

GRAND UNION

Having screamed at my six-year-old to the point that she threw herself down on her bed and wept, I felt the need to get out of the house and see my mother. She was dead, and in heaven, but for convenience's sake we met outside the chicken spot at the top of Ladbroke Grove. It was, in the moment, the blackest place I could think of. We sat together on the steps of the Golden Dragon. Mandem and Galdem passed us by, heading inside for their stir-fry and their Szechuan. Mother and I regarded each other. For being dead, she looked pretty fantastic. Death could not wither her. It was merely one of a long line of things that could not wither her. She wore her dreds wrapped just right, high and impressive. Never ashy, her darkness shone. She looked the spit of Queen Nanny on the five-hundred-dollar bill.

That is not a coincidence, she said, when I mentioned the resemblance. In death, I have become Nanny of the Maroons. That is, I have always been she, but now it is revealed. Figures, I said, and she admonished me for using an Americanism and asked if I was still living in those devilish parts. I had to confess I was, but had come all this way, across an ocean, just to converse with her spirit. Well, you're Asante now, she said, and I was glad to hear it, having always suspected as much. Still, I kissed my teeth, to make clear that, like all warrior daughters,

I wanted more from my warrior mother, much more, and would never get enough. My mother kissed her teeth in turn, signifying that she understood.

Together, we surveyed the scene. All around us was carnival detritus: Red Stripe cans and abandoned yellow crusts of lamb patty and broken whistles and glittering press-on face jewelry and filthy feathers and friendly cards from the police, describing proper stop-and-search procedure, informing us of the limits of their powers. Oh, carnival! While we dance in the August sun it's wonderful, it's sticky with joy, it's the sweet flypaper of life, but then night arrives, the police hurry us home, we survey the devastated streets, we think *surely we're not going to put ourselves through all this shit again next year?* (Nanny has gone to carnival every year since 1972.) Or maybe only I think that. (The borders between me and everybody else have never been clear to me.) Maybe all cycles must be respected.

The women in our family, announced my mother, do not recognize the women in our family. Well, that seemed cheap and tautological to me so I went inside to get some chicken. Though it's a Chinese place, it empathizes with its clientele, and that day they were offering inauthentic jerk with rice and pea and two plastic forks. I watched the daughter of the establishment sigh as the mother of the establishment critiqued her Styrofoam-box-closing technique in rapid Cantonese. And I once knew a girl called Hermione whose mother would never sit down to eat. She went straight from cooking to cleaning and if anyone tried to get her to the table she said *oh, no, no, no, I'm fine with my little plate here*, and then she'd clean up after everybody and pick at that plate like a bird, one bite every half-hour or so, till it was stone cold and a skin had grown over it, at

which point she'd scrape whatever was left into the bin and wash up the little plate, too. It was her way of showing love and it was so exotic to me—I was in awe of it. I went to her funeral. Seven hundred people stood up as one to chant: "*She always thought of others, never of herself!*" But you can only really know the blood you're swimming in.

When I got back outside, my mother had assumed the position of an old Obeah woman: legs wide apart, skirts falling in between, toes splayed like a duck. She still looked fantastic. Many had been the time she'd eaten the food straight off my plate before I'd even raised my plastic fork—but I could see why the Arawaks once flocked to her. If you're on the edge of extinction nothing less than Nanny will do. Yet you can't sing a note, I said to my mother—I was finally getting to the point—and the weird thing is my daughter sings with soul, truly with soul, and I suppose I'm worried about what it all means. Here my mother and all the other Obeah women in the neighborhood paused to laugh long and loud at the way worries will sprout on wet, fertile ground yet rarely care to flower in the kind of drought conditions they themselves had known.

Now, if you asked Billie Holiday, my mother said, with her eyes closed, she would tell you: *No one sings the word "hunger" like I do. Or the word "love."* That's not a defense of anything, clarified my mother, that's just a true fact. Although I'm not a Billie fan myself, daughter, as you know. Rodigan is my musical love, then, now and forever!

I stood up. I told her I loved her. I wandered over to the Grand Union Canal which may well be that river of milk which all the daughters of the world are looking for whenever they go to the hardware store for milk, even though they know full well

there's no milk at the hardware store. Hardware! Americanisms everywhere. But also love, and recognition of history, and the inconceivably broad shadow cast by the Blue Mountains, on top of which you'll find my Maroon grandfather, never dying, undead, totally undead, living eternally among his chickens and goats, his parcels of contested land, his dozens and dozens and dozens of out-the-house children, among whom a few bold girls now make their way down the shady side of the mountain, following the tread of my mudder, and her mudder, and her mudder, moving with necessary speed, not always holding each other's hands.



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