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Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters

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Garfield Ellis

TILL I'M LAID TO REST

. . .

Tiny had to attend a get-together that night and insisted that Shirley go with her.

"I have some people I want you to meet." She said. Shirley was still trying to come to terms with herself and she did not want to meet any strangers that evening. Yet she did not want to remain in the house and contend with the lonely, empty room . . . that mysterious unmade bed that had taken away three days of her life without her realizing.

"I don't think I would fit in," she replied faintly.

"But we have young people your age too man." Tiny said. She had not seen another Jamaican her age in the time she had been in the United States. Her mind had immediately returned to Jamaica. She had not written a word to Dawn since she arrived. She had wanted to wait till she moved in with Mark and she was sure of a permanent address. So she had not written her, and now that there was no Mark, there was nothing to write and tell. She sighed audibly as she remembered. Tonight Dawn would be at home or on some, date, maybe at some club, Ecstasy maybe, with any number of men worshipping at her feet . . . enjoying the good life. But from the drab back room in Miramar all that seemed a million miles and a hundred years away. She could not remember ever feeling such loneliness and hunger not even those days in Sufferers Heights in the midst of the gang wars when her mother could hardly pay the rent and they had to lock the doors as early as six o'clock for fear.

"We have it every weekend or so," Tiny insisted, "And we always have plenty food."

This brought her fully alert. Her stomach growled at the sound of the word *food*. She had not eaten for days and the little soup that Tiny had given her had only served to sharpen her appetite. Now she was so hungry that her stomach growled constantly.

When they got to the get-together there were only a few people there. They entered a

large living room much like Tiny's with tasteful furnishing pushed aside to make space for what must be the dance floor. A woman was sitting watching the television with a Red Stripe beer bottle in her hand. Tiny introduced them and the woman glanced up to say hello. They moved to the kitchen where two other women were seated at a high counter on stools drinking Red Stripe while one eyed a little old man through a glass door, fussing over a grill in the backyard.

As they approached, Tiny was greeted with a roar, and the woman who eyed the man rose quickly to hug her. "Who this," she bellowed as if speaking across a bar counter, though they were standing side by side.

"Is my niece." Tiny said. "This is my niece, Shirley."

She was a short brown woman around forty-five with her clothes cut young and tight around a body that must have been quite exquisite. She wore an ugly wig with coarse long hair that touched her shoulders.

"Go 'way." The woman fanned her hand at tiny go 'way. "You can have niece good-looking so. Which part a you have Indian in you family?"

"Is me niece though. Shirley this is Madge. We call her Madgy."

Shirley was too amazed at Tiny's lie to deny her boast. She took Madgy's hand and smiled.

"Babs. don't come yet?" Tiny inquired pulling a stool to the table "Siddung, Shirley man, siddung."

But Madge was already steering Shirley towards a vacant seat. "What you want to drink? A beer? Red Stripe or what?"

Shirley preferred a soft drink and Madge brought her a coke. The other woman at the table was close to her sixties but seemed as spirited and young as Tiny and Madge who must have been pushing close to fifty.

"So what happen to Babs." Tiny insisted as she reached for the beer that Madge offered her."

"Lord, what happen to you and this Babs thing so!" Madge leaned against the counter and nudged the other woman, and they both laughed loudly."

"Me just want to see her."

"Well she say she soon come, but a doubt she goin' make it. What you say Cherry? You think she goin' make it?"

The woman laughed mischievously. "I don' know missis."

"Is what?" Tiny inquired. "Is what?"

Madge laughed loudly and held her crotch, then skipped away. "Hey Sammy that deh chicken goin' take the whole night?" Then she returned to Tiny at the counter and did a small grinding dance. "Soldering missis, soldering."

"You lie!" Tiny dropped her beer onto the counter and all three women burst into sustained laughter.

"And if you see the piece a man too. If you see the piece o' man." Madge began to snap her fingers and move her hand against her side as one would when mimicking a jockey on a horse.

"No wonder," Tiny laughed "No wonder. I trying to get her since evening."

"Well, only one somebody getting, and him not here right now."

"Is lie! So what him look like?"

"It matter!" said, Cherry. It matter? Man a man missis."

"Not for me," said Tiny "my man have to look good."

"You can stay there." Madge laughed. "My own nah dry up pon me, Missis. Soldering is soldering. What you say Shirley?"

