

Ellen Ombre

SHREDS

FROM THE SHORT STORY COLLECTION, *MAELSTROM*

Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer

• • •

I was born in the district of Commewijne. Some of the plantations in that fertile, once-wealthy Surinamese district had meaningful names: Mon Souci, Mon Trésor, Peace and Delight, Newfound Care.

I come from Spite and Remorse.

Most of the plantations no longer exist. Abandoned by their inhabitants the buildings collapsed. The sluices silted up and the fields became swamps and breeding grounds for caiman. The trading stations fell prey to parasites, weeds and choking liana, and were slowly overwhelmed by the jungle. Sometimes a royal palm sits enthroned above the rampant vegetation. Or, witness to faded glories, a tall hedge of flowering coral trees, whose shadows once fell protectively over the rows of coffee.

I was taken away from Spite and Remorse when I was four, perhaps five years old. The events that took place in my life before I had to leave my relatives to be delivered up as a fosterling in the city, continued in an underworld of spirits and shadows. Nothing there is palpable, but the vague spirits who lead a quiet life in my dreams could very well stand for a father, a mother, for brothers and sisters.

I don't know my exact age but what difference does a day, a week or a month make to a whole existence which has been given to you by someone else and which you

have to take as it is? You see people everywhere who don't accept the life they receive and resist it, always trying to squirm their way out of it: megalomania, waste. Sooner or later death has mercy on them.

I'm not mentioned in the records of Spite and Remorse. My existence starts in the house of Mr and Mrs Miskin in Paramaribo. These are the people who raised me to be who I am now. I am named with their name and speak as they speak. What preceded this fostered life now exists as vague images of the journey from the plantation to Paramaribo. But there are also some clear flashes. Such as my climbing into the car, a means of transportation I had never seen before. The noise of the motor. The car door being shut, short and powerful like the noise of a *setigon*. Events I have used to fix my memories. Most probably because of the car's rocking movement and my surrender to it, I continually dozed off. I spent most of the journey asleep.

I remember the silhouette of the driver, big and dark. A female was sitting next to me on the back seat. When I awoke and opened my eyes she gave me a friendly look from behind her shining spectacles, said something, and waved with her hand. It could have been a reassuring gesture or perhaps a greeting. I didn't understand her. I closed my eyes and drifted away. Even now I can sleep for days when everyday life gets too much for me; letters on the doormat, an account that has to be settled, noises, the telephone; why haven't you been in touch, recriminations for short-sightedness; charity, interest, livelihood, the dishes. It all piles up and gets as heavy as stone. In sleep's no man's land I come back home and rid myself of the ballast.

It was dark when I arrived at my new foster home. I woke up because the car stopped. In the doorway of a large house someone was standing in the light. It was a woman. She walked down slowly, her arms spread. She helped me out of the car. I let her lead me up the stairs. Climbing stairs, one foot at a time, step by step, was just as foreign to me as all the other events of that particular day on which I came to the Miskins' house. On all fours, I finally managed to reach the top step. Being able to walk doesn't mean you're able to climb stairs.

I remember a paralyzing tiredness and the sleepiness that took hold of me in that strange house until I awoke and noticed that someone was bent over me. It was not the woman with the shining spectacles from the car. In the twilight of the room, I vaguely

recognized the face of the lady from the night before who had stood with her arms spread in the light and accompanied me up the steps. She drew me with her. I followed her to a small room. She gestured and I understood that she wanted me to undress myself and that I had to wash.

Perhaps it was because she turned on the tap that came out of the wall and caused the water to suddenly splatter out above me, I don't know, but for the first time in my life I was overwhelmed by fear. I stood stock-still with my arms clamped over each other. The lady tried to pull my frock up over my head. She couldn't get it past my stiffly crossed arms. The frock was the only thing I had that was my own. I endured being washed with my clothes on. The frock stuck to my body like a cold skin.

Later Mrs Miskin would sometimes cite that first cold shower: 'You had a will of your own, girl, the typical character of a *kaboegroe*. When an Indian and a Maroon go together, you get a type of...' She coughed, looked at me seriously and frowned. 'As tough and impenetrable as a mangrove swamp. It took a lot of effort to break that will of yours. But pay attention: where there's a will, there's a way.'

Mrs Miskin woke me every morning at five. The first few months I had to shower with her watching. She stood in the corner of the bathroom and gave directions.

'Soap, use plenty of Sunlight. That's the best way to banish primitive odors.'

Later, when she considered that I had gotten the basics of daily personal hygiene, I washed alone.

'Well child,' she asked me when I was dressed and had come downstairs. 'Have you cleansed yourself properly?' She already had the comb at the ready. 'Come, let me quickly tidy your hair.' She liked combing and plaiting my hair. When she was finished I set the table in the dining room while she prepared banana meal porridge for breakfast.

