

*Jennifer Palmer*



## Mr. Hugo

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MR. HUGO IS A HOMOSEXUAL, PEOPLE SAY, and beneath their breaths, they call him names because it is important that their judgement speak. What else can he be, this forty-four year old bachelor if he has never had a woman. Confirmation that it is so comes from good authority. Mr. Jacobs, the postmaster, has testified that Mr. Hugo once approached him sexually, said he told him off properly for such nastiness. While Mr. Jacobs' motivations for this accusation has become suspect, after it was found out that he himself was undeniably a homosexual, caught in the act, why should people bother to revise their belief about Mr. Hugo when he does not deny that it is true. He is lucky that the thing that saves him from scorn is that he is a gentleman, generous, discreet.

In these parts, dry seasons have been known to wreak vicious and indiscriminate havoc, when the midday sun toasts the grass crisp and brown, when it cracks and crumbles the bare earth to dust as the temperature climbs and sizzles the air above ground. Conditions like these will easily ignite the leaf trash. A breeze will fan a spark till it blazes and flies with the wind. Hillsides, cane-fields, forests might be obliterated, go up into deep smoky black clouds of soot that are seen drifting across fields and houses, that sit on mountain tops or suspend menacingly over the horizon. While beneath the crackling and burning unceased encroaches on villages, razes houses ashes to the ground. Mr. Hugo has lost his house and possessions in such a fire. He is pitied for his loss, but has no place to go because nobody wants him.

It is not unusual that Che would want to offer Mr. Hugo lodgings. He is in the habit of bringing home strays. And, after all, Mr. Hugo has frequently delivered him from rumshops and revived him out of his alcoholic comas. Bernadette knows. She never minds giving any one a plate of food or shelter for the night, but she prefers to keep her little sanctuary for family and children. This time Che isn't bringing home any transient. He is talking about installing Mr. Hugo in the match-box room adjoining the kitchen. A permanent arrangement of board and lodging is a matter to think about, discuss. Che forgets that he should wait for her answer. He realizes his mistake too late to retract the words that come galloping out of his mouth, "I tell him yes already."

"He'll pay rent," Che attempts to mollify his woman lurking behind an ugly dead-eyed mask, "De money is all yours. Why not try it out for a little while." And people will talk, Bernadette knows, whether you do or you don't take in a homosexual into your house, so she might not have argued

against the idea if those words, *I tell him yes already*, didn't jab her so, as if she has no say in the matter at all. She is aware that such acute vexation cannot be contained in these words alone. It proceeds from a greater source of aggravation ever since Che stole the money from the pan. The anger that she feels glances off the surface of those words and plunges through the layers of infractions Che has committed against the children and herself, each and every one of them unconsciously measured, piled and compacted over years.

"I radder starve dan bring any sinfulness in dis house." She is astonished by the vehemence in her voice. To him her response is irrational, inconsistent with the woman he has married. There used to be a time when, "Bernie my Fluff," were all the words needed to melt her down like warm butter. No more! His Bernie was a different woman now. It shames him that she has grown to be more than he is man enough to match. Still, like white on rice, she cannot betray her true nature. He knows her well enough to know that this response has less to do with how she feels about Mr. Hugo's sexuality than with him. It's about the money in the pan business that she will never forgive. His blotchy mind recalls the incident only vaguely. But the severity of his wife's behavior since confirms his culpability, impresses upon him the gravity of his offense. Details of truth when remembered by her are so unpalatable to his conscience, the way she sums it up, *What kin o' man will tief food from he own chirren mout?* will make him do anything to erase the incident from his past. He has tried in vain to redeem himself, miscalculating recurrently that the simple truth will do. He longs to give the matter eternal rest, but now he welcomes a re-opening of the old sore, any detour to detract attention from his present predicament concerning Mr. Hugo. Damned that slip of the tongue he has blundered already, for saying yes without first consulting Bernie. He stalls, bracing himself to handle the stubbornness of his wife. When a man says "yes" he must stand on his word. He has his pride to think about and Che believes that in games with women, he cannot play fair if he is to win. As he did back then, he falters on the lie he tells again. And, as with the best of lies, he has come to believe it himself,

"Fluff, if I tell yuh once I tell yuh a hundred times, me eh tief no money. It was a loan."