Shirley dropped her eyes quickly. Each woman there could be her mother but their conversation was enough to embarrass her. Old ladies who could laugh and make jokes about men like girls in a bathroom or at a pajama party. Madge was obviously the life of the crowd, loud and mischievous, expert with at holding a cigarette at the corner of her mouth while she spoke and worked. She could even laugh with the cigarette there screwing up her face as if tightening one side of her lips while opening the other side for wide raucous laughter.

She nudged Shirley playfully. "All like how you pretty so, you must pick and choose. Man must run you down like flies."

Shirley could only manage a weak smile. The scent of jerk chicken made its way across the room and made her stomach growl.

"Lend me you phone," Tiny said. "Make me call her."

"Make the woman stay," Cherry said.

But Madge was already searching for the portable phone.

See it pon the fridge top." Tiny pointed.

“Make the woman stay. Why you want interrupt her?” Cherry spoke without conviction.

“Interrupt her yes.” Madge seemed a little tipsy. “She should reach here long time.”

Tiny dialled quickly. The other women waited eagerly pushing their faces toward the phone at tiny’s ear.

“What happen to you.” Tiny inquired into the receiver. She listened a while then smiled mischievously at Madge “Is after ten now man, what you doing so long getting ready.” She said into the phone again.

Madge made the jockey motion against her leg.

Tiny listened then continued into the phone. “But everybody hear waiting on the you man. You coming or not? I want to ask you something.”

“Or you done come?” Madge shouted toward the phone. Cherry almost fell off the stool. Tiny was barely able to suppress her laughter. She placed her hand against Madge’s shoulder to push her away from the receiver. “I bring my niece to meet you. So you coming?” She waited a bit then looked across the room at the clock on the wall “Is a little after ten. You coming? . . . Alright you know, we waiting. I want talk to you about something. . . Make sure you come.”

“And don’t stop come.” Madge shouted again toward the phone. But Tiny was already clicking the switch. “How you so out of order man?” She shoved the phone at Madge with a half smile. “You don’t even know how to behave yourself. You don’t see Shirley?”

Madge took the phone “She probably deh pon it all the while she talking to you.”

“Yes,” Tiny smiled. “She did sound kind a funny fi true.”

“Whoa,” Madge laughed, held her crotch and danced across the floor. “Soldering.”

The doorbell rang.

“Wonder who that now?” Madge composed herself and moved across the room.

Tiny smiled at Shirley “Don’t mind her you hear. Is so she stay.”

Shirley smiled weakly and finished her soft drink. She wondered when the food would be ready. She also wondered where were the *plenty young people* her age that Tiny said would be there.

She watched Madge make her way to the door. Her body wriggling in the dress as seductively as a fifty year old body could in a dress that was a bit too tight on a body that had become much too soft to resist the pressure of the belt against it. She was not fat, but age had redefined the curves of her body, and the dress that would have made her irresistible fifteen years

ago, now seemed a bit ridiculous. The waist gathered as if it had too many pleats and the fabric did not bounce but was dead against her slip. If Shirley had not been so hungry she would have probably laughed.

A slim young woman much darker than Shirley but about her age, in a nurse's uniform, bounced past Madge into the room and paused momentarily to pat the woman watching TV in the living room. "Lord Ivy. You and the T.V. How you can watch TV so?"

"Tell you say young people coming." Tiny smiled at Shirley as the young woman bounded across the living room. Madge trailed her as quickly as she could. Behind them walking slowly was a slim man, almost white with thin hair and a large cigarette stuck in his mouth. He was so thin, the beltless jeans he wore, seemed on the verge of slipping past his hips. Shirley watched as he sauntered across the room, and stood facing the kitchen without so much as acknowledging the people there. He seemed washed out and tired. Yet he stood with a haughtiness of one above all that was before him. Mark would have looked something like that she thought, if he lost all his money and didn't eat for a year.

The young woman bounded to the counter and hugged Tiny tightly. "Tiny, what happen?"

Tiny laughed "Nothing. A bring me niece to meet you."

"Which niece?" she said, looking at Shirley, "You can have niece pretty so!"

Madge laughed forcefully.

Tiny smiled. "Shirley, is Madge daughter this. You see how she go on just like her. She name Dionne. That is her husband Phillip." Shirley shook Dionne's hand and watched as Phillip made a small nod. He seemed to scorn the very ground on which he stood.

"Me tell her that young people her age would come." Tiny said to Dionne.

"Lie she telling." Dionne said. "No more young people not coming. And me not staying. Just come to get little food." She pointed her nose toward the grill.