Mr and Mrs Miskin ate at the large table in the dining room. They took breakfast at quarter past six. On Sundays as well. I ate first in the scullery. Before starting to eat I thanked our Father In Heaven for His good gifts. That was what I was taught to do. He, the Lord In Heaven, suffered the little children to come unto Him.

My foster parents raised me with the bible. Prayers before meals, giving thanks afterwards, psalms recited by heart, the Gospel, the chapters and the verses.

During Mr and Mrs Miskin's meals in the dining room there was nothing to be heard except the clicking of cutlery on china. At the table a great silence ruled between my foster parents. The final chord, which I learned to recognize in the scraping of the cutlery on the plate, a short silence and the sound of Mr Miskin's chair being pushed back, was the sign that I should enter and clear the table.

Every morning at half past six he left for work. Before climbing onto his Fongers bicycle he took the brim of his brown felt hat between thumb and index finger and turned it down. He was always dressed in a deep-blue three-piece suit. Once a year he would order a new one from Wulfsen and Wulfsen.

'The tailor,' said Mrs Miskin, 'for the Dutch and the upper classes.' With satisfaction, she watched his departure through the venetian blinds.

My foster parents had fixed habits. After a warm lunch Mr Miskin went upstairs to his relaxing room, a dark room into which he withdrew to read the bible and other weighty books. He was no talker – Mrs Miskin told me that repeatedly. Silently, he moved through the house. But in the afternoons, at exactly four o'clock, when he'd gone into the bathroom after his midday rest, he made the sounds of an invalid for whom the last hour had struck.

'Mr Miskin's coughing up his gall again,' Mrs Miskin would say. It was as if the water he used to gargle contained an emetic. The inescapable noises he produced made me retch. At half past four he came downstairs as noiselessly as ever. 'I'm just going to stretch my legs.' He left for his afternoon walk.

The woman who had brought me to the Miskins as a fosterling was called Miss Treurniet. She brought inland children to the city where there was a shortage of children in service. Mrs Miskin had explained to me that sister Treurniet was a godly woman, a true daughter of the Dear Lord: 'She took you from that native hovel that you might become civilized. I assure you that here, in the city with us, you are at home with our Saviour.'

Miss Treurniet was shaped like a doll; a smooth girl's face which connected necklessly to a shapeless body.

'Spinsterhood is the future which awaits many of those cautious girls who have been raised by the better families,' said Mrs Miskin. 'They find their vocation in the

service of the Lord. Their whole being is dedicated to the good cause. If they don't find the Lord their life is but an empty shell.'

The two women called each other 'Sister'. They weren't related to each other but were, as Mrs Miskin put it, close *matris*. 'The only female who has access to my hearth and home.' She would stake her life on the fact that if she, Mrs Miskin, were to ask Miss Treurniet for a favour, no matter how unusual it might be, Miss Treurniet would never let her down.

'But I'm a modest person. Just as long as you never forget to be grateful to Miss Treurniet for bringing you into the big wide world, the world of the church and civilization, Paramaribo.'

In this city's registry office my foster parents entered me as: 'Hannah, fosterling belonging to the family of Eugenio Miskin and Esmeralda Miskin, née Schattevoo. At the time of delivery, the 22nd of February, 1939, estimated age four years.'

The day after my registration I was enrolled at St Peter's School, St Peter's School was a Catholic school run by nuns. My teacher was called Sister Victorine. Mrs Miskin wasn't Catholic but it was the closest school, just a few minutes walk from the house.

'Everyone has their own faith,' she explained, 'but personally I swear by the Lutheran church. Nothing exceeds it. It is, furthermore, a church with standing.'

On Sundays I accompanied her to her church. We walked along the Grote Combé Way past the Dutch pastor's house where gigantic, panting, slavering dogs watched over young Javanese girls to whom the Gospel was being preached. Then, through the quiet Palm Garden and past the former Governor's Residence to the Waterkant. Mrs Miskin wore a plain silk dress. Always plain, never floral or striped. She found that 'too riotous, too Negroid.' Gold pins on her shoulders held the straps of her slip in place.

I walked beside her and saw the admiring glances of approaching walkers. She nodded a greeting to an acquaintance but did not stop. A woman of standing walks on. Mr Miskin was of another faith, the Community of the Moravian Brethren, which also included Miss Treurniet amongst its numbers. 'They have done a great deal for the less fortunate, a great deal of work converting the population of the bush country. Thanks to their efforts, many a Muslim has turned his back on Allah. You will never hear me utter a

word of complaint about the Moravian Church.' On Sundays Mr and Mrs Miskin parted company. Each visited their own church.

At first my vocabulary was limited to 'please' and 'thank you', and 'sir' and 'madam', but very soon I had learnt to speak impeccable Dutch.

