



Kiskadee Girl

Maggie Harris

HopeRoad: London



HopeRoad: London

www.hoperoadpublishing.com

Prologue

1971

So this was it. A country from an aeroplane window.

All those months of planning culminated in a gathering at Timehri Airport. Family groups cluster in the departure lounge. Bags and grips wait by new shoes. Handbags laden with passport, tickets, letters, addresses. Mothers cry, uncles fetch drinks, running children divert attention from the emotion of the moment. You, embarrassed by the whole shenanigans. You didn't want to come, you told me.

Last night, all I could think of was how much I wanted you to make love to me. Come and get me, I whispered. In England, come and get me.

We had said our goodbyes in New Amsterdam. I had made some pretext about returning, offered to collect the rent, some *story*. I caught a hire car from the rank outside Stabroek market, travelled back by myself along that long East Coast road wedged in-between a fat Indian woman, numerous bags, two men. I'd sat forward on the frayed leather seat, prepared for the pot-holes. Coconut palms swayed in the triangles of blue between elbow and window. From the *Torani* steamer, the rooftop of your house glinted across the water.

I'd popped to Mrs J's; Mummy had told me to stay with her, not to stay in our house alone, but by the time Mummy found out the truth I would be far away in England. "Mummy's fine with me staying alone", I told her airily, "after all, she's sending me half way round the world by myself!"

You'd come and whistled as you always had, from the gate, and I appeared, making my movements deliberately slow, lounging back on the porch rail like I imagined Judy Geeson would, or Hayley Mills, or Tuesday Weld or any of those stars people were always telling me I looked so much like. But you were top-class lounge lizard material.

You walked more slowly up those stairs than it took cassareep to drip from the bottle, the cigarette glowing

between your fingers, sweat darkening the armpit of your chocolate brown shirt.

We didn't even consider Mummy's bed. Her crucifix would have impaled us. We didn't use mine either. Small and narrow, with Aunt Lel just across the road? So we went into my sisters' double bed at the back of the house, the dounze tree silent. That bed that had, once upon a time, widened for my sisters and me and visiting cousins, sleeping up to four crossways. That bed that, before my upgrade to the gallery room, had seen countless pillow fights; that, through thin walls, had heard Mummy giving birth to Yonnette; that, Christmas upon Christmas, would hear us whispering at foreday morning; that had had its share of small tousled heads, curly-haired, hard-haired heads, snoring mouths and dribble mouths, brown arms flung wide, punching and kicking and tossing off sheets, talcum powder smell and poopsy smell, fever burning up times, Limacol times, calling the doctor times. In that bed you told me how much you would miss me and asked how I could leave you. The smell of your damp skin in the late afternoon heat mixed with that aftershave you wore was imprinted on my sister's pillow. I sat astride you feeling a mixture of sadness and power. All those times you had hurt me, when I had sent my little prayers up to Jesus, all that detailing in my diary of the past eighteen months, those depths of despair, that rare bliss when I loved you so much you were every corpuscle in my blood, came back and inhabited the pores of my skin like rain.

Your coarse hands pinned my thighs down as if they never ever wanted to let me go. But even then, as my eyes refused to leave yours, even then as part of my brain was fixing these moments in my memory for eternity, something else inhabited me. That same something that had left pencil smudges on my fingers and thumbs, guided outlines of dancing figures onto white paper, teased a softness onto the pencilled mouth of a young girl – some migrant Pre-Raphaelite beauty. That same something that made me copy out song lyrics, head bent to the radio to catch the words, shouting at my sisters to shut up. The Hollies, Hot Chocolate, Otis Redding, The Moody Blues.

Those snatches of poetry, copied out onto the inner pages of school books – Tennyson: ‘O what shall I be at fifty, if I am still alive, if I find the world so bitter when I am but twenty-five...’ Well before you, all of Grimm’s, The Snow Queen, The Famous Five. The Hardy Boys, Anne of Green Gables, What Katy Did. Little Women...All of that world that lived and breathed inside me that you were no part of.

I didn’t know then of our own Caribbean literatures, but buried my nose into the delicious smell of library books, new books, borrowed books, comics; re-enacted those tales for myself and my sisters to perform our own version of Little Women with me as Meg, Des as Jo, Mary as Beth and Yonnette as Amy...

What did you know or care about those narratives embedded into my very fabric? And you see, it mattered, it so, so mattered, because my heroes were given to me on paper, on screen, James Dean smouldering, Warren Beatty and Natalie Wood tormented by passion in 1961 in *Splendour in the Grass*, *Scarlett* and *Rhett, Dr Zhivago*.

