

Janice Shinebourne

Janice Shinebourne (née Lowe, b. 1947) was born and educated in Guyana, relocating to London, England, in 1970. She became a university lecturer and a political and cultural activist. Her publications include two novels: *Timepiece* (1986), for which she won the Guyana Prize for Best First Novel, and *The Last English Plantation* (1988). *The Godmother and Other Stories* was published in 2004.

Shinebourne's "Red Bean Cakes: New York and London" reflects her characteristic pared, economical style and her preoccupation with memories of Guyana (or, as the narrator says, "Old British Guiana"). The memoir celebrates the multiculturalism the narrator experiences in Guyana, London, and New York, allowing her to find herself at home in most cosmopolitan communities. Compare Shinebourne's response to such communities with Bharati Mukherjee's in "Hindus" and Cyril Dabydeen's in "My Mother."

Red Bean Cakes: New York and London¹

Soho, London

Instead of listening to my order, the waiters at The Canton in London's Soho listened to my accent and strained to place it. I used to have to repeat the order twice, even thrice. I used to catch them looking at me with intense curiosity. However, in ten years they have not asked if I am from China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, or the Philippines. Now they accept I am a woman who likes to come here to eat. Now, the headwaiter greets me like an old friend, serves me himself and gives me his warmest smile.

I go to Soho, too, to meet different friends, to catch up on our different interests. We meet at Cranks Restaurant in Great Newport Street because there is no limit on the time they let us spend there, nor do they monitor how much *we spend drinking* just tea and coffee.

The Canton reminds me of my grandmother's cooking in old British Guiana. She was Chinese. Her first husband was a man from Kashmir who died young; then a man from Delhi became her devoted husband. He spoke Hindi, so did she. So did we. She wore saris he bought her as tokens of his love. Once a week, they went to the cinema to watch romantic Indian films and learn the latest love songs by Latamangeshkar.² He taught her to cook Indian dishes—where to buy the spices and how and when to use them—to grow all the vegetables herself, to raise her own

¹ This memoir/story was first published as "1957, Red Bean Cakes, Soho, London," in *Moving Worlds*, Caribbean Issue, 3.1 (2003): 119-23. It was later collected under the title given here in the author's *The Godmother and Other Stories* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2004) 119-21.

² *Latamangeshkar* (*Lata Mangeshkar*) Indian singer best known as a playback singer in Bollywood movies.

ducks and chickens. She made delicious duck curry. I used to chase the ducks around the garden and catch them so she could thank Allah and bless the duck while she slit its throat, drained the blood, and placed it in a tub of scalding water for the children to strip the feathers.

So while I sit at my table at The Canton, I am a secure child again in British Guiana. I am with my brothers and sister. We are chasing ducks around our backyard. I hear my grandmother trying to sing like Latamangeshkar in a Guyanese accent. I am enjoying the memory of my Delhi-born step-grandfather, who was an affectionate man who, when he visited, always remembered to bring a present for each of his stepchildren and step-grandchildren. When I eat roast duck and Chinese greens at The Canton in London, I taste East Indian duck in their Chinese duck, I taste Guyanese calaloo¹ in Chinese greens. In my memory, I am in a Guyanese garden.

Southall, London

I have a long journey to The Canton so I don't go as often as I would like. It takes thirty to forty-five minutes on London's Piccadilly Line. However, Omi's restaurant is local. It takes me ten minutes from my home in West London to drive there. I have eaten there for as long as I have at The Canton. There is no better Punjabi food in Southall, especially the curried fish, pilau rice and bhindi.² Guyanese curries were part of the Creole diet I grew up with — though they bear little resemblance to Punjabi cooking.

Kuldip first took me there in the early eighties. He introduced me to the owners — several brothers and their father whose BMWs were always parked in the forecourt.

When Kuldip wanted to treat comrades or journalists from the BBC or the national newspapers, he took them to Omi's. It took a couple of months for the penny to drop — they used to smile at me because they thought I was his girlfriend. When I began to turn up alone, at first I got the same curious, overprotective looks the waiters at The Canton used to give me.

At teatime, the students from the tertiary college and secondary schools fill the restaurant. They do all the things they can't do at home or in the streets where their elders can see them. They chat up boyfriends and girlfriends. They smoke, they drink beer. They listen to hip-hop, gangster rap, rag and jungle on their ghetto blasters. They live in Southall and environs — Punjabis mainly, but also Muslims, Somalis, English, Irish, African, Caribbean, Vietnamese, Chinese. In those days, I used to teach at the tertiary college. At lunchtime, it used to be all English — packed with teachers and local government staff. Those were the days of Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council when Southall attracted the white Left. It also used to attract the Black and Asian Left because it was once a front line town like Brixton, when it fought racists off its streets. On weekdays as well as on weekends, large

¹ *calaloo* Both a spinach-like leaf and a thick soup made from the leaves; here Shinebourne is referring to the former.

² *bhindi* Ochroes (Hindi).

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extended Punjabi families come for early dinner. Between lunch and dinner, it is quieter. I take my friends then, and we take as long as we like, drinking cups of masala tea and mopping the gravy and chutney on our plates with the last piece of chapati or tandoori naan.¹

In old British Guiana, my father used to travel a long way to town for Chinese cooking—although he ran his own eating-place. It was divided in two, the cake shop on the left and grocery on the right. On market days the women monopolized the cake shop when they came to cool their thirst on their way home. Then, the men had to use the grocery. On Saturday mornings, the women came to the grocery—then, the men had to use the cake shop. In the canecutting season, the whole place was a refuge for canecutters. In the mornings, it was full of workmen wanting cigarettes and loaves of bread and cheese to take to the factory and fields. In father's place, it was the times when the barriers came down that he liked, the times you would find men and women, children and adults, not in an exclusive space, but talking to each other.