At the St Peter's School I was allowed to skip the infants' class.

'What an intelligent girl that is,' said Sister Victorine to Mrs Miskin who had been asked to come to the school for a talk. 'And knowing that she's a fosterling. She's so precocious, I've never had one like that before. In general these children are quite backward when they come to the city. You'd think she was much older. Extraordinary!'

Mrs Miskin sniffed at a lace handkerchief she always held in her hand when outside the house and said: 'What can I say, Sister? I've taken this task on myself and I'm carrying it out with all my heart and soul.'

The first, second and third class were combined. There was a boy called Sobha in my class. He was so big he already had a moustache. Once when he had to read the Dutch ABC out loud he asked Sister: 'Does? What's that, Does?' Like me he was learning the words. That there might be a connection between the pictures in the primer and the words didn't occur to us at first. None of us had ever seen a black dog with a strangely cut, curly coat and, furthermore, we had never encountered a single dog called *Does*. Dogs were called Blacky or Nona. They were dogs' names. A cat was called Pussy and not *Mies*.

'You're here to learn, boy, not to ask questions,' answered Sister. 'Children should speak when they're spoken to.'

I didn't need to ask any questions. Mrs Miskin schooled me at home to such a degree that I was very soon using language in a way that had nothing to do with the world of my school books.

I sat in the place of honour, at the front. My school desk was up against Sister's own. The white skin of her face almost formed a whole with the yellowed cap of her habit.

In the morning I was allowed to hand out the slates and slate pencils. At the back of the class were the big children and the children on whom, according to Sister, school was wasted, because their heads were filled with everything except good sense. Sobha

sat there and Jules Chok Fung Yen, a boy with baggy deep-blue shorts and knobbly knees. Jules came from China. He was far advanced in arithmetic and could multiply and divide large numbers at top speed. He didn't speak any Dutch and in Paramaribo he had to start at the beginning with *Does* and *Mies*. But mostly he just slept with his head on his hands and softly snored.

New children came to the school and others disappeared. I remember Jopie. She sat by herself at the back of the class. She told me about her family who lived on the plantation New Refound, about her little brothers and her granny. Now she was a fosterling with Mrs Mendesohn. But she missed her mother so much that she'd already run away from the Mendesohns' a few times. She couldn't find her way back home. I asked her how long she had lived with her foster mother. She said: 'Two months.' Mrs Mendesohn had threatened her with Youthripen, the children's prison. For a long time I thought that Jopie had made up the plantation name New Refound. Place names in Surinam mean something.

Mrs Miskin took me to Youthripen one Sunday afternoon, 'as an edification' she said. The girls hung off the barbed-wire-topped wire-mesh fence like listless bats that had lost their way because of the light. They were barefoot, in dark-brown uniforms. Young men hung around, their hands deep in constantly moving trouser pockets. The men made hissing noises. One moved the red point of his tongue in and out of his mouth like a snake face to face with its prey.

If Jopie ran away again she'd be locked up in there. Then she'd never see her mother again. In class she stared straight ahead or lay with her head on her arms and slept. Just like Jules Chok Fung Yen. Sometimes it was Jopie's turn to go to the front of the class. Sister called her Sleeping Beauty and asked her to recite the two times table. Jopie stood up slowly, dragged her feet all the way to the front and then bowed her head and said nothing. Sister Victorine said: 'There are whole tribes that will never learn.' Jopie went back to her place at the back of the class and silently stared into space.

The school books had pretty pictures in them. Of *Ot* and *Sien* and *Trui*. Children who aged a year with every new book. They weren't precocious. But they were very far away in an unreachable world. We of St Peter's School could never be like them. We were from a different world. The things that happened to *Ot* and *Sien* and the other

children in the schoolbooks happened under the watchful eye of very kind grown-ups. What a divine world, I thought, and was filled with longings: a mother who lovingly does the washing with a washboard in the kitchen, her plump white arms dripping suds. And a monkey with a skirt and a hat on.

The one time a disaster happened to *Ot* and *Sien* the chapter was called: 'A Leak at *Guurtje's*'. It had been windy. A tile had got loose. There was a leak in the old woman's house. That was something nasty happening in that other world. That was worth mention.

Mrs Miskin taught me another language. She recited long, rhythmic sentences, her head held to one side, looking into the distance: 'Similar sounds are stepping stones one skips over when one speaks.' She read to me from her favourite book: PJ Harrebomée, whom she called the master of the aphorism. She knew countless poems off by heart.

'What is important is the art of declamation, giving the correct emphasis,' she spoke, 'but that is preceded by committing the text to memory, word for word.' And emphasizing every syllable she recited: 'Negritude is like flowering vanilla, high in the jungle trees. Still far away, the odour greets us, while carried with the breeze.' That verse is carved into my brain. As self-evident as the fact that the knife, as Mrs Miskin taught me, is laid to the right of the plate when setting the table.

