

## TEMPTED TO TOUCH

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I head down the dirt road, a dusty path where people don't walk, but rather swagger, slowly pulling their bodies as the hot equatorial sun yells at them to take a rest. Pairs of Guyanese men's eyes leer at me from behind windows in dilapidated shacks, from the doors of rum shops, from the top of construction beams...wishing they could make my thighs tingle. They can tell I'm not a local—my white skin and Pantene-shampooed hair an antithesis to their dark bodies drenched in sweat—and it excites them.

I arrive at one of the three main roads in my small town of New Amsterdam, and immediately a potpourri of dancehall music, bicycle bells, and cows snacking on people's garbage assaults my ears. I wave to Agnes as she leaves the vegetable market, the aging janitor at the high school where I teach, and she nods back affectionately. A group of men and women are *limin'*, hanging out, with bottles of Bank's Beer attached to their hands like an additional appendage. One of the Afro-Guyanese women is dressed in tight jean shorts and is leaning against the car, her behind shaking in perfectly timed rhythm to the frenetic soca beats of "Tempted to Touch," which screams from the car's speakers: *Before the end of the night/I wanna hold you so tight/You know I want you so much/And I'm so tempted to touch*. I stare in envious awe at her, feeling inadequate.

Two men restore my confidence. Eyeing my whole body, they each give a *ssip ssip*, the Guyanese version of a mating call that's halfway between a whistle and a kiss. Their confidence makes their dark chocolate skin even more attractive, a color I've always found seductive, the exotic "other." I look and coyly smile, lifting up my chest a bit more as I walk on. I'm not particularly beautiful but, here, I am a mango in a sea of bananas, exotic and juicy, seemingly ripe for the Guyanese men to plunder.

I stop in front of the school supply shop. I come in three times a week to make photocopies of books and materials for my reading classes, not ever wanting to leave the cool air for my fickle fan back home. I am a Peace Corps volunteer, fresh from my years of college in the homogenous city of Boston, eager to escape the equally flavorless roots of my hometown on Long Island. Seeking unbridled adventure, I want to help reduce poverty any way I can, in between eating exotic foods and learning new customs. I'm also broke—a welcome freedom from the usual need to buy everything I see—and instead save my Guyanese dollars for the classroom.

I don't have much money to make the copies, but I can't bear to ask my headmaster for reimbursement. Our school is always last to receive funding, the last to place on national exams. The kids I've been teaching for the last year and a half are twelve to fifteen years old, yet read at a first grade level, the coarse sons and daughters of sugar cane cutters and washer-women. Earlier that day, I made a promise that I would bring in a printed copy of the Harry Potter paragraph

I'd crudely scribbled on the board. It is because of Hermoine, the main girl character who is clever and unafraid of how knowledgeable she is. The girls in my classes are told they are stupid and are lashed by their parents if they don't clean up the house; the paragraph is my passive attempt to show them life can be something else.

I call on Kamani to underline the verbs on the board. She is a petite Indian girl, and I often see her at the outside market luring customers for her mother to sell them cheap plastic bracelets and other goods. Her eyes are like bowls of chocolate soup, her long black hair swings playfully against her back, and her small, smooth hands are untainted by life's burdens. According to Hindu culture, in a few short years she will be eligible for marriage.

"Miss, me like dis story..." she says quietly. She is quick and is more than halfway through the task before she makes a mistake.

"Miss, look, she don't know what she doing," Siyad says. He comes to the board and tries to steal Kamani's chalk.

"Noooo, miss! Tell he to stop!" she says, as her little body struggles to hold on to the chalk. The thin stick breaks in half. Siyad tugs Kamani's ponytail.

"Enough!" I yell. "Siyad, sit down. Or I'm going to get Ms. Correia in here, and you know what she'll do."

I don't believe in corporal punishment, but the teachers at my school still do, and the threat silences them like flies caught in a zapper. Siyad sucks his teeth and walks outside to the grassy playing field.

These books that I'm now handing over in the stationery store to be photocopied are for students such as Siyad and Kamani, who need to be shown more than a sliver of care by their teachers. The young teenage boy who usually takes my orders is here. He is Indo-Guyanese, tall and willowy like many of the Hindu-practicing men in Guyana. His thick, wavy hair offsets his body, combed so that it resembles a helmet, with boyish sideburns as its straps. His hands are thin and delicate, revealing an equally tranquil demeanor.

"Notin' else?" he asks.

"Nope, that's it," I say.

He hands me back change, unsmiling, barely looking at my face.

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The Bollywood melodies trail Craig and I as we leave the ice cream shop across the street that morphs into a karaoke den on Wednesday nights. We walk into the thick night, the heat imposing itself like a steamy woolen blanket. Suddenly, four boys emerge from around the corner and drunkenly stagger toward us. I immediately recognize the boy from the photocopy shop on my right. Our footsteps are parallel, the boundaries between us clear. Do I say hello? Give a nod of my head? Throw a quick glance?

