Window to Fate

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Abstract
Four months after Jesse left for Kingston to find a husband, Ma Lou's grandson Devonshire came home from Col6n. Strutted in, was more like it. He arrived in fullblown Col6n style - a brown draped suit complete with watch chain with dangling charms and a fat gold watch inside his fob pocket, matching brown derby, yellow boots, and a walking stick with the head of a wolf carved in ivory on the handle. 'Dev, what a sweet-man you turn into,' Mama laughed when trailing the sweet smell of brillantine he came into the bedroom to pay his respects to her the minute he arrived. It was the first time in years Brid had heard her mother laugh. Dev didn't see Brid when he came for she shot out of sight as soon as she saw him approaching across the yard, but she had a good look at him; Brid was good at seeing through cracks in walls and half-pulled shutters, from behind closed doors and between floorboards. But Brid didn't like to be seen.

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'How's Jesse?' Dev asked, 'and little Bridget?'

Jesse is gone away my dear, gone to Kingston to stay with her Aunt Irene. Four months now she's gone and left us. Brid is still around though by now she's grown out of your sight, Dev. Just me and Brid left. And Ma Lou.'

'Brid,' her mother called in her weak, pale voice. 'Bridget. Come Brid and look who's here.'

'Brid-get!' Ma Lou yelled in her loud marketwoman's voice.

But Brid who was peering through a crack into Mama's room didn't answer. She held her breath so they wouldn't hear her and marvelled at Dev. How handsome he had become. He had grown almost a foot taller in the five years he was gone, and had filled out. Looked like a real grown up man. Dev was hardly much older than she was now when he left home. A real langillala skinny-foot boy he was. And look at him now. Brid was pleased to see Dev, for he'd been the closest thing she had to a brother. In the past she could always rely on him to play games with her, pick mangoes from the tallest branches or knock down the ripe soursops; he would dry her tears when she cried and frighten her with tales of duppies and Blackartman. But she wouldn't come out and talk to him because she was dismayed to see the old Dev vanished and this impressive, self-assured stranger in his place. It was as if Dev too had let her down. His coming instead of making her feel happy as she had imagined, just
made her feel more ashamed. Ashamed of herself, her unfashionable hair and hand-me-down clothes, ashamed of the old house with the rotting verandah and falling shingles and peeling woodwork, ashamed of her mother who was perpetually ill, the smell of the sick-room, damp and decay, ashamed of their poverty and their pride. Or rather, Mama and Jesse’s pride, for she had none, or so they told her.

Ma Lou wasn’t too impressed by Dev – she didn’t want a sweet-man for a grandson. She felt better when after a few weeks of walking up and down the whole district to show off his clothes, his Panama strut, his American accent and his Panama gold rings – like all the other young men who came back from foreign – Dev took off his good clothes and his jewellery, put on a pair of American denim overalls and one of his old shirts and went into the garden with his machete. Now that Ma Lou could understand, for fly high, fly low, she said after Dev left to get work on building the Panama Canal, there was nothing to beat working on the land. But Dev didn’t really go into the garden to work; he just wanted to get into the feel of things again, to rid himself of the dust and the sound of dynamite blasting in his ears, the American straw-boss yelling and rain and the smell of damp clothes and mildew and dead things rotting in the streets.

‘Dev looking for land to buy,’ Ma Lou confided to Mama, as she sponged her body down and turned her in the bed. ‘Want to put him money into land. And house. That Dev have him head well screw on,’ she said with satisfaction, as if she had done the screwing, for she believed that whatever sense Dev showed in managing his affairs it was she who had beaten it into him. Dev’s mother had come and placed him in her arms shortly after he was born and was never heard from again. Dev’s father, Ma Lou’s son, died soon after, when a tree he was chopping down fell the wrong way. So she had ended up with Dev for her very own.

‘Maybe he could buy ours,’ Mama said and laughed again, but Brid listening on the other side of the wall knew it wasn’t a genuine laugh like the one she had greeted Dev with. This was the laugh of bitterness for Brid knew it pained her mother to see what she and her family had come to, while people like Dev whom they would never have counted in the old days, were now moving up in the world. Brid knew because it was all her mother used to talk about to Jesse.