'Do you know who created those splendid lines? Eugène W Rellum.' With this name she taught me the history of the reversed surname: 'Now we have two flies with one blow. Surinam's history is so fascinating, child. Rellum should have actually been called Muller. Nearby, long ago, there lived a certain Mr Kalop, a little brown man who was related to the great Polak family, but of course they were of a much lighter colour than Kalop. This Kalop had once been houseboy to the Polaks. Family connections are sometimes complicated. It is so important that you know things about the past. Even if only to be able to participate in discussions.'

I thought of Jopie, my classmate from New Refound. She knew so much about the past that she longed for it. It ruled her days. She didn't discuss it. In front of the class she could only give a display of silence.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Mrs Miskin. 'I'm trying to refine you and I see you staring into space. Pay attention, girl, don't daydream.' And she carried on with

her story. The history of the reversed names was from long ago, from the time when there were still slaveholders.

'If I told you how we were mishandled and humiliated in former days.' She made a face as if she were trying to suppress afterpains. 'Like a cancer, the worm of slavery gnawed at every budding sprout which, with proper care, could have contributed to the blossoming and prosperity of our country. You can get down on your bare knees and thank our Dear Lord that you didn't live in those times.'

On my bare knees I thanked the Lord with full submission.

She taught me the poems of Van den Vondel and Speenhoff, the Dutch national anthem. I learnt everything off by heart and gradually made Mrs Miskin's language my own.

'There are,' she once said solemnly, 'two beautiful things in this world: remembering and forgetting. And two ugly things: remembering and forgetting. I didn't make that up myself,' she smiled, 'but it's something I could have made up myself.' I thought it a pretty saying and repeated the words to myself. Mrs Miskin was like a radio that was on all day, quiet but clearly audible. She was my background music. I was her only audience. We were in tune with each other.

Mrs Miskin was big. She had shining black hair that she wore in a bun over which she stretched a gossamer thin hairnet. She wore beautiful dresses with lace collars. Gold bracelets tinkled on her wrists. When she spoke she stood straight, her head slightly raised. As people do when giving a recital.

Mr Miskin had no time for her rhymes and what he called her verbal flood. He was small, a good bit smaller than his wife, and stout. It seemed as if his head had been dropped onto his shoulders from a great height so that his neck had shot into his trunk. The back of his head was like a sloth's. Mr and Mrs Miskin lived together politely. They never touched each other. At home they avoided each other. When she spoke to him he answered without looking up from the book he was reading, so that it looked as if he were reading out loud. If he happened not to be reading he looked downwards while speaking, as if studying his knees or the ends of his shoes.

'Do me a favour,' he said when Mrs Miskin had been speaking for too long. 'Words, words, I can't bear all this racket.'

After first arriving in the house of my foster parents, I slept on a woven mat on the floor. Mr and Mrs Miskin slept in two beds. In the mornings, when I helped Mrs Miskin with the housework before going to school, we made the beds and I noticed how she tied them together with a shining cord around their bars. She always did that herself. One Saturday I was allowed to accompany Mrs Miskin to Happy Day, the department store where she made her large purchases.

'A sleeping mat is for a plantation,' said Mrs Miskin, 'we're going to make a fine city lady out of you.' She bought a camp bed for me. 'Later, when you've grown up, you shall sleep in a proper bed like Mr Miskin and I. When you have reached that stage. But you still have so much to learn. Everything in life has to be earned.'

Civilizing me was Mrs Miskin's life and joy. 'Won't they get the shock of their lives if they ever see you again at Spite and Remorse. When a lady comes to visit them. We, Mr Miskin and I, may not have brought you to this world but, by refining you, with a great deal of refining, I must succeed in making you into a copy of ourselves. No one, no one will recognize you there when you stand, clean and well-cared for, in front of the primitives. They will ask themselves who the lady is. And what will you answer?'

'I am Hannah Miskin,' I answered.

I tried to imagine returning to Spite and Remorse. The only things I had to hold on to were Mrs Miskin's descriptions. Primitiveness, poverty, idolatry, rattlesnakes and other terrifying things, such as the story about the history of the place name Spite and Remorse which she told me with great enthusiasm. Long, long ago, when slaveholders still had slaves, the plantation I came from was the property of the wealthy Du Plessis family. Mr Du Plessis was an incorrigible lady's man and his wife a jealous spouse who watched over her husband like a kidnapper guarding his victim. She traced all his movements and noticed that he spent a noticeably large amount of time in the vicinity of a certain house slave, Etrave. One time the jealous Mrs Du Plessis saw how her husband, in an attempt at seduction, casually stroked the young slave's breasts as he passed her. The mistress was furious. *She* was in charge in the house. With such behaviour the slaveholder undermined *her* authority. Outside he could go his own way and let his bestial drives run free. But inside the house her rules applied. She summoned the plantation flogger and ordered him to chop off the young slave's breasts. That would

teach her to make eyes at her husband. Boiling with rage, she personally fried up the breasts for her husband.

