



*Jamaica Remembered*

*By George Graham*

## **Jamaica Remembered**

*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.*

## *The Things We Nyammed*

My mother used to tell me about a concert she attended as a little girl in Guy's Hill. It was at the elementary school, and was put on by the townspeople themselves, a talent showcase of sorts.

There was the cultured lady who sang in a high vibrato, "I am sooo all alone..." And the rude boys at the back of the hall who shouted, "You mus' be all alone if you sing like that!"

Then there was Mr. Somebody or Other, "late of Cuba," who played his guitar vigorously and proclaimed: "Lawd, she juke me a me side an' pinch me a me jaw, an' tear off all me clothes."

Then there was the young man who recited a poem he had composed: "My name is Alfred Small... I come from Caron Hall... An' when the potatoes bear too small... I nyam them, skin an' all."

That was the hit of the show.

And no wonder. One of the two things we Jamaicans wax most poetic about is food. The other, of course, is sex; but that's another story, We like to eat — "nyam," we call it when we're among friends.

If you're Jamaican, you'll remember this song for sure:

*Dip an' fall back  
Dip an' fall back  
Take my advice  
There is nothin' nice  
Like the dip an' fall back"*

And what is dip and fall back?

Just listen:

*You take a shad or mackerel an' you put it down to soak  
You get a bone-dry coconut, an' you no need no pork.  
You grater down the coconut until it begin to boil,  
Until the custard begin to form, an' coconut oil."*

Mmmmm... How well I remember the sweet, *sweet* coconut custard, summoning me with its irresistible aroma to Miss Minah's kitchen...

Then, says the song:

*You boil a green banana, an' you eat it with the dip  
You mix a cup o' beverage, an' so you dip, you sip.  
An' if the war should come again, an' bomb begin to drop  
All I want is to settle down with me dip an' fall back.*

Pickled shad and mackerel were staples. Smelly in the shop, but tangy and delicious in the frying pan. My mother savored the shad-roe. She liked red herring, too, but my father preferred the soft, slushy canned herring... heaped on hard doe bread and washed down with Red Stripe beer.

Still the "salt t'ing" we Jamaicans relied on most wasn't shad, mackerel or herring. It was cod. Newfoundland cod fish salted and dried board hard in the sun. We soaked it overnight to soften the texture and take away some of the saltiness. Then we roasted it for breakfast, cooked it with ackees for lunch, poked it into the middle of a breadfruit to give it extra flavor as it roasted slowly in the red-hot coals...

Coconuts were another Jamaican staple. We made oil from it, and used it in nearly all our cooking. The young girls smoothed their legs and slicked their hair with it. During the war, when we couldn't get kerosene oil, we floated a wick in a jar of coconut oil and lighted our homes with it.

The young coconuts gave us water when we were out in the hot sun, far from a cooling spring. And when we split the coconut open we could scoop out the creamy jelly, sweet enough by itself, and even sweeter when buried with thick, black wet sugar.

Bananas. We ate them ripe, of course. And we baked them for dessert, pouring coconut cream over them. We boiled them green — as a vegetable. And we even made porridge with them (though I must confess that green banana porridge is not among my favorite Jamaican foods.) The banana-like plantain was another stand-by. We fried it ripe for supper and roasted it green to go with our morning coffee, chocolate or mint tea.

The "cup o' beverage" was not just any beverage. It was a kind of orange-ade, made of Seville oranges, brown sugar and water. I've swallowed gallons of "beverage" in my time...

Something was always in season. Mangoes, of course. Avocadoes (we called them pears because of their shape)... Star apples... Rose apples... Otahiti apples... Locusts... Stinkin' toe... Sweetsop... Soursop... Custard apples... Jackfruit... Guineps... Tamarind... Cherries (not the foreign kind but a smaller version with a three-part seed, shaped like the ace of clubs) and clammy cherries (which were just barely edible)... Joomblin'... June plums... Hog plums... Guavas... Makkafat...

And we had dumplings... big gray or brown ones you boiled with your "ground provisions" (yam, yampie, sweet potato, dasheen, baddoo, coco...) and little white ones that helped fill out the stew... and Johnny cakes, cheaper than bread and much tastier, especially when you used it to sop up the gravy in your plate...

My sister will tell you we didn't eat those native foods, and *she* probably didn't. She was the pampered only-girl who lay in bed till noon while Cookie brought her breakfast in bed.

And it's true that we usually had roast beef or a caponized chicken for Sunday dinner — sometimes even roast duck or turkey when we had company. Served with rice-and-peas, boiled yams, sweet potatoes and vegetables from our own garden.