"You and you long gut." Madge said.

Dionne passed the counter and went straight for the fridge. In the minute or so she had been there she had completely taken over the proceedings. She was slim with a fading beauty. Too many lines in her face for her age, Shirley thought. But she had the abundant personality of her mother. She crossed to the fridge and found a soft drink "You want something Phillip?" She beckoned to her husband.

"I'm fine." was all he said.

"No bother come here with you loud noise. And lock the fridge, light bill high." Madge said.

"Loud noise! Who can make noise like you?"

"Well we was having a quiet conversation before you come." Madge pulled out a stool.

Dionne ignored her and moved toward the grill. "Hey Sam no food don' ready yet."

"The chicken ready," Sam said. "And the rice cook long time."

"Plain rice or rice and bean." Dionne said.

"Plain rice," said Sam.

"Don't tell her nothing, Sam." Madge shouted after a sip. "Nobody don't cook rice and *bean* in here."

By this Dionne had a piece of chicken and a soda in her hand. She calmed and came back to the counter. "How you take them?" She asked Shirley "They don't mad you with them old stories?"

Shirley smiled faintly. "I just got here."

"Nobody not madding nobody," Madge said.

"Them fool, them fool," Dionne said elbowing her mother fondly. "Vex, she vex you know. Because me say *rice and beans*. I don' know how Jamaican fool so. Use the big kidney bean with rice and call it *rice and peas*. All me tell her that is beans she still say *rice and peas*, and get vex. Ask Phillip."

Madge seemed to shudder with rage, and her good nature threatened to break. "Is rice and *peas*. Onoo too Americanize, want change everything."

"Jamaican people too fool fool," Dionne said between bites. "Lord Sam, the chicken not too bad at all. "Put some pon a plate for me. Me not staying long."

"Yes make haste and go on." Said Madge.

"Lord man, stay little," Tiny said "Babs not even come yet."

"That is another one," Dionne said to Shirley "Me sorry for you when she come. Them out of order." She regarded Tiny. "Me have to go home with my husband."

"That you a call that." Madge whispered so low that Shirley was probably the only one

who heard her. But Dionne heard the whisper and seemed to guess at what it meant.

“I know what you say you know. I know what you say. And that is why I don’t like to come here. You always want insult people.”

“What I say?” Madge retorted. “What I say?”

“I hear though. You never hear Shirley?”

“No.” Shirley was beginning to dislike her. “She did not say anything.”

“You stay there take up for her,” Dionne said, reaching behind her to take the plate that Sam offered. “You stay there take up for her. Me gone to my yard.”

“Go on, you *maga* like,” Madge said. “Bout you rice and *bean*.”

“Is *beans*. Is not *peas*. It’s kidney beans in there. So is *beans* and rice.” Dionne leaned into her and kissed her.

“Go on, I don’t want any kiss from you. Go on. Like you ever see *ham* in *Hamburger* Or *dog* in hot dog”

Dionne turned and swept from the room with her husband.

There was a short silence as the women paused to recover. Her whirlwind of a visit had sucked all the energy from the room. She had not spent more than five minutes yet it felt like she had been there an hour. The party had to take a deep breath to start again. *And what a party* Shirley thought. One old woman sitting glued to the T.V. set and three others sitting around a counter playing at pajama party. And she sitting there almost enjoying it, but more hungry and exhausted than anything, wondering when the food would come, and when Tiny would get tired so they could get out of there.

“I only hope the one Sam don’ give her all of the chicken,” Madge finally said.

“After me not mad,” Sam said from the patio.

“And you goin’ make we starve.”

Sam appeared with a platter of chicken and placed it in the midst of the women. Cherry rose and began to distribute utensils from the fridge top.

“I don’ care if you vex,” Cherry said, placing a plate before Madge, “I don’t care if you vex, is you daughter and all, but I don’ like how she talk to you.”

“Lord, is so she go on all the while .” Tiny Said. “If you don’t mind sharp you think them fighting sometimes. You don’t see how she make sure kiss her before she leave?”

“Don’t like how she talk to you sometimes,” Cherry said.

“Make she go on with her piece o’ dry up husband.” Madge said, “Me no know if somebody can call something like that husband.”

The women laughed. The mood began to return. In the half hour or so Shirley had been there, it had swung from high raucous laughter, to a half embarrassed silence. Now it came down to a gentler mood that she could deal with. Madge’s raunchy laugh and red jokes had made her uncomfortable. She had never met anyone like her, like them, these old ladies sitting loose and unafraid of expressing themselves in the grossest of fashions.