'Human meat,' she interrupted the story, 'apparently has a very delicate taste. It can be compared to lean pork.' Fortunately I had never eaten pork. It was *treef* to Mrs Miskin so we never had it in the house.

'Silently the couple sat down to their meal,' she continued the story. 'The man clearly enjoyed it and smacked his lips heartily.

"Superb," he said, praising his wife's culinary art.

"Well then," she said, when the meal was finished and the man had uttered a satisfied belch, "I hope you've finally had your full. You just ate the breasts of your beloved Etrave."

The man stood up, with his knees bent he tried to support himself on the edge of the table. He tore the buttons off his shirt and grabbed at his throat. All he could get out was vomit. It was like the explosion of Krakatoa. First, the steaming undigested food came out, one thick mush. Then the gall-coloured fluid and finally seething foam. He couldn't stop vomiting. He fell down and vomited out his heart and his soul. Mrs Du Plessis looked down with horror at her dying husband.

"Oh God, my Lord," she called out in despair, "what have I done?" Her spite had made way for remorse.

'Well,' she said, because a silence had fallen, 'what do you think of that?'

'I don't know,' I answered.

'Of course you don't know. It was long before your time.'

On the twenty-second of February attention was drawn to my existence in my foster parents' house. I can still clearly remember the first celebration of the anniversary of my arrival. The copper in the hall was cleaned, the Viennese wooden furniture was waxed, the floorboards oiled.

'It is,' said Mrs Miskin solemnly, 'a memorable day.' She had made orgeat and baked a *viado*. I accompanied her to Happy Day, the department store where she went shopping on Saturdays. She bought small candles and paper serviettes. Alma, the seamstress, had made a beautiful dress for me. Pink with a billowing skirt.

Miss Treurniet was invited to the party. Her spectacles shined. She had taken a place in the Viennese wooden rocking chair, her legs slightly spread, the way people who are too fat sit. She looked big and droopy like a rag *kotomissie* doll but without the traditional costume. She played continuously with the hinges of the handbag she was holding on her lap. Mr Miskin sat silently in one armchair and stared ahead. I sat on a small bench at the low coffee table on which the cake had been placed. In the middle of the *viado* was one of the candles we had bought together. Mrs Miskin took a box of matches out of the sideboard, lit one and gave it to me: 'Here child, light that candle.' After my second attempt to transmit the flame from the match to the candle, Mrs Miskin lit it herself.

She was the only one standing and seemed bigger than I had ever seen her before.

'Child,' she said solemnly, her hands folded, 'time flies. You have now been with us for one year. If you continue to do your best you may stay with us until you reach womanhood. God willing.'

I received a small present wrapped in shining paper. It was a silver ring with a small red stone.

Mrs Miskin pulled up a chair next to sister Treurniet's. She sighed. The ring was much too big for me.

'Better to have something too big, then you can grow into it. Something that fits will get too small, cut off the circulation and stunt the growth.'

Miss Treurniet said: 'You put that very well, sister Miskin.' I received a present from her too, a white handkerchief with an embroidered edge.

'How our Hannah has grown,' said Miss Treurniet.

'At the registry office,' said Mrs Miskin, 'I said that she was four years old. Possibly too few years. She's already a strapping girl. She's already lost quite a few of her milk teeth. But it gives a pert impression, such a precocious child.'

Miss Treurniet said: 'I estimate her more as seven than six.'

The four of us sat like that for a time.

The first crickets announced the evening. The birthday party was over. Miss Treurniet said goodbye. Mr Miskin accompanied her on her way. 'That gives me the

chance to stretch my legs at the same time,' he said. 'That had gone by the board because of the festivities.'

I took the ring and the handkerchief upstairs to my bedroom. I carefully packed the ring into an empty matchbox. I pulled the red case out from under my camp bed, opened it with one of the two keys that were tied to the handle with a string, and put the box and the handkerchief with the rest of my things.

The case was my very first possession. The day after I arrived at her house in the city, Mrs Miskin gave it to me as a gift. All my possessions were stored away in it: my Sunday dress, the three dresses for weekdays. 'One in the wardrobe, one to wash and one to wear,' was the Dutch adage Mrs Miskin brought me up with but there were always two neatly starched and ironed dresses in the case.

The Miskins had waited for a child for a long time. 'From my own flesh and blood,' as Mrs Miskin was wont to say. 'But the Dear Lord ordained otherwise. It can't have been because of me. They turned me inside out, just like a fish, and there was nothing the matter.' I always had to think of Mrs Miskin inside out when I cleaned the fish on Fridays. It was one of the household duties she had taught me.