"Is so? If yuh call borrowing without asking, what dey call tiefing?"

"Bernie, O Gawd yuh know if I did ask yuh I wasn't getting a fardding. Tell me yuh wouldn't o' say I was using it to go drink and gamble?"

"Ask and it shall be given, de Mighty One say. And you eh shame? Tell me, how much times yuh ask and get and squander it all away."

"Yuh tink I de borrow dat money for me? Is for you and de chirren." His plea to be believed pitches and fractures his voice. "Lord, woman," he bawls, holding his head in his hands, bowing, "what I go do to make yuh believe notting more important in de worl to me dan you and de chirren." Tears stream from his red eyes, his fat lips tremble and glisten with a slimy dribble that wets his limbs hanging low and limp. For her to watch a grown man bawl is wrenching, no matter she has seen it

many times over. He picks himself up and his voice again, after a pause, "I borrow dat money from you to invest in a boat. Fluff, me own boat. Yuh know what dat means, more of everything for you and de chirren. Is a wicked fate dat bandits jump me before I clench de deal. Is a miracle I still alive today." Reliable sources have told Bernadette that her money went to pay a gambling debt. A formidable opponent Che had butt ends with that time, who, if he didn't have his money would surely have had Che's head.

In the first performances of this drama, Bernadette is moved by veins of truth marbled into a ball of lies. But it's a familiar scene played out too many times to sustain its intended effect. In his own way, she knows, Che cares for his family. But his way is capricious and uncertain, as shifting as the sand beneath the tides. It is nothing she can count upon. For years she is satisfied to wear his love like a borrowed cloak, allowing herself to enjoy a fleeting warmth and security. This pan incident is a persistent obstacle between them. Each time it resurfaces, she hopes that he will own his guilt, show remorse. She might forgive him. But it is one too many lies mounting upon the initial lie that makes her snap. Seized by a convulsing rage, she belches out,

"Che, you're the biggest tef I know. But dat eh ha notting to do with Mr. Hugo coming here. Over my dead body I will let you taint up me chirren and make my house into some Sodom and Gomorrah." Her own words alarm her, distort other sentiments she feels, but she cannot check the outpour of a bottled rage. Che is shocked. He always knows exactly what to tell a woman. Bernadette has been his special study. But this radical change he discovers in his woman, can it be? When words come back to him, they fall spontaneously, with no particular aim or destination this time,

"Bernadette, I thought yuh was different. I thought anyone wit charity would be you. I thought yuh was above judging and all dat." His voice and his body shrink, as he concedes his loss. But quite unintentionally, though he could not beforehand have guessed at the measure of its success, he strikes a lethal blow on his behalf, for Bernadette is slapped into shame by the plain truth in what he has said.

Bernadette tacitly agrees for Mr. Hugo to stay; she wants no part of him. "Make sure he keeps to himself," she insists. She lives with the everyday whisperings that a condition like Mr. Hugo's is something to beware of, distrust. It being some aberration of the normal and good, she should worry for her sons, for evil is invasive, quietly insinuates itself, then dominates. It is squandering words appealing to fixed minds, so she doesn't say what she believes, that evil lies not in them who cannot help themselves for being born so. And who in his right mind chooses eternal damnation and scorn is either an innocent or a fool; just as scorners of the black, yellow and maimed, the innocent and the fool should be shamed. But there is wisdom in precaution, which Bernadette takes, for such singular reasoning is a feather against the crippling weight of popular prejudice. Under which, she succumbs.