Brid couldn’t understand how Mama and Jesse could be so proud of their white skin when so far as she could see, there were no advantages to be derived from it. At school, it is true, the big girls would sit with their backs against the flying buttresses of the church (the school was in the same yard) and during recess take turns endlessly combing and plaiting her hair, praising her to the skies for how beautiful it was and how wonderful it was to have good, tall hair. But then during class the boys sitting behind would thread her long plait through the hole for the inkwell in their desk and tie it into a knot. So clever were they that sometimes she
wouldn’t even realise what was happening until the bell rang and she stood up and knocked the desk over, sending ink pots and slates flying while the bad boys dashed out of the schoolroom yelling with laughter and the other children shouted at her while she cried with frustration trying to free herself from the desk. So what good was that? She saw no advantage to having fair skin because everyone around her was black and she stood out, and she didn’t want to stand out, didn’t want them to notice her, because then they would notice her poverty, her house falling down, her bedridden mother. Everyone else around was poor too, ate turn cornmeal and shad just like them, or worse; had houses ten times worse than theirs, without floors even, and had no nice furniture like they had – the pieces that hadn’t yet been sold. But that was different. ‘Black people born to be poor,’ Mama said, ‘nobody expects any better of them.’

‘So why were we born poor?’ Brid asked Jesse in their room that night.

‘We weren’t born poor,’ Jesse said. ‘We’re only poor because Papa ran away and left us and there was nobody to look after the place after that. Mama got sick and everything.’

Brid knew this by heart; she had heard it many times before. So why didn’t they just accept their lot in life and stop behaving as if they were better than everybody else, she asked.

‘Bridget, you’ll understand when you’re older,’ Jesse said. ‘God gave you beautiful skin and long lovely hair and you should thank him for it and take care of it. Someday a man will come along who will appreciate those things and you’ll be glad then that you don’t have ol’nayga skin and picky-picky hair.’

That’s all Jesse lived for: for a man to come along. Meanwhile, she took good care of herself; rubbed cocoa butter into her skin every single night and brushed her hair a hundred times morning and evening. She used chewstick to clean her teeth every time she ate, rubbed annatto into her lips and cheeks and put charcoal on her lashes, washed her hair with aloe and rinsed it with rosemary, tried out a new hair style every day, twisting her head this way and that to see the effect in the tarnished three-way vanity mirror, though nobody ever saw her except Brid and Mama and Ma Lou.

When Jesse was twenty, she and Mama and Ma Lou realised that nobody would ever come along to notice her where they lived, since nobody ever came at all, so she was sent to Aunt Irene in Kingston.

Brid liked it when Jesse was around because then nobody made any demands on her. Jesse was the one who helped Ma Lou with Mama in the sickroom, who went and spent her time talking and reading to her. Brid hated going into the room, hated the smell, the way her mother looked, her querulous complaints. She never went in if she could help it. Now that she no longer went to school, she preferred to spend her time helping Ma Lou in the garden or the kitchen, places where Jesse hated to be.
When Dev left, there was no man to help them, except for Mass Ron who came to do the hard work as needed, like digging the yam hills and helping to plant and stake the yams, doing the ploughing and cutting and burning. Mass Ron was hired to do these things when there was money, or for a share of the crop, when there was none. When the land was cleared, Brid went out and helped Ma Lou with the planting, or reaping the cocoa, picking the coffee, peeling the ginger, or shelling the corn.

It was Ma Lou who arranged for her friend Miss Gertie who was still selling in the market to come and buy their crops. Without Ma Lou, Brid thought, they’d be nothing. Ma Lou lived in a little cottage at the back which Dev shared with her until he went away. Then Ma Lou came and lay down her bedding in the room beside Mama’s and slept there every night. Ma Lou was born in the cottage because her parents used to work with Mama’s grandparents, and even after her parents died, Ma Lou just stayed on. When Mama was born, it was Ma Lou who looked after her and then she looked after Mama’s babies. Ma Lou had been with them all her life; it was unthinkable that she should not be there for always. Ma Lou belonged to them as they belonged to her. Brid used to think that their lives and Ma Lou’s were intertwined like the Scotchman fig which grew on to the big silk-cotton tree, twisting and embedding itself into the trunk of the other to such an extent that it was hard to figure out which was the silk-cotton and which the fig. It was Ma Lou who made all the decisions now about the family; she who planted the crops and sold what needed to be sold to earn them a little cash, she who went to market to buy; she who fed them and looked after them, for Mama was now helpless as a child. Brid never understood what was wrong with Mama; she knew she had taken to her bed after Papa left (which she was too young to remember) and hadn’t ever left her room again.