Every Friday around one o'clock Mai, the fishwife, came by with a big basket on her head in which the fish lay, protected from the sun by a banana leaf. '*Warapa, trapoen, koebi*,' she would call through the street.

Mrs Miskin bought a *koebi*. She taught me how to cut open the fish's belly. First, I had to sharpen a knife on the whetstone. Then I had to stick the point of the knife in the small hole in the middle of the belly. In one movement, I had to pull it through to the gills. Under the skin, not too deeply. The innards had to be removed from the intestinal cavity with their membrane intact. I carefully extracted the *koebi*-stone from out of the head. Mrs Miskin had a collection of these white stones. Around her neck she wore a gold necklace. The pendant was a *koebi*-stone set in gold.

The fish had to be divided into three pieces. The head piece was for me, the tail for Mrs Miskin and the fleshy middle chunk for Mr Miskin.

The Miskins' house was on Hofstede Crull Avenue, in the Combé neighbourhood. 'I'm still trying to find the works of this poet from our Golden Age,' said Mrs Miskin.

'But it's so darned long ago. I bet that even in the mother country a search for his poems would be in vain.'

It was the neighbourhood where many streets were named after Dutch governors: Wichers Street, Crommelin Street, Van Sommelsdijck Street. My school was on Loth Avenue.

The house, the largest in the street, was built on stilts. Around the yard a concrete wall had been erected. Shards of glass from broken bottles had been set into the top of the wall.

On one side the yard bordered on a large property on which an abandoned, bougainvillea and ivy-covered, planter's house stood. Mango trees, cacao, pomegranates, soursop grew in abundance in that garden. Once when I was busy sweeping the front yard, a lot of mangos fell one after the other to the ground. I looked up and saw that the crown of the giant mango tree, that top-heavily overshadowed part of our yard, was coloured with moving black and yellow. I stopped working. Amongst the plentiful fruit I picked out little monkeys. The animals were gorging themselves on the fruit no one picked.

The property was bewitched. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew that.

In the night time you heard baleful owl's calls.

At the most unexpected moments you would see a big cane basket on the broken wooden bridge that connected the property with the street. The basket was filled to overflowing with the most beautiful fruit, bottles of wine and spirits. On top of the wine and snacks sat a living white chicken, put there by the same invisible hand. The animal made no attempt to escape.

With a shiver I passed the objects. In the early afternoon when I came back from school everything was untouched under the scorching sun and the chicken was gasping for air. The next morning there was no sign of the basket. When I first saw the basket on my way to school, I went back to the house to get Mrs Miskin.

'In the future you must act as if the object is not there. Because what the eye doesn't see can do the heart no harm.' She spat on the ground, made the sign of the cross, and instructed me to do the same. That day I was late for school. Sister Victorine had no sympathy for my excuse. As punishment I had to write 'Witchcraft does not exist' one hundred times.

The monkeys weren't bothered by the fact that the yard was bewitched. As light as birds they sprang from branch to branch. All at once a rifle shot rung out and I saw one of the animals tumble down, hit the top of the fence and plop down in our yard like an overripe fruit. I ran over to it. The animal lay on its belly with its face in the sand. In the tree the other monkeys shrieked. Some of the animals sprang down to the lowest branches. I picked up a stick and turned the animal over onto its back. It was a squirrel monkey. The eyes were wide open. The upper lip was drawn up and the little teeth were visible in the silent, grinning mouth. In its arms it held on tight to a tiny, wrinkled, baby monkey. The little one crumpled its tiny forehead into a frown. Its mouth opened and closed with a suckling movement. I tried to lever the baby from its mother's embrace. But the mother animal held on stiffly to the little black hands. It was as if a clamp had been closed around her baby's body.

I ran into the house to get Mrs Miskin. When we came back out there was no monkey on the ground, the animals had disappeared. High up in the mango tree the last monkeys sprang away and dissolved in the shades of the trees on the haunted property.

'Now listen good, girl. Don't play tricks on me.' She held onto my chin with one hand and forced me to look her in the eyes. Threateningly, she held her index finger under my nose: 'Imagination and reality aren't the same thing, remember that. Reality is gruesome enough by itself.'

I swore I was telling the truth. It was unbearable that Mrs Miskin suspected me of lying.

'I've noticed that you see a lot more than's good for you. Close your eyes. Don't go getting yourself any *hebics* you're not strong enough for.

The shot that had brought down the monkey had come from the large property that adjoined ours on the other side, a *bigi jarie*, on which various houses stood.

Mrs Miskin said: 'It was as if Noah's Ark ran aground there after the flood. That's Surinam,' she said and, about to start declaiming, assumed her solemn face, 'in a nutshell. Our country does not have just one people but different kinds with their own languages, religions, customs and habits. There is no single tradition. They don't know where they come from or where they are going to. Their only point of departure is their great suffering and that undermines them.'

