



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.*

Mango Time

*People turn down their pots, mango time
Until they begin to rot, mango time
And John shut his shop
While the mangoes drop from top
Bippety-bop, bippety-bop, mango time.*

I can smell them now, number eleven, hairy, black mango... and the syrup-sweet robin from St. Elizabeth.

You're probably one of those townies who turn up their noses at "common" mangoes. You only eat St. Julian, Bombay and East Indian mangoes — big, respectable fruit you can take to the table.

If you are, I'm sorry for you.

Sure, a hairy mango can be — well — hairy. You get strings between your teeth, and you get juice all over your face, no matter how careful you are. But that's a small price to pay for the flavor.

Uncle Alvin, my mother's brother, gave me a tricycle for my fourth birthday. We were living in Kingston at the time, staying with Aunt Lucy, and the family across the street had several bushy mango trees. As summer approached, the trees were burdened with fruit. Gradually, they ripened, yellow and orange, glowing irresistibly among the dark green leaves.

I watched the children across the street scampering along the branches, filling themselves with mangoes. I heard their shouts of joy and the thump of mangoes hitting the sandy soil. And I smelled the heavy aroma carried across the street on the seabreeze. I watched and listened, my mouth watering and my stomach growling. I didn't want to beg, so I decided to trade instead.

The only thing of value that I had to offer was the tricycle. And so it happened that the little children got my tricycle and I got their permission to eat as many mangoes as I wanted.

When their parents found out and tried to return the tricycle, my mother wouldn't hear of it.

"He made an agreement," she said. "He'll have to live with it. Maybe that will teach him to be more careful in future."

But I don't recall feeling any remorse. What I recall is the taste of those mangoes as I sat among the branches, stuffing my face, day after day, till the crop was done. I remember, too, the black mango trees at the foot of Grandpa's hill. When those two old trees bore, mangoes were everywhere. You could hear them falling day and night. People from miles away brought their bankra baskets and collected as many mangoes as they, their family — and sometimes their donkeys — could carry. Yet there was always more than we could ever hope to eat.

Some people said the mango trees grew on a grave site, and that's why they bore so much. But Grandpa said that was foolishness, that the earth was just rich. I don't deny there's a lot to be said for a Bombay mango cut in two so you can eat it with a spoon, or for a fragrant St. Julian with its exotic flavor, or for a big, sweet East Indian. But those are mangoes you eat one at a time. With "common" mangoes, you can lose yourself in their bounty, eating one after the other with total abandon, the juice running down your chin.

Then, when your belly is as round as a puppy's, you head home for a wash and a snooze, while the mangoes drop from top and the bees hum soothingly. It is high summer, and mango time. God's in His Heaven, and you're feeling all right.

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