But Dionne’s entrance and exit had brought them down and had given Shirley a different sort of embarrassment. She sensed love turned inside out and flung back. It had made her quiet, and she momentarily wondered, if one, looking on as she was, as the scene between mother and daughter played out, if one, seeing her and her own mother, would be filled with the sense of disgust at her that she had felt at Dionne. But Shirley had never talked to her mother like that—had never gone in, taken, insulted and left. She reacted to her mother. Dionne acted upon hers.

“One thing though,” Tiny, said, “One thing though, they must remember that they only have one mother.”

“Them!” Cherry shrugged and finally sat, “Them young people mi dear, them don’ care bout one thing.”

“I going home and leave the whole o’ them. Make them rass suffer.” Madge said, her mouth half full. “Going sell the rass house, put them out o’ door. Sell the rass house them. See where them going to come and look for food. See where them goin’ live and don’t pay rent. Husband dry up no rass. Probably can’ even fuck . . . batty flat like.”

“Lord Madge man,” Tiny bellowed, “behave you self.”

“Lef’ me yah woman, look from when them say them married and can’t even have one pickney.”

“Then suppose them not ready yet,” Tiny asked.

“Three year and don’t ready? You no see that is a *board man*.” Madge looked around for her beer.

“I am not fasting,” said Cherry, “Is your business, but I think maybe him don’t want have children with her. Him is a show off fellow. Them high colour people don’t like have children with nothing too black. And him come from good family too.”

“Mi tell her that all the while,” said, Madge “fucking boy just using her. As him get him

green card so him gone. Don't even want to work, say him not working till him get him green card. Say him waiting till him can get good work. Now him living off people and going on like him better than anybody."

"She must go on better though man," Tiny said. "Is one mother she have.

"Goin' go home and leave them rass" said Madge "Goin go home and leave them."

"You not going anywhere," Tiny said to her. "You not going anywhere. Look from when me tell you to fix up the little piece a house you have out there- make we go home. All now, you don' even move a finger."

"Well one day I goin' move." Madge looked behind her "Hey Sammy, leave what you doing and bring some rice." She shook her bottle, "Bring some more drinks too."

"I'll do it." Shirley said. And rose from her stool to walk toward the refrigerator. She had to find something to do. The conversation was making her uneasy, reviving feelings of guilt and uncertainties that often haunted her about her relationship with her mother. She had never treated it right, there were still many unfinished sentences, pauses that were never filled with words, silences that were never touched. She had to move, she had to get up before Tiny sighed one more time and mention that *Is only one mother them have*. One mother, one little woman who had sacrificed herself so Shirley could make something of her life and she had left Jamaica for nearly three months and had not written a word to her. Nor called her on the phone at work, nor sent a card. Three months, one mother, not one word.

Shirley felt dizzy. She reached to open the refrigerator. It was laden with food. She turned momentarily to see what each of the women was drinking. Then she searched to find it. The beer was in the freezer. She selected two, she found the soft drinks and distributed them quickly. She turned to Sam, but he was halfway to her, smiling foolishly, he handed her the platter with the rice.

"What happen to the music?" she heard Madge shout.

"It stop? Me not even notice." Sam moved past her into the living room and soon some old *rock steady* floated gently across the room. "Desmond Decker" Madge shouted and wriggled on the stool.

This was some party, Shirley thought. If Tiny had meant to lift her mood by inviting her, she had failed. She had expected to at least find a bunch of old women playing bingo or something, not this raunchy lot, laughing loudly and raucous, as if desperately trying to delay the

sadness waiting in the wings. Shirley wondered if this was all there was to it. Was this all that America gave? Is this what she would turn out to be if she stayed? What was she doing sitting in a crowd of ugly people out of date and time?

“Make me see it!” Madge’s roar caught her attention as she moved to rejoin them.

“Lot 44 Tamarind Place, Eltham Gardens. Make me see it.” Madge kept yelling as Tiny rummaged through her bag. “Make we see it man, you love hide too much.” Madge stretched her hands toward Tiny.

“Lord! wait!” Tiny finally found what she was looking for. “She pulled a small square photograph from her bag and handed it to the impatient Madge. Madge plucked the photo from her and looked at it, her face lightened. “*Rass*, them really work on it. It really look nice.” She passed it to Cherry who squealed. “And is a nice colour though. But the yard look different man.”