All imaginable peoples were represented on the *bigi jarie*; Indians, Hindus, a Maroon, a Chinese, *Boeroes*. If Noah had seen that motley crew he would have thought: 'What now?' And abandoned ship.

Mostly the people there just moped around. They were poor and the property was dirty. With the slightest bit of rain it flooded. The latrines overflowed and gave off a penetrating stench. Chickens, Pekin ducks, a *pakira*, a baby deer, dogs and cats; they were all mixed up together.

In the middle of the property was the house of the Hindu family, Gopal. I was forbidden to have any contact with them. From my bedroom window I had a good view of their verandah. They were always fiddling with each other, combing hair or looking for lice. The man had filariasis. He moved with his legs wide apart, as if walking on tree-stump stilts. Below his knees his trouser legs looked like flared skirts. There were eighteen children in the family. It wasn't very long after I'd seen the dead monkey in the garden that three of the Gopals' children died in the space of a few days. The mother set up a piercing wailing tore her hair out of her head. From my bedroom I watched her throw herself on the ground and start eating sand. Disdainfully, Mrs Miskin commented on the riffraff next door: 'What a farce. With eighteen, three more or less is neither here nor there. They're ghastly. Those women breed like rabbits. You have to ask yourself how that fellow manages it. It's an ungodly state of affairs.'

She viewed the fact that she herself had never had any children as the worst thing that had ever happened to her. When the moon was full she moaned: 'Oh, Father in Heaven, that I've never been fun to bursting and able to endure that liberating pain.'

Every time she got her sickness, which is what she called those strange moods, it was full moon. First she became uneasy and started talking incessantly. The whole house was turned upside down. The linen was dragged out of the wardrobe, the china cabinet had to be washed out, the copper polished, the mosquito nets aired.

'I can't stand this filth, I can't stand it,' she mumbled. The house had to be cleaned from top to bottom. She sprinkled lavish quantities of Creoline which dissolved in water to form a milky fluid. On my knees, I scrubbed the floorboards clean. To her I was a slattern, a grub. She called me unteachable. I could do nothing right.

After finishing the job she collapsed. Felled, she lay between the sheets with a wet flannel over her eyes. The blinds in her bedroom had to be kept shut, in her state she couldn't abide the light of day. But it was the moon, especially the moon, that had to be shut out. She cursed the day she was born and called herself a hinny, a worthless monster, a dry well. The ominous owls called, the dogs howled along with her, heads up high, raised to the moon, sorrowing for unfulfilled desires.

'And you,' she moaned bitterly, 'I know that all my efforts to make you someone in society are pearls before swine.' She predicted that the day would come when I would forget her.

'Never, never,' I spluttered from my kneeling position at the foot of her bed. 'I shall always carry you with me.'

Normally, she was glad to have me with her. She said I was her hobby, a gift, small perhaps, but one that gave meaning to her life. She needed to have me to care for. I kept her going.

'And,' she said. 'I'm serving the good cause. With my efforts and dedication I give you civilization you would have lacked if you had stayed in the bush.' I would have been unable to read or write. I would have been a lost soul in the jungle, a prey to wild animals. And without a grain of spiritual hygiene. She took her time and said what she wanted to say. And I remembered her words, just as I remembered the verses and psalms. My second birthday on the twenty-second of February was celebrated, just as the first had been, in the company of Mr and Mrs Miskin and Miss Treurniet. Once again there was *viado* and orgeat. Mrs Miskin handed me a gift wrapped in shining paper. I opened it. A green exercise book appeared.

'Don't look so crestfallen,' Mrs Miskin took the exercise book out of my hands. 'What do you think it is?'

'An exercise book,' I said.

'That's what I thought. Eugenio, may I use your pen?'

Mr Miskin stood up and walked to the writing table in the corner of the room, took a pen out of the pen holder and opened the ink bottle.

'Wait, before an accident happens.' Mrs Miskin walked over to him, sat at the table, dipped the pen into the bottle and started writing on the cover.

Flapping the book she came over to me. 'Read out loud,' she said. In decorative letters was written: DIARY. 'In this book you can note all the trials and tribulations of everyday life. One tends to so quickly forget,' she said.

Miss Treurniet gave me a gift of a pencil. Together we spent most of the festive afternoon sitting silently in the front room where the copper had been polished and the chairs rubbed until they shone.

Miss Treurniet had left, Mr Miskin had accompanied her on her way. To stretch his legs.

'I have another little something for you,' she said when we were alone. 'In a way it's a bit of a present from me to you. But in the end effect, the hand that feeds you, Mr Miskin, will benefit the most from it.' She gave me a book and opened it at the first page. 'Read that, child,' she said.

'The first tips for daily hygiene,' I read. 'Tip one: Irrespective as to whether the hand is attractive or unattractive, the correct handling of the nails and their careful trimming and polishing gives every hand, good or bad, the appearance of good breeding.'

'Magnificent,' she interrupted. 'Carry on like that.'

I read on: 'One begins by filing the nails when they are dry and hard, after which it is necessary to soak them. The best nail file is a flexible, strong, thin file, without any hand grip. File around the corners carefully and endeavour to penetrate into the corners themselves.'

'Marvellous Hannah, go on.' Delighted, she clapped her hands.

I hesitated. 'Further,' she said.

And I continued. 'After the cuticle has been cleaned and loosened, it must be cautiously but firmly pressed into place. A short length of lime stick is all that is needed for good nail maintenance and its regular use will ensure that the cuticle knife, a dangerous instrument outside of the hands of experts, does not need to be employed.'

'Eugenio,' She called.

I started, and stopped reading. She had heard Mr Miskin coming home.

'Eugenio, a surprise.'

Mr Miskin did not appear.

'Carry on.'

And I continued: 'Because the continual manipulation of the cuticles makes them thick and tough, they must be pushed back every morning with a lime stick.

'Go on,' she ordered. 'Eugenio!'

Mr Miskin appeared in the doorway. 'What's got into you, woman? You're screaming like a griot.'

'My efforts have borne fruit. Read my child, read loudly.'

And I read the story again and emphasized the syllables clearly, just as Mrs Miskin had taught me to do.

Mr Miskin stood in the doorway and listened.

'Well, what do you think? I promise you that within a week she'll know this text off by heart.' She clapped her hands with joy.

'She has talent, that's for sure,' said Mr Miskin. His eyes wandered from my head down to my feet and back up again. 'That's for sure,' he repeated.

After a week I could say the text in my sleep.

Around about that time I was given a file, a pot of salve, a fingerbowl and a sheet of emery paper.

'I'm pleased that you're single handedly taking over some of my domestic chores,' said Mrs Miskin. She gave me an empty biscuit tin to keep my hand things in. THE BEECH had been punched out on the lid in italics.

'Eugenio, may I introduce you to your little manicurist.' Mr Miskin lay flat on the bed, his eyes closed. Mrs Miskin sat on a small bench and I knelt down beside her.

Mr Miskin opened his eyes, looked at me briefly, smiled and lay his hand on a towel on her lap. She took his thumb. I was allowed to pass the instruments.

'Here, you do it,' she said unexpectedly one afternoon.

The thumb felt thick. I hesitated and held the stiff thumb awkwardly between my fingers.

'Don't look so scared, child,' she said, 'that thumb won't bite you.'

'Well?' She looked at me expectantly and pressed the nail file into my hand.

'Don't hesitate.'

I followed her instructions. Mr Miskin neither moved nor spoke.

When I was finished she got up off the stool and said: 'Sit down.' I sat down and draped the towel over my lap. Mr Miskin turned onto his side. His eyes were closed. I started on the other hand.

'I'll leave Mr Miskin in your hands for this from now on. I couldn't do it better myself. If you continue to do it so meticulously we won't need to acquire a cuticle knife.'

Mr Miskin valued regularity. After his lunch and before his rest hour he liked having his hands done.

Just as I'd made Mrs Miskin's language, poems and sayings my own, I also got to know Mr Miskin's predilections.

Every second day, I had to go to him after lunch in his relaxing room.

'Come in,' he called when I knocked on the door. He lay stretched out in his silk dressing gown. I sat on the footstool, took my tools out of the biscuit tin from THE BEECH, and spread the hand towel over my lap.

Mr Miskin turned onto his side. He looked at me, stretched out his arm and spread his fingers out on the towel. A smile played over his lips.

'You see this hand?' Mr Miskin moved his fingers forcing me to stop my task. 'This is the hand that feeds you. Without this hand your head, your belly, your limbs don't exist, none of you exists. This hand is turning you into a big girl. Look at me.' I looked him in the eyes. 'What happens between the walls of my relaxing room is our secret. Miss Treurniet, Mrs Miskin, no one exists here except you and me. You understand?'

I did what was asked of me.

"Flarden" by Ellen Ombre.

From Maalstroom.

Copyright © 1992 by Ellen Ombre.

Originally Published by De Arbeiderspers.

Reprinted by permission of the author, and David Colmer, the translator.

Calabash

A JOURNAL OF CARIBBEAN ARTS AND LETTERS

Volume 4, Number 1 / Spring-Summer 2006

Information about this work:

SHREDS

By: Ellen Ombre

Start Page: 28

URL: <http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/vol4no1/0401028.pdf>

Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

Calabash is published by New York University. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher information may be obtained at:

<http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/about.html>

Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters

© 2006 New York University