The boundaries disappear as I feel his shoulders brush up against mine as he quickly leans into me. From the bottom up, his hand touches the fabric over the front of my underpants, as if he were slowly pulling up a zipper.

I become a painting on somebody's wall, stagnant, the world around me fake. I see a Rasta man sway on his bike out of the corner of my eye. I hear the blind man on the corner trying to sell his paintings. I smell the cheap perfume of the lady selling cigarettes on the corner. I look at Craig next to me and suddenly stop and violently swivel around, remembering that another hand besides his was just on my body.

"What the hell was that all about? You just *touched* me," I say to his back, each word ascending in volume. I march toward him as if I were going into battle, my fists as tightly clenched as they can be despite the sweat, my step strong.

He doesn't say anything. His eyes are glazed over, and his body slightly sways like a palm frond after the storm calms down, unsure if it's going to start again.

"No, no, no, he didn't do that. You see," his friends say. "here wah happen..."

I don't hear what they say. All of their frantic faces are melded into one, their buttery skin a hotbed of anxiety.

"You touched my *vagina*," I say to him again, pointing. Still, nothing. The chorus of voices continues.

Though Craig hasn't seen what happened, he is trying to assuage the friends, attempting to talk to the boy. Trying to calm me down but I won't listen.

"He fucking touched my vagina!" I say louder.

Now there is a small group of people gathered around us as the bhangra beats continue in the background.

"This is bullshit," I say.

I turn and stomp toward my apartment. I run up our steps, only stopping to breathe once I reach the small balcony at the top. Craig follows me.

"I'm so angry right now. I was standing there...with months of frustration at this place boiling up in my fists," says Craig. He is also a Peace Corps volunteer. "I've never gotten into a fight before. I wouldn't even know what to do."

Possessing sleek feminine hips and soft, computer-trained hands, Craig at times seems more of a woman than I am. Though I occasionally spend time with a handful of women teachers, most of my friends here are men. I prefer their raw company, and enjoy the freedom of sitting outside with them as they inhale bottle after bottle of rum. Guyanese women do summon me to their kitchens. Agnes has repeatedly invited me into her home to cook with her. I usually decline, claiming I need to prepare lessons, but secretly I am avoiding entangling myself in a fixed gender role. I disdain how trapped most of them are, as willfully stuck as sugar on a moist finger.

"The kid was like, my student's age," Craig continues. "He looked about nineteen. I couldn't very well hit one of my students."

"Did that just happen? Did that really just fucking happen?!" I ask fervently. "I feel like a rape victim feels, you know, when they start to question if

they made it all up. It doesn't feel real."

My pores have ceased breathing; my skin is numb. I go inside and bathe for an hour, mindlessly hauling bucket after bucket of water onto my body to wash off the night's events.

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"*Bhai*, why didn't you hit he?" Kitty, the Peace Corps Safety and Security Coordinator whose name belies his beefy stature, asks Craig.

Craig tries to defend himself, but all he gets in return is a suck of the teeth and a multitude of reasons why the boy should've gotten a good lashin.'

I didn't want to tell Kitty at first, afraid of directing even more attention to myself, scared of betraying a community to which I've grown attached. Now we are standing at the town's police station, a building whose creaky wooden planks and crumbling wall paint make it feel less like a place where laws are enforced than a horror movie set, because I can't stop thinking about that night. I've just finished telling my side of the story to the receiving police officer, and we are patiently waiting for the boy to arrive. The locals are always in a perpetual state of anticipation—awaiting their cook-up rice to be done, for their barrels of clothes and games to arrive from family in the U.S., for their lives to get better.

The boy's manager from the stationary store arrives, a woman with a strong jaw line and a buttoned-up shirt hugging her neck.

"Well, I can hardly believe this. He's such a nice boy. He wouldn't do something like that," she says, a woman whose Caribbean accent is hardened by leftover traces from Britain, their colonial oppressor.

"M'am, I wasn't drunk. I *know* what happened," I say.

"Well, I just don't see why we have to make such a big deal of this," she says.

"Lady! This is a big deal!" Craig screams.

"Craig, c'mon down, *bhai*. Don't get all iggy," says Kitty, as he places his large hand on Craig's chest.

Her words make me distrust my memory, a bad friend of mine who has been known to meld disparate people and events into one wrong scene. Am I making this up?

The boy arrives with his mother, who is dressed in an exquisite, jeweled yellow sari, set apart by dull, dirt-covered sandals. The boy is wearing a formal white shirt and a calm, controlled, and aloof gaze I now try to avoid. His mother pushes him into a small room to be interrogated.