Mills & Boon novels had prepared me for you, the dark, disagreeable hero with a tongue for a sword, but we both knew, at some level, that no-one had written us a script. Would I be the career girl in New Amsterdam, in Georgetown? Was I secretary material, mother material? Would I stay home and mind kids? And if we wanted to lift the umbrella even higher, could I marry you? Could Catholic marry Muslim?

Who would I vote for? D’Aguiar? Burnham? Jagan? More and more my mother, my sisters and I were feeling we had no place. New Amsterdam was becoming a ghost town. Marix was gone, Elly, Barbara, Joey, Latch, Frencho, Vidya. Our arms were getting tired waving goodbye to all our friends. America, you whispered, America.

Our friend Hazel had organised a farewell party at her house in Georgetown. The house was full of people, my girlfriends from New Amsterdam, Georgetown boys, family, you. Somebody was putting records on, people were dancing. I see Katie push through the crowd to the DJ and whisper in his ear. He nods, then puts on Jefferson Airplane ‘I’m leaving on a jet plane’. Everybody claps and Katie pulls

you out from the dance you were having with Lorna, drags you over to me. You're protesting, "Leave me nuh!" But the whole room is watching. So you take me in your arms unwillingly and the crowd cheers again, singing along heartily as if it was a birthday party. But you're angry. You didn't want to come. You dance with me with one arm hanging by your side, a cigarette glowing brightly between your fingers.

And so I go. When the plane lifts and I look down and see my country below me for the first time, I wonder where all the houses and all the roads have gone. All I can see is a wave of green bush rolling away and away inland with thin brown squiggles which are rivers; beyond that, the ocean. It's as if everything I've ever known has been swallowed up. I've said everything I had to say to you. I speak to Daddy now – I'm flying, Daddy, I'm flying.

And you, my country, return to me when it rains; this English rain now borrows the force of the Trade Winds and pelts bangalang, down on conservatory, slate roofs, tiles.

There was a time I wished for rain such as this, laughing at English rains and rivers, rivers no more than streams. *You want to see rain?* I would laugh. This could be with the girls in the factory, as we stood outside the workshop doors and watched the water run down the concrete yard. And they would look at each other and laugh, drawing on the last stumps of their cigarettes before the bell sounded. Or pausing on a bridge in the Kent countryside, to play Pooh Sticks on a swirl of water barely above the level of its stones. Try the Demerara, or the Berbice, *those* are rivers!

You return to me when babies come, cut out of me with knives, their eyes bluer than the Guyana sky, and I sing *You will know that you are down in Demerara, Demerara, you will know that you are down in Demerara and Clap hands for Mamma, and Brownskin girl, stay home and mind baby...* and the rain bangalangs on the conservatory roof and no-one but me will know what it means.

You return to me when I re-enter a classroom at the age of thirty-nine into a room swimming with the faces of strangers and I feel as stupid and fragile and as tongue-tied as I was

first time round, the tongue only free within the pages of a diary, and when I am asked what my name is I temporarily forget, then wonder what accent should I use...and there you are again, my country, tripping off the edge of my lips, pushing your rain-smell earth-smell in, hysterically whispering *Latin Latin Creole Creole English Southern Counties*. And mothering and loving and factory floors and washing floors and divorce courts had never been my intention.

And you return to me each time I have to peel you off my lips, explain where you are geographically, culturally, politically, and always have to explain why I am here and not there, *all that sunshine innit?* and I still don't know the answer. And you return to me when that telephone call comes all the way from Georgetown just before I leave to get the kids from school one wet December afternoon, 1999, *Georgetown calling...* Al Creighton from the University of Guyana telling me I have won the Guyana Prize.

And I wear you always, like that nugget ring I have hidden about myself, and where once I returned in the smallest of shapes, a firefly or a kiskadee, a raindrop even, or the pinhead of a memory, I now return in poems, and in these stories told so long ago; and hope no-one will think I am a jumbie and find a shell to break me with.

The Conch Shell

1969

We throw it down the backsteps and watch it bounce, clatter and splinter, heading for the yard. All them years on top of the Phillips radio, *Mister King Conch*, always needing dusting. Now he just drop like somebody old shoe, and for the first time we hear Mummy cursing bad words. Daddy spirit was *in* the shell, they said, he didn't know yet he was dead. Mr