When Jesse went off to Kingston she promised to write, but it was three months now since they’d heard from her. In her first letters Jesse had told of the grand reception she had had from Aunt Irene and Uncle Cyrus and her cousins, about her new wardrobe, her new life. But then the letters ceased. Mama heard from Aunt Irene; heard that Jesse was getting on and fitted into the family, that they expected great things of her. But Jesse didn’t write again.

Brid could just imagine Jesse in her new wardrobe, with a fashionable hairdo, charming all the young men who came to call, having a hard time making up her mind, choosing which one to marry. Jesse had promised that as soon as she settled down, she would send for Brid, send her clothes to travel in, proper shoes and a suitcase. Promised to find Brid a husband too, though this made Brid laugh because she was sixteen and she couldn’t imagine anyone liking her much less wanting to marry her. Now Brid cried herself to sleep because there was no one to laugh with.

Dev never even saw Brid until after he had been back for a few weeks, because he had been so busy walking up and down showing off and
when he came back to the cottage at nights, they would all have gone to bed. It was only after he decided that he had been seen by everyone he wanted to see him and had put his good clothes away and stopped walking about that he saw Brid in the garden one day. She was in the garden helping Ma Lou stake tomatoes, with her thick black hair in one long plait down her back and her skirt pulled up at the waist to show her bare legs just like Ma Lou. But as soon as she looked up and saw him, she fled into the house. She never came back and he helped his grandmother to finish the job. He had been astonished to see her, to see that she was no longer the skinny little girl he had left behind, had turned into a fine young lady, better looking, he thought with satisfaction, than that Jesse who, even when they were small, was so full of airs and graces and who would never have gone into the yard without stockings, no matter how patched they were, and who would never pull up her skirt at the waist to show her legs.

‘Brid turn into a fine young lady,’ he said to his grandmother.

‘Yes but God alone know what is going to become of that child. I never worry about Jesse. Jesse will get by. But that Brid. Not a one to mind her. And she wild like mongoose. What going happen to Brid?’

Brid never spoke to Dev at all, she was too shy; felt he had risen too far above her now, so she always managed to disappear when she saw him coming. Then she would rush to peek at him from behind the slatted shutters in the bedroom. She really wished she could talk to Dev, she wanted to find out all about his adventures, what had happened to him in the years he had been away; but she had to be content with the second-hand accounts she got from Ma Lou or listen through the wall when he came to talk to Mama.

Dev was disappointed that Brid no longer wanted to be his friend, to talk to him. Now he was back home, he felt restless and at loose ends, didn’t know what to do with himself. He wanted to make something of his life, buy land, build a proper house for himself and his grandmother, for he was now a master carpenter, wanted to go into the housebuilding business. He could make it, he felt sure, for he had been taught by the Americans and nobody could beat them when it came to modern, efficient ways. The country was ripe for people like him, he knew. He was looking for land, yes, for a property, had money to burn, so he didn’t know why he was still hanging around this yard like an angry bull tied to a post. He had been shocked to come home, to see the house with one side almost fallen in, to see the squalor in which they lived. He’d completely forgotten what it had been like. Only the land was as he remembered it, the hazy blue mountains in the distance, the greenness of everything, the freshness of the air, the brightness of the stars at night. He took it all as a benediction, after the hell of Culebra, of Colón.

He couldn’t sleep and took to walking outside at night, to look at the stars, feel the cool air, and for a long time wasn’t even conscious that he
always ended up standing in the darkness of the cocoa walk staring at the shutters of Bridget’s room. Brid saw him though, for she hardly slept either, and one night she had seen his shadow move in the cocoa walk, saw him standing there looking at her window. After that, she peeked through the shutters every night, stood by the window for hours, until she saw him. Didn’t know why it gave her such unimaginable joy to see him standing there, looking at her window, to stand there and watch him. Only when his shadow disappeared would she get back into bed, and feeling deeply secure, sleep soundly for the rest of the night.