Soon I am summoned inside. The boy timidly sits in the midst of four women like an insect caught in a web of estrogen, soon to be dissolved. The head police officer sits upright behind the desk, her large limbs and breasts overflowing onto the table to convey a primal authority. The boy's manager stands by the wall with arms crossed and lips pursed as she stares at the boy. The mom sits besides him, her piercing green eyes glowing with rage.

My whole body is locked, hardened, as I try to pry his eyes away from

the floor with my gaze. He won't raise his head. The very thing he wanted—a literal grab of power from my most coveted body part—now subdues him, waiting to inflict its punishment.

"*Bhai*, whatcha got to say to she?" the lady in charge commands.

"Sorry," he says, staring at his hands.

"Me can't hear ya *bhai*."

"Sorry," he repeats, looking at me for a brief moment.

"*Bhai*, you going to get a lashin' when you get home, me tell you," his mom says. She starts hitting him, her bracelets beautifully jingling with each smack.

"Yeah, and don't you touch Peace Corps volunteers ever again!" I furiously yell.

"Don't you touch any woman, *bhai*, if she no want it," the officer firmly admonishes.

"Any woman, ya hear?" says his manager.

This is the only time I've seen women here defy the seemingly timeless and infinite gender system of Guyanese culture, collectively unleashing their anger at all of the abuse and inequality that's been forced on them. Underlying this, however, is hope; hope that they can change their daughters' and nieces' futures through berating this young boy, the only way they know how to do it. I feel triumphant and high off the power of these women. But sheepish, too, and unworthy.

"Yeah, any woman," I chime in a few seconds later as I blush, realizing I endangered the web by breaking one of its rules. The women all nod at me, conveying their forgiveness.

"You pressing dem charges, eh?" the officer asks.

I hesitate. I don't want to ruin his life for a mistake. I don't want his father to beat him.

"No," I say.

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"Miss, Siyad is touching me again!" yells Kamani as she jumps over a broken desk in the back row.

A week later Siyad is repeating his same trick of violently yanking on Kamani's ponytail. I call over Ms. Shepherd, a fellow teacher who walks around the school with bell hooks' "Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism" under her arm. I know Siyad sees my white skin as cartoon-like. Maybe he will listen to Ms. Shepherd.

I take Kamani outside of the classroom and ask if she's okay. She nods slowly, gently biting on her upper lip. What I had said at the police station about not touching Peace Corps volunteers didn't include Kamani. Until the moment those words spewed out of my mouth, I hadn't realized how truly disengaged I've been from Guyanese women. And how much it feels like a loss.

I reach into my bag and hand Kamani my Harry Potter book. She quickly

grabs it and hugs it closely to her chest.

"You remind me of Hermione," I say. "You're very smart."

"Yes, Miss," she says.

After the bell rings, I begin to walk toward the photocopy shop to prepare for tomorrow's lesson. I don't care if the boy is there or not. As I languidly meander down the main road, I notice the same characters, the heat welding them into their fixed places. "Tempted to Touch" and other hits blare from houses, grocery stores, and restaurants, accompanying each step I take. I am coming up on a group of men. Already I can hear the trademark Guyanese catcall ejaculating from their lips.

"I ain't never had the white meat yet," a man with a gold tooth says.

"Come have a drink wit us, *gyal*," says Kevin, a young man who I've danced and shared rum with before.

Before I can answer, Agnes frantically waves her worn hands. She is motioning for me to come to her house, a small shack that shyly sits in between a rum shop and a record store on the busy street.

"Miss Celex! Me niece and me cousin is here. We cooking. Come, *gyal*. We teach you how to cook roti, saltfish, bake. All dem tings," she yells as I'm waiting to cross the road.

"Good afternoon, Agnes! I have some stuff to do for school..." I say, knowing how Guyanese women love to *gaff*, talking until the early morning hours.

"Hush, *gyal*. You come here now. We teach you how to make Craig nice and happy," she says teasingly.

"White *gyal* no wanna go wit you, old woman," one of the men says, laughing.

"*Bhai*, you better go before I whack you wit me pointa broom," Agnes says, attempting to shoo them away.

I glance at the dirt path past the men and briefly contemplate Kevin's offer. I glance at Agnes' wizened face and the two women behind her, sucking their teeth in jest and laughing while massaging dough. I've shunned their world but, right now, their solidarity is attractive. Novel, even. I don't have to be a guest in the boys' club all of the time. Sometimes they go too far. Sometimes I don't belong. I accept Agnes' invitation.

I shoot the men a smirk as the lure of the forbidden has now worn off. The power I had been feeling up until the moment the boy touched me had been an illusion. Now, its appeal seems shallow and unnecessary...a childish game. I begin to *ssip ssip* back at them, pursing my lips in mock defiance, as I walk toward Agnes. They look bewildered. I laugh and shake my head.

The chorus of male hormones continues as I enter Agnes' home, proudly holding my chest up for me, and for me only. Agnes immediately hands me a rolling pin. I get to work, leaving the men outside.