Brixton, London

Mother's menu included fufu, metagee, peas and rice, plantains, yams, cassavas, eddoes, tanya, breadfruit, pepperpot made with fermented casareep, salt fish, salt beef, konki.² Her menu weaned me off breast milk. She also used it to teach me to cook for myself. Friends come to my table expecting Chinese. I have to explain that I prefer to eat Chinese at The Canton and Indian at Omi's because cooking them does not come to me as naturally as African Guyanese cooking.

I lived in London for over twenty-five years before I found a restaurant with a menu as evocative of my mother's tastes and lifestyle as The Canton's was of my grandmother and Omi's of my father. It took so long because I never looked for one. London was famous for its Indian and Chinese restaurants, not Caribbean ones. So I always cooked my mother's favourite dishes at home, for my family, friends and myself. Shopping for the ingredients was as integral to their power to evoke the memory of my mother as was cooking them—although she grew everything in her garden. Her gardening involved an intricate communal system: seeds, roots, shoots and their harvest, all exchanged between neighbours. When I travel to Finsbury Park, Shepherd's Bush, or Brixton³ to find the ingredients for my mother's menu, I relive the journeys she and her friends would make *down the road* in search of a better crop of cassava or tanya root to bring back to their gardens, replant and harvest for their cooking.

¹ *chapati* or *tandoori naan* Various versions of Indian unleavened bread.

² *fufu*... *konki* Foods endemic to the Caribbean: *fufu* (mashed plantain); *metagee* (a thick soup made of many of the items listed here); *yams*, *tanya*, *eddoes*, and *cassava* (all edible tubers); *pepperpot* (a stew made from *casareep*, which is fermented cassava juice or milk); *konki* or *conkie* (a dessert made of cornmeal).

³ *Finsbury Park*, *Shepherd's Bush*, or *Brixton* Districts of London with large West Indian immigrant and second-generation population.

The first time I went to Cafe Jam in Brixton, the friend who took me there had no idea the chef and the menu were Guyanese. We were hungry and it was the nearest restaurant so we dropped in and made a snap decision to have lunch there. The waitress told us if we were willing to wait, she had to go *down the road* to Brixton market to bring in some of the ingredients. When our meal arrived, it was cooked in the Guyanese style, down to the black cake dessert. Now I eat at Cafe Jam regularly and I am really happy when I have to wait a long time for the ingredients to be brought in from *down the road*.

Chinatown, New York

I was trying to find my way to Chinatown in New York, which I was visiting for the first time. I had a need to find the red bean cakes my mother made. I asked a young woman the way and heard the unmistakable accent of someone from the Dominican Republic. As soon as she had given me directions, she said, "You have an English and a Caribbean accent." She wished me a good day and went on her way, waving to me as she disappeared into the crowd. It reminded me how Caribbean people have developed the skills of cultural translation. We tune our ears to accents, learning to recognize and use them to map our everyday transactions. Without that skill and other ones, we would have no maps to negotiate with. So, on my way to find my mother's red bean cake, I was reminded by a woman from the Caribbean that I was from the Caribbean, though I was looking for the home that my mother's red bean cake symbolized in Chinatown, New York.

But how different New York's Chinatown is from London's. My overriding impression was the aggressive competition for space, the number of cars and trucks, and people. People are dwarfed like ants by tall buildings and wide roads. I missed London's narrow streets, which seem to be more people-friendly. Here I saw people running for their lives as they crossed the road, with drivers oblivious to their safety. It made me think of Wild West movies, of wagons and horses stampeding through towns while people tried to get out of the way. In the communication style of some of the people of Chinatown I saw the inflections of the Wild West too—the macho John Wayne swagger in the way the owners of the jewellery shops guarded their trays of gold in open view of the pavement, daring anyone to a high noon shootout. I saw the Marlon Brando curl of the lips when they speak. I felt lost, far away from home in this version of Chinatown.

But I did not give up on my mother's red bean cake. I ventured to ask for them in a cake shop. I was shown red bean cakes I had never seen before, and the proprietor and I ended up having a conversation about the differences between the cakes I buy in London's Soho and the cakes on display in his shop. I explained to him that in London I always got my mother's red bean cakes from a shop in Soho. We were translating to each other the specificities of our different locations by talking about Chinese cakes. Cakes had become a metaphor of home to both of us. It gave me the confidence to explore a bit more, to get beyond the John Wayne and Marlon Brando macho barrier guarding the border to New York. And I came home with a bag of

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food much better for my diet than red bean cakes: a bag full of beautifully fresh pak choy, string beans, and spring onions, amazed at how much cheaper they are here and how much you get for a dollar. I paid three dollars for a bag of vegetables that would have set me back about eight pounds in London, that is, eleven dollars. New York wasn't so bad after all.

Later that night, I found red bean cakes, exactly like my mother's, in a Guyanese restaurant in Brooklyn. In London I get red bean cakes in Chinatown. In New York I do not find them in Chinatown but in a Guyanese restaurant in Brooklyn. I was home again.

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