She stays alert, watches for Mr. Hugo to slip up and betray himself. Perhaps he will bring a lover into the house, she will have to turn him out. Not once, several times she blushes in shame, catch-

ing herself with imaginings of the sexual clumsiness that men must encounter when they are driven to prefer their own kind.

But in the six months of his stay, so far, Mr. Hugo gives no reason for complaint. He remains invisible except for the trail of habits that she comes to notice him by. He leaves extra money for his keep and as though he can feel her pulse of anxiety, she observes that the amount that he leaves grows in proportion to her need. She returns from work to find the garden weeded. The ready yams and coco he will dig, wash them and leave them by the kitchen doorstep. A breadfruit will be roasted sometimes. Dry coconuts will be husked and heaped. At first she is suspicious that some motivation lies behind these habits. But months wear on with nothing sinister revealed. The numerous ways in which these small services ease her life have caused in her a change of heart regarding Mr. Hugo's occupancy. How to thank him now that her anger for Che for saying yes before she agrees has slipped and poisoned any possible good relations between them? For from the start, by leaving his food on a certain shelf in the kitchen safe, she has implied that he is unwelcome. Now she wishes to tell him it is no longer so.

But the public's anxiety unceasingly presses her to watch for certain things. Unmanliness is one. He has taught her boys how to sweeten their mother's coffee, to scrub and darn their own jeans, to starch and iron a shirt. Such skills in a man Che would openly disapprove of, if he ever stayed long enough to notice. She shrugs off their father's petty peeve for, certainly, a drinking, gambling, womanizing man doesn't dare uphold himself as an example of the ideal. But secretly she doesn't know if she should feel ashamed that these occupations, while building competence and independence in her boys, bring to her a mother's undeserved relief. *Watch out for a queeriness in behavior! Some oddity, Expect! Unseemly advances, Beware!* In bits of awkward conversation as best as she can manage telling a nine and eleven year old, she takes precaution to warn them. *We know. We know.* They give a hurried embarrassed laugh. For children prefer to know from other children the secrets of Mr. Hugo, as they already know.

With the village's unflinching eye pinned on a man like that, Bernadette doesn't need a spy to tell her how Mr. Hugo spends his days. She catches him when he wakes at five, roasting, grinding, brewing fresh coffee daily. Then he leaves. Since the burning down of his shoemaker's stall, his home and his business, she has heard that he hires himself out as morning laborer on estates, cane-fields, oil-fields, working hard to reclaim his loss. Then he returns to Bernadette's kitchen chamber to take a nap. In the early afternoon he is often seen seated on a three-legged stool, his restless hands reaching for a familiar occupation. His tools are scattered on a bench beside him, a knife, a mallet and a pan of nails. His fingers deftly smooths and stretches the leather uppers over a wooden last to meet an outer sole, a boy's size six. And for yards around people can hear the regular doleful hammering of the shoe maker.

Bernadette's boys say, *Mammie, de man is strange*. He finds them wherever they are and drags them

out of idling. They complain. He assigns them various chores about the house and yard, mopping floors, cutting grass and feeding fowls. Not satisfied with that, he sits them down at a kitchen table, presents them with a copybook and shows them how to form and practice their letters. They must recite the times tables twice and study a rhyme. While, at nights, Bernadette sees a lantern burning by the window in the chamber where the shoemaker sits on the edge of his bed. He sits there smoking. His fingers needing exercise, with waxen thread and hog's bristles, he stitches upper leathers to their inner soles.

Days unravel leaving Bernadette with a bittersweet pleasure for the presence of Mr. Hugo. The regular presence of a man is pleasing—a sober, useful man, more so. Though they hardly speak, she grows accustomed to the habit of his being there till, unconsciously, she depends on it. The tenant makes such a difference in her life, so sweetens her sufferance of loneliness and abandonment that she is frightened to think what she will do without him. The more of the man disclosed to her by his deed, the more he appears to her in quite a normal light. She is willing to dismiss all this homosexual business as a lie, to forget that it might be true.