The idea took a long time to crystallize in Dev’s mind, but when it did, it all seemed so right to him. He was now ready to take a wife, why shouldn’t he marry Brid? What was the use of building a house if he didn’t have a woman? Why shouldn’t he buy this house and land from them, so they could all continue to live together, for how could he separate his grandmother from Brid and her mother. Weren’t they all one family? He turned his carpenter’s eyes on the house, walked around and assessed it carefully, admiring its proportions, and came to the conclusion that the structure, built of the finest mahogany and cedar, was sound enough. It was not too far gone that it couldn’t be restored. He would need to add bathrooms with modern plumbing and a proper kitchen. The verandah could be enlarged. If they hadn’t sold any of the land in his absence, he knew it was some two hundred acres of reasonably good soil, just about what he was looking for. He would have to have a proper survey done, get an outsider to fix the price; he would never want anyone to say he had taken advantage of Brid and her mother. When he had thought it all through, he broke the news to his grandmother.

Instead of being overjoyed as he had thought she would be at this solution to their problems, for she spent all her time worrying about Brid’s future, his grandmother had nearly fainted; she had been so shocked she had sat down heavily on the bed in the cottage where he was talking to her.

“You? Marry Bridget?” she said. “Dev, you gone crazy or what?”

“What you mean?” he asked, genuinely confused.

“Dev, you know oil and water don’t mix from morning. You go away is true and do well for yourself. I am proud of you. No woman could be prouder of her son and that is the Lord’s own truth. But that still don’t give you no right to think you can marry white people daughter. Don’t even bother to think of it. You want kill off Miss Carmel?”

“Well, somebody has to marry Brid and what is wrong with me? You mean them old time something don’t break down yet? Look at Brid and Miss Carmel, poor as churchmouse. You’d think they’d be glad to have somebody that could take care of them.”

“You see that now. You come in just like all them Colón man there. And I did think you have a little more sense in you head. Go to Colón and make a little money and you all come back same way – thinking you just
as good as everybody else. Wanting to change the whole world overnight. Out to create nothing but bad blood and confusion.’

‘Gran, what confusion you see me creating?’ Dev protested. ‘Why you so unfair? You behaving as if is something criminal I proposing.’

But his grandmother refused to listen to him anymore, threw her apron over her head and cried the living eye-water for his boldness. He had never seen his grandmother cry before except the time Mr Jasper went away, and he was so shattered that he put on his hat and left, went down to the village and drank rum and came home late and went straight to bed. Next day he took some of his clothes and went to stay with a Colón mate who lived not far away. But even as he laughed and talked with his paseiro, he couldn’t control his thoughts, began to wonder if he did right in coming back and if he should stay in this country at all, feeling that while he had gone away and been changed so much, nothing there had changed.

They had all wanted to come back home so badly, if they could survive blackwater and yellow fever, typhoid and malaria, the dynamite blasts and the train accidents, the snakebites and the floods and overwork, didn’t end up in the asylum or in jail, and if they ever managed to save enough money or win the lottery. Nobody wanted to live with Jim Crow on the American Canal Zone. But until you saved enough, you put up with it and swallowed your pride, accepted that you were ‘silver’, not ‘gold’ as the races were categorised – and paid, got into the habit of averting your eyes when the white American women walked by and smiling when they addressed you as ‘Boy’, got used to saying ‘yassuh’, ‘nosuh’ to everything their white husbands said, for they controlled your lives. You did the same as the Negroes from the States did. But the islanders knew that those men didn’t know any better, it came as natural to them as eating and sleeping to behave in this subservient manner and they viewed them with scorn. They didn’t have a home to go back to where the climate was natural instead of this endless rain and where you were a subject of the King of England. A British subject. Good as any man. Equal to any man before the law. British law.

Dev had to laugh now at how naive they all were, how silly in their belief that they were better off in their own country; for it wasn’t their country at all. It was a country just like the Canal Zone where the white man reigned supreme, and where people like him were expected to remain their semi-slaves and servants. Yassuh. Nosuh. Only there were no signs which said ‘Silver’ and ‘Gold’. Here, they were simply expected to recognise the invisible signs, to be born knowing their places. Dev thought wryly that with the opening of the Panama Canal to which so many black men had given their life’s blood, the Americans could see nothing incongruous about the motto they had chosen for their grand enterprise and cut in stone on their administrative building: ‘The Land Divided: The World United.’ But, he reflected, the world was united only to further the pur-
pose of white commerce. On other matters which hinged on the colour of a man's skin, the world would stay forever divided.