My mother always raised chickens. My father caponized the birds himself, tying weights to their legs and wings and spreading them across the ironing board to expose their sides. With a stroke of his penknife and a quick twist of his caponizing tool, the job was done in seconds.

The chickens ran free, clipping at the grass and zig-zagging after insects. We could always find one when we wanted to, though. They would come running and flapping when my mother or Agatha rattled corn in a pudding pan, signaling their meal time. Throughout the day, we would hear the clucking of one hen after another, proclaiming that they had laid an egg somewhere, and off we'd go rummaging under the bushes and in the trashy corners of the garage till we found the egg.

If my father was home when it was time to kill a chicken for dinner, he would take his shotgun and stroll around the grounds until he saw a likely young bird. He would toss a pebble to make it run, then blow its head off. If my father wasn't home, Dudley or Agatha would catch a bird by hand, upturn a washtub over it so that its head stuck out, then swiftly decapitate it. The headless bird flattered noisily under the tub, bringing tears to my sister's eyes; but my father assured us that it had felt no pain. Death was instantaneous, he said, and the movements were no more than "nervous twitches."

Some days, the fishermen would come by with wicker baskets full of snapper, king fish, jack, butter fish, grunt, goat fish, parrot fish... and any number of other bright-hued varieties. They would run the 18 miles up the mountainside from the seashore, and I was told that occasionally one of them died from it — his heart gave out. But they had to get to Malvern while the fish was still fresh, and they had no ice.

I can see my mother now, poking the side of a fish with her finger to test it. If the skin did not immediately spring back, that meant the fish was no longer fresh... Tough luck for the fisherman who had run 18 miles up the mountain. He hadn't run fast enough.

Then the butcher would send word that he was killing a steer, and we would reserve the part we wanted. Or someone in the district would pass the word that he was butchering a goat, or a pig...

Still, it wasn't every day you could get fresh beef, pork, goat's mutton or fish, and we were glad to have a supply of salt-fish, shad and mackerel in the pantry cupboard.

I know *I* ate the native Jamaican food — lots of it. One of my earliest memories is of running away from home and moving in with the East Indians in their barracks, because there I could eat as much roti as I wanted. Unfortunately, my term in the barracks lasted less than a day. My parents had dozens of people searching the sinkhole-riddled hillsides and wading in the Rio Grande, and within hours they had run me to earth and dragged me home for a spanking.

My mouth waters as I remember the hot, HOT curried goat and the crackling from the roasted suckling pigs... Sometimes, driving in the mountains, we would pass a barbecue pit where they were making jerk pork. In those days there were wild pigs in the Blue Mountains, and it was often one of those that turned slowly on a spit, dripping fat that hissed and flared in the glowing charcoal below.

On our trips to Kingston, we would buy patties in May Pen or Old Harbour, when my father would break his journey to get gas for the car (and fuel of another kind for himself and Uncle Arthur).

My brother Harry was even more passionately fond of Jamaican food than I was. Once, when I turned up my nose at a massive cornmeal-and-flour dumpling, he gazed at me wide-eyed and proclaimed: "Dumpalin' you don' want? Give it to me then!"

Betty may have preferred Yorkshire pudding and steak-and-kidney pie, but Harry and I relished such delicacies as ox-tail soup and cow's foot stew. My father (often) told us about a young boy who got into the cow's foot stew. When his father interrogated him, he was speechless because his mouth was glued shut.

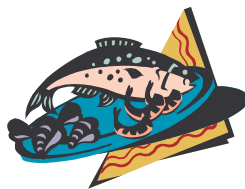
Of all the Jamaican foods, the best loved has to be bun.

In our house, bun was especially popular at Easter. On Good Friday, we fasted, so we could eat only bun and cheese. Some sacrifice! We children wished we could fast every day of the year!

During the War, when German U-boats kept the cargo ships from bringing us wheat flour, we Jamaicans learned to make flour from mango seed kernels. And I can tell you that the mango seed flour made excellent bun.

For candy we had gizada (made from grated coconut), paradise plums, mint balls, and a confection made from molasses, so hard to chew we called it Bustamante backbone or staggerback.

Once, Agatha the Cook found a stonemason to make us a candy stone, and she and my mother made red-and-yellow-striped candy — the white-sugar kind we usually had at Christmas, hard and crusty outside but quite soft inside. They also made candy from honey. It's no wonder we had trouble with our teeth!



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