“But it must look different,” Tiny said. “Them change everything. Make everything bigger.”

“Then is how much money so you send go give them?” Madge asked as she lit a cigarette.

“You too fast,” Tiny said. “Make Shirley look on it now man.”

Cherry handed the picture to Shirley. “Look Shirley, lot 44 Tamarind Place, Eltham Gardens.”

It showed a medium sized blue and white house built like a hexagon. It was nicely done, in green with Grey and white trimmings. The yard seemed a bit small, but Shirley realized that the house had not ben built that size. Originally it was half the size but additions and renovations had been made and now it stood beautifully and tastefully done. The fence was made of whitewashed wood designed in small hexagons. “It’s very nice,” Shirley said.

“You like it?” Tiny smiled.

“Then how Shirley is you niece and don’t know it. And everybody here know lot 44,” the rest of the women joined in “Tamarind Place!” The room burst into laughter “She don’t stop beat it in we head.” Madge teased.

“Is my house,” Tiny ignored her. “Me moving down next year.”

Shirley was almost at a loss for words. The simple, smiling, out-of-date woman had a plan.

“Don’t know what the hell you going back down to that place for.” Madge said seriously, “Pure old thief down there.”

“Me going back though. No you just say you going back too?”

“Sometime me say so, yes, but me don’t think me could live down there.”

Cherry cut her eyes, “Me, nothing down there. Nothing at all. And every day them kill somebody else. Me hear say Kingston have to lock up as six o’clock come.”

“Lord. It not so bad,” Tiny said. “Onoo blowing things out of proportion.”

“I couldn’t tell when I go down there,” Cherry said.

“Then how you must know.” Tiny challenged.

“Them Jamaican people too wicked,” Madge said. “The dirty politician them raise up the price of everything. Hear say one pound a chicken is seventy Jamaican dollar. Three US\$ for one pound a chicken, I don’ know how people live. Some people don’t earn seventy dollar a day. Fucking thief politician them.”

“And the people them too,” Cherry said, “Them too *stay-bad* man. You know why I don’ go down there more often? You have to bring something for every body. And they don’t want anything cheap.”

“You have to buy NIKE and all them things,” Madge said.

“And you have to bring for every body.”

“And who you can’t bring for, vex with you. Like them give you anything to put down.”

“Is onoo spoil them,” Tiny said.

“Spoil who, ma?” Madge dismissed her. “Jamaican people too wicked man. You know say I live in America nearly twenty years now, and out of all the letters I get from Jamaica, is only two of them start off with *how you do*. The first letter from my father when me come, and the one from me sister to tell me say him dead. Every other letter start with beg you this or that? How come you stop send this? How come is Christmas and you only send that? Not even a thank you. Just begging so. Jesus Christ, they don’ even care if you thief it and give to them..”

“And not to mention the collect call them,” Cherry said. “Every day is another collect call.”

“Call you collect to beg you something. Me have people call me collect so wish me Merry Christmas to rass. Up here sick and lonely and have to pay to hear a greeting.” Madge crushed her cigarette in the ash tray.

“Is onoo spoil them,” Tiny said, “I block my phone. You have to control it.”

“Is not that I wouldn’t visit sometimes,” Cherry said, “But I can’ afford to. I mean, I can find the fare, and I miss the place. But I can’t live like Jamaican people. And I can’t afford to buy present for everybody.”

“Them too rass wicked.” Said Madge.

“I mean,” said Cherry, “If just once I could go down and see the place, and have somebody to carry me around, you know. Just’ to go down and see the place. . . .”

“All you have to do is go down.” Tiny said.

But Shirley sensed a wavering in her voice.

“You can go on talk,” Madge said. “You lucky, you have big house.”

“Then you no have house down there too,” Tiny said.

“Cho, that a house.” Madge retorted. “What me going do down there now, Tiny? You tell me. Missis, if I did live in Jamaica, I could a buy the same old house you talking ‘bout? How much the average Jamaican earn? Five year salary can’t buy a car.”

“It not so bad,” Tiny said.

“Alright,” said Madge. “See Shirley here. Ask Shirley. Tell me to rass Shirley, you tell me. You work in a bank?”

“Yes,” Shirley said.

“What you do?”

“I’m a supervisor.”

“Alright,” Madge said “Alright. Don’t tell me how much you get, but tell me something. If you get all you money for one year in you hand without tax or anything come out, you can buy a car with it . . . a brand new car, not even a good car. . . say a Toyota , a cheap one?”