Yet while Dev could see the divisions in wider terms, nearer home he found it difficult to accept this cynical philosophy. Was his grandmother so right after all? For hadn't he played with Brid and Jesse from they were children, grown up with them like a brother? Granted that long before he left home, Jesse had ceased to have anything to do with him, but he never bothered much with Jesse anyway, she was always too full of herself. But little Brid now, hadn't she always been his little sister? The Jaspers were the only white people around, and because they were so much a part of his life, he had never really remarked on the difference in their colour. He was aware he was different because he and his grannie lived on the Jaspers' land, had no land of their own, were the Jaspers' servants, which is why they lived in a separate cottage instead of in the big house. But the Jaspers had come down in the world, his grannie was always saying, and after a while they were all poor together. Cooked together and ate together. Up to when he went away, sixteen and very young and foolish, he thought that poverty conferred equality.

Dev stayed with his friend for a while, thinking things through, and then he decided to go away again, perhaps to Costa Rica or Cuba this time, or even to the United States itself; at least you knew where you stood with the Americans. There was nothing for him here. But he couldn't get Brid out of his mind, her startled face as she looked up from staking tomatoes and saw him, her brown legs flashing and her long plait swinging as she dashed into the house. More and more he wondered if Brid had stayed away from him only because she was shy or 'wild' as his grandmother called her. Or had she become like Jesse now that she was grown up, seeing him only as black to her white? Was that why she didn't want to speak to him? He decided that he was going, yes, but first he had to know, had to call to Brid and make her look at him at least. Even if she never said a word; if she looked at him, he would read her like a book.

When Dev went off to stay with his friend, Brid had ceased to sleep at nights, stood by the window waiting for him till dawn. Cried the whole night through. Would he ever come back? Why did she feel so alone again now he was no longer there? She felt more bereft even than when Jesse had left her. Dev and his grandmother had had a quarrel, that much she knew, but what was the cause she could never find out, no matter how hard she listened. 'Dev go away and come back too full of himself ya,' all she heard Ma Lou say to her mother when Mama asked what had happened to him. So that didn't tell her much about where Dev had gone and when he would be back. And she had been so mean to him. Dev was her friend and she hadn't even bothered to speak to him; he probably thought she was a snob like Jesse. If Dev ever came back, she promised herself, no matter how difficult she found it, she would force herself to go
and speak to him, let him know she was glad to have him back, let him
know – but she was afraid to admit anything else, even to herself.

Dev came back and told Ma Lou he was going away again, and he
couldn’t bear the look in her eyes. She said nothing but she went around
singing mournful hymns all day even after he told her that he would
spend some money to fix up the Jaspers’ house, so she and Miss Carmel
and Bridget would at least have a solid roof over their heads. He made
sure to tell her he was doing it for her, since he knew she would never
leave there until her dying day. When she told Miss Carmel that Dev was
going to fix the roof and the floors (without telling her the last part) she
said ‘God bless Dev, he was always a good boy’ and turned her face to
the wall and sighed.

In two twos, Dev measured up everything, arranged to buy the shingles
and lumber and nails and get a few of his old Colón mates to come and
help him once the lumber arrived. He wasn’t going to do the extensive re-
furbishing he had envisaged, just enough to keep the three women dry
and stop them from flying through the rotten floorboards.

He was so busy arranging all this that he gave no thought to Brid for the
first few days after he came back. It was only when everything was fixed
and he was waiting, that he started to go outside again at night, and
though he did not intend it, his feet invariably led him to the cocoa walk
facing Brid’s room. He remembered his decision to confront her, to force
her to give him some sign of how she felt, whether she too saw this un-
bridgeable chasm between them, but he wasn’t sure how he was going to
achieve this. He hoped that all the excitement of the next few weeks, the
hammering and the sawing, might draw her out of her shell.

Now he stood dumbly looking at her room, wondering why he felt so
unbearably sad, until the cold night air drove him inside.

The first night he came, Brid saw him, for she had been looking every
night. He stood in the shadows of the cocoa walk but she knew he was
there and she found it hard to control her heartbeats. The minute she saw
him she had wanted to throw open her shutter, to let him know she was
there. But though her hand reached countless times for the latch, she
couldn’t bring herself to open it. Then he was gone and she climbed into
bed no longer feeling consoled by his presence but overwhelmed by her
cowardice. Every night it was the same; she reached for the latch, willing
herself to open it, but could never find the will to carry the action
through. Every night it was the same. But she was becoming easier and
easier in her mind. She was wearing down the barriers, bit by bit, and one
night, she knew, she would confound herself and throw open the shutters.