Having retired from his toil, on evenings, Mr Hugo settles himself on a chair, smoking before an open casement window in his chamber of the detached kitchen hut. It is already dark at six o'clock. He has been sitting there well into the night till, now, the wee hours of morning. An oil lamp hangs from a nail of the low ceiling above him and burns, silvering a patch of blackness clinging to the window.

In the main house, Bernadette is seized by an unexplainable restlessness, tormenting her sleep, despite her fatigue. She's abandoned yet again. From time to time she rises and paces the floor, pausing to look out of her window and gaze at the long ethereal curls of tobacco smoke lifting and disappearing into the silvery veil.

Months of his thoughtfulness and generosity ever since Mr Hugo's occupation in her dwelling begins mellowing her resentment for the man, displacing it with tenderness. For so long she has been used to obligation tugging her out of bed that she is disquieted by an exultant feeling of being lured into wakefulness by the rhythmic pounding of the mortar in her yard by a tight muscled, half-naked man, accompanied by the aromatic burst of roasted coffee beans. She has been trained to expect that little joys will punctuate life's hardships, but to be wary of the dangers of abundant joy, and to remember, above all, only God can bring peace of mind. She cautions herself not to be too happy in that abundant joy she feels in having a man around the house once again. Still, she would like to shout it to the villagers that she is confirmed that Mr. Hugo is one hundred times more than the half-a-man he is rumored to be.

The night is torrid. Her throat is parched. By the way she is drinking a fever is coming on. Bernadette raises her cup from the side of her bed to her mouth and drains it empty. There is a water barrel in the kitchen with a galvanize spout leading from the roof-top where it catches the rain that

trickles down. She will wrap herself in a shift, wear a scarf to shelter the dew. She tiptoes out the door, not to wake the children. The wooden steps creak from her weight on her right foot as she stuffs the left in the old boot on the step where it lies. Her hand with the flash-light shivers. Outside a breeze cools the heat on her skin. It doesn't soothe her throat. She must be ill.

The shoemaker in the antechamber of the kitchen is alert to alien sounds. Bernadette enters. He is punctual to greet intruders by the parted curtain that leads to his retreat. A short distance between them, the figures stand rigid, each calculating the other in silence, in the subdued light.

Bernadette is swept up by a sudden passion. Not a fever, but passion races through her and burns her fingertips. Her blood runs cold right down to her toes. Passion coursing through her like waves of fever, hot and cold, she does not remember, in this moment, that it was some similar conflagration that once melded her to Che. *It is a devil's weakness that wills it*, she thinks, *she can will it away*. But any item of consequence that might latch her restraint in place breaks loose, floats weightless in her mind: He is no ordinary man. He might reject her for his own sex. No matter.

For now, the insurmountable yearning has crescendoed far too close to its climax to recede. She notes with some relief that the atmosphere is spelled by animal heat coming from both sides of the room. And in the ensuing suspension of time, where bodies might collide, they drift together. Their skins softly melt in the way that seams disappear under the thumbing of a sculptor's gentle touch, unifying distinctions, making them whole. In the midst of sweet embrace, through his clothes her hands are tracing of their own accord, the contours of his rear, the hollows of his back and the stiffness of his manhood. She is convinced that this Mr. Hugo is no homosexual at all.

And suddenly, before the abating of her desire, before her mind distends, condemns, with awareness of the outrageous act she is committing, she senses a sudden tension in Mr. Hugo that singes her desire. He straightens his posture, kisses each of her palms and folds them like a treasure against her bosom. Then an index finger sweetened by a kiss he plants gently upon her lips, "SH!" He whispers in a broken voice, "You are my first and only love, but you're not mine to have." With that Mr. Hugo turns and leaves the room. She feels a greater wrenching by his leaving than the abomination she ought to feel for having violated her vow to Che, in the sight of God. 🐼