“No,” said Shirley.

“Two year then,” said Madge. “Two years then.”

“No,” said Shirley honestly. “No.”

“I don’ have to go any further,” said Madge. “Bank supervisor and that is if she don’t pay tax or buy anything. So what about house and food and all them things? Is pure sufferation down there you hear, ma. Pure sufferation down there. And fucking wicked people and politician. All o’ them fi just light in a barrel and roll down a rass hill.”

“But we wouldn’t have to go through all of that,” Tiny said. “We have house already,

and car and so.”

“And the little pickney them just begging on the street more and more every day. You stop you car and one dozen a them start clean you window, some a thief you money same time. The little gal them a breed up every day . The school them smell like dung heap, the government say them stop pay fi fix school, all them pay is teacher salary. And what that? Everything mash up down there to rass. And all the politician them a drive up and down in big car. Pure wickedness man, wicked fucking politician them. . . them want weed out and burn to rass man.”

“Lord Madge, it not so bad.”

“You one can go on,” Madge fanned a hand at Tiny. You one can go on. You a nurse now, you have certificate. But what kind a hustling me going do? Me is sixty, all me a go find is some poor ass man fi come dig out me belly.

“I would visit sometime,” said Cherry “I would visit sometime, if the people them never did stay so bad.”

“The one Madge, she like make things look too bad sometimes,” Tiny said.

And then the doorbell sounded.

“Must Babs this,” Tiny said.

“Go let her in no,” Madge waved a new cigarette.

Tiny rose, but the woman watching T.V. stood, peeped through the window and opened the door, *It must have been a commercial break.* Shirley thought. A dark woman walked carefully into the room with a man at her side. She was the same general age as the rest, but she had on tights that stopped just above her ankle where the wrappings of a tiny slipper ended. She wore a large blouse that seemed more like a shirt, opened at the waist as if the last buttons were left unclasped. It hung to her knees. She had all her hair which was permed and pulled into one. Shirley guessed the man’s age to be about fifty-five or so, but he had baggy jeans that fell carelessly in and around unlaced high-top sneakers. He wore a large shirt, opened at the chest to show a gold chain nestling into grey chest hair. His hair was cut with a very modern fade, flat at the top.

Mr. Rooster, Shirley thought.

Now the women were shy and demure, fidgeting and smiling like restless cats. Even the one watching TV paused long enough to watch them walk across the living room to the counter. Babs came forward with her gentleman and introduced him. There was a murmur of *Hello Tonys*

and shy smiles. One would never have guessed at the kind of conversation that just transpired.

“So how the party going?” Babs asked, as she looked around for a stool. There were only four and they were occupied. Tiny rose quickly and offered her seat to Babs.

She made Tony sit down. “Me use to the place already,” She said.

Now Tony was in the midst of them and Cherry was trying to size him up shyly while Madge stared him straight in the face. “Have a nice piece a man here though Babs,” She said jokingly “No bother leave him careless.”

The group laughed and Tony pretended to be bashful. His false teeth protruded slightly.

“This is me niece a telling you about.” Tiny introduced Shirley to Babs. Babs had a broad friendly face with a serious business like mouth. She sized up Shirley quickly and her eyes took on a momentary seriousness, then she smiled. “How you do Shirley,” was all she said.

Shirley rose and shook her hand. Babs moved toward the fridge and Tiny followed her quickly, “I want talk to you about something,” she said.

Shirley took the opportunity to step away from the counter. She needed some fresh air. She walked past Sam at the edge of the patio, through the screen door, and past the smoking grill into the small grassy backyard. The scent of food from home mixed with the warm night air. She lifted her face, closed her eyes, breathed deeply and sighed, *Miami*.

She tried to remember the first time it had occurred to her to come there, the first time the word had fixed itself in her head as a refuge to go to. It may have been that first time she saw Mark, or that first date when they sat at Heather’s and he had looked at her over shish-kebab and told her “You belong in America.” Maybe it was before that, maybe it was the distant memories of her father calling her a movie star, or the several days she spent before the TV watching Miami Vice and Falcon Crest. It could have been any time, it could have been the day when she realized Mark was not coming back or the first evening she ran her fingers on the lace of Victoria’s Secret lingerie. It could have been any time, she could not remember. But she could remember the feelings throbbing in her like a hunger she must satisfy. She remembered lying at times in her bed, squeezing herself tightly so as not to tremble with the vision of it, the yearning for it. She could hardly grasp it now, that passion that overwhelmed her— consumed her so. For consumed her it must have, because, thinking back, she could not see the logic of it, the sense of casting all she had on a throw of a dice. It must have been *some* passion, *some* yearning. For she had left it all, sold it all, abandoned her friends her mother – her life – and boarded a sliver bird

for Miami.

And now standing there in the warmth of its night amidst the smell of burnt meat, she wondered if it really existed. *Where was Miami?* That place she was made for, that was made for her, that would embrace her – lift her by her positive attributes to a higher plane and maximize her. Where was the life? Where were the things? Where was the hope?

She saw once, she admitted, saw the glitter for a night, saw the boys half naked skating carelessly on a silver street where tourists passed twenty-four hours, and music was the atmosphere. Saw it once; beautiful cars and carefree people gliding by – exotic foods – tasted it too, tasted Miami. Or did she? Did she ever experience Miami? Did she experience Miami? Or did she see it passing by?

She sighed again and shook her head to clear it. She was going mad. She smiled sadly as she walked to the corner of the yard, where it linked with another, and squinted along the fence to the street outside. There was loneliness in Miami. There was poverty and dread. There were old lonely women in Miami and old men with false teeth playing rooster to them, as they stretched back through a fog of lost years for a joy they left somewhere far behind. There was a fear she could not fathom. The fear these people had – these people, shouting uncertainly, making rude jokes, laughing too loud, shifting in and out of moods with fear in their eyes – fighting to get some light, any light, in their lives – laughing at things they probably would not have tolerated ten years before – twenty years before, as if they must be happy, must be good, must keep light; fight for it, demand it, reach for it with uncertain trembling hands – so they may keep away the pain in their eyes, that suspicious furtive look of one being hunted, one keeping their guard up, knowing that sadness was always there, constantly, lurking in the wings.

Sadness lurking in the wings, Jesus Christ she was a poet now.

Things disappear in Miami, nights disappear, days disappear when you go to sleep. She shivered slightly. And thought of her mother. She must be sowing now, probably gone to church, Saturday evening *Sisters's Meeting*. She would never turn her back if she returned home now. She would grunt, maybe give those eloquent silences. And now that Shirley had returned defeated, she would probably feel a greater sense of authority, probably feel the need to make her points known more. *She could be bad, but not so bad.* She would never turn Shirley away, never humour her.

She could return.

With nothing. But she could return; without explanation, without money – empty of all the stuff she had gathered over the years except her two suitcases of clothes and Victoria's Secret fantasies. She could return now, she could go right back home and her mother would be there. Wouldn't even seem surprised, that she had no job, no career and had to start from scratch. She could return. Many had before her, and at least she did not have any large family to expect her to bring back things, no multitude of friends. Just her mother, just Dawn and so. And she could deal with that. She could start over. Jamaica was her country. There, her beauty and poise opened doors – there were hundred men dying to wash her feet there, she would return. *Jesus why did she have to be here?* If the prodigal could go back, she could go back. She could face it. She was strong. She could go back.

She cried softly. She knew, it was not that she could not face the disgrace, it was that she did not have the strength to turn her back on Miami. Miami the dream. Every morning she woke up there was some reason to dream, some person winning some lottery, some athlete signing a big contract, some entrepreneur becoming a millionaire, some reason to hope, some reason to give it one more day. Sometimes she would look outside at people passing in beautiful cars and say to herself, these are people like me, I can do it.

But where was the formulae?

She had never failed at anything before, she had never failed to dream, she had come here to make it and now before she could even start she had been defeated. For though every day she saw a reason to dream, every morning she stepped through her door, there were ten reasons to say the dream was not for her. *Throughput Mark had said, throughput,* and now she understood. It seems Miami and the vision of it were just a fleeting thing, a spectator dream that ordinary people watched from outside. *Throughput!* She had never tasted Miami, she had never felt it, she had only sat and watched it rushing by like a high-speed train, and she could not come up with the fare. *Throughput,* a dream – a high speed dream – *Miami*

"You ready?" It was Tiny. "Why you one stand out here like this?" There was compassion in her voice and Shirley hated it. She needed compassion, but she did not need to know that Tiny knew she needed it. She did not need to know she was so intuitive. Tiny was not her mother, and she hated when her mother acted like she knew her more than she knew herself.

"I'm coming now," She said, to pause her, so she would not come closer and see the

tears. But her voice had a small crack to it. "I'm coming now," she said. "Wait a minute, I'm coming."

"Alright," Tiny said. "Me inside when you ready."

She pressed the heel of her palm along her face, scrubbing from her eyelid down her cheeks, massaging her skin with her palm. The tears were gone, but close scrutiny would tell. She composed herself.

It was time.

She had not cried from so deep inside since she was a child and her father had left and did not return.

It was time to return, time to go home.

"When you going home Shirley?" Madge and the group had migrated to the living room to join the other woman. The TV was going full blast. The centre table held glasses. A bottle of white rum had appeared in her absence. Madge stood and held her hands. "When you going home you must tell me, you hear? I have a box a want you carry for my sister, just few things."

"I'll remember." Shirley said.

"And I have one too." Cherry squealed from across the room. She was sitting on the other side of the rooster.

"Remember you know," Madge smiled. "You so nice and quiet. You see how we out of order some time?"

"I enjoyed myself, I didn't mind." Shirley said.

"Alright, pass by again, before you leave." Madge released her. "Come look for the old lady."

"Alright, we gone." Tiny started for the door.

The ride was quiet for most of the way back. Shirley was a bit surprised, but she was grateful. Tiny drew into the yard, parked and shut the engine down. For some unknown reason both women sat silently in the parked car and looked uncomfortably through the windscreen. Shirley had planned to jump from the car as soon as it stopped. But something held her there and Tiny did not move.

Shirley felt she had to say something. She turned to the little woman who had shown her so much kindness, sensing that the night had not been one of chance, that Tiny had invited her to the get-together for a purpose. So she could see something, as if she wanted to drive home an import lesson.

“Thank you,” Shirley said again, “Thank you for everything.”

“Lord,” Tiny said shyly. “Thanks for what?”

“For everything.”

“Alright,” She said. “Alright”

Shirley turned, clasped the handle of the car and opened the door.

“I know is not my business . . .” Tiny paused uncomfortably “I know you know what you doing and so . . . and is not my business. But . . .” She paused uncomfortably and shook her head. She could not complete what she had to say.

Shirley paused halfway through the open door. She turned back to Tiny “Is alright,” she said . . . I kinda understand what you trying to say.”

Tiny smiled gratefully, “You understand though?”

“I better,” Shirley said, and alighted from the car.

“Shirley.”

Shirley paused and turned around. Tiny had stepped from the car on the other side.

“Listen.” Tiny dipped into her bag and produced a small folded piece of paper. “Me don’t know if you interested or not. But like how you soon go home and so, and you may need a little money . . .” She paused again twisting the paper in her hand. Then she spoke rapidly “Anyway, Babs tell me about a little work you can do if you want. You can make a money to buy something to carry home for you friend them and so.”

Shirley snapped to attention. “Work!” She touched the top of the car.

“Yes. Well you don’t have to take it or anything. Me know you work in bank and so, but since you here not doing anything. . .”

“Work!” Shirley repeated “What kind of work?”

“Well, is little babysitting. Some people have two children. Them want a babysitter for a few weeks. Is live-in if you want or you can just go during the day.”

“Oh, I see.” Shirley paused. “Well, I don’t know . . .”

“Well, you don’t have to take it,” Tiny said, all the time staring kindly across the top of

the car.

“I didn’t say that,” Shirley said. “Babysitting you say?”

“Yes,” Tiny said. “It pay about two fifty a week, but you know Babs have to get her twenty or so . . . because is her job. But it better than nothing.” She pushed the paper across the top of the car.

Shirley took it slowly. “I’ll think about it,” she said.

“Yes.” Tiny was sober. “But tell me if you don’t want it, so me can tell Babs.”

“OK,” Shirley said, “I will.”

“Alright then,” Tiny said, as she turned towards her door, “Well alright. Me gone in. It look like is some stale beer Madge did have in her fridge. Me gone in.”

Shirley did not have the first words to say to the disappearing back.

And so it was, that the following Monday morning, Shirley Temple Brown walked to the modern guardhouse of the Coral Estates Golf and Country Club and asked to be directed to the home of the Williamsons. She was given a computer print-out that had the full address and directions into the vast property. Twenty minutes later she stood in a large driveway, that sliced through immaculately cut grass, at the huge door of the largest house she had ever seen, and rang the bell. She heard a window crack, saw a curtain move and glimpsed the excited face of a blond child peeping through. The curtains fell and she heard a patter of little feet and an excited scream, “Mummy, mummy, mummy, the new maid is here.”