suit),
And look out the window at the skyscrapers...
Dreaming of Jamaica.*

Spending Time With Aunt Min

In the mountains where Aunt Min lived the earth is clay — hard, smooth clay that sticks to your cowskin boots, making them heavy as concrete blocks. Scraping the clay off your boots is not an easy job. You need a flat, strong piece of stick, like an orange-tree branch split in two and cut to about a foot long. And you scrape and scrape... Even after you do your best, there's going to be clay on those boots — that's how sticky the clay is. You have to leave your boots outside when you go into the house, or you'll certainly hear about it from Aunt Min...

You wouldn't want to track mud all over the hardwood floors that her helper, Miss Eva, would polish daily with a brush made from half a dry coconut. Every morning, right after family prayers, Miss Eva would get down on her hands and knees and attack those floors to the beat of "Mosquito One, mosquito two, mosquito jump in a hot callaloo." Though no mosquito in its right mind would go near a bowl of green, slushy callaloo. Mosquitoes have a lot more sense than people, if you ask me.

As I was just a child — especially a boy child — I didn't wear boots or shoes much when I was on vacation from school. I'd wear cowskin boots to the banana walk, because I could get jiggers in my toes otherwise. And, of course, I wore shoes — shoes that hurt — to church. We were not supposed to go into the House of God feeling too comfortable. Look at Aunt Min. She laced herself up in a corset a mosquito couldn't breathe in.

I can still hear my bare feet slap-slap-slapping on the clay as I ran down the hillsides. I can feel the cool caress of the spring water as I waded through a stream. Then *ow!* "Makka juke me," as I would have said then. In case, you don't know patois, that means: "A thorn pricked me." And that's the price you pay for going barefoot.

There was a lot of food at Aunt Min's, but not much that a child would like. They had that callaloo we mentioned earlier, and bananas — boiled green and eaten as a vegetable, or mashed into a porridge with milk and brown sugar. We had salt fish and dumplings, tripe, corned pork, and goat meat ... stewed peas, rice, roast plantain, and tough, tasteless coco... (But on Sunday, if Parson came to mid-day dinner, we'd have chicken or roast beef, with rice-and-peas and green beans.)

So when I stayed at Aunt Min's, I was usually hungry. Especially when she locked away the shutpan full of molasses-laden wet sugar and I couldn't get to scoop out a handful and run for my life.

One day, I was walking down a path, so hungry my stomach thought my throat was cut (as Aunt Min used to say). It was tamarind season, which meant nothing worth eating was on any of the trees — except a few tamarinds, which make a good beverage but don't do much for serious hunger pangs. My head hung low, and my feet were heavy. The sun beat down on my head, and my belly growled.

That was when I saw it! A Willy penny, lying there as big as life in the middle of the path. You should've seen me grab that penny and take off. Straight to Miss Mattie's higgler shop, where giant Grosse Michelle bananas hung from the ceiling in ripe, fragrant bunches... one for a penny.

I'll never forget how good that banana tasted, as I sat on a rock and ate it, ever so slowly, with the cool wind on my face and the blue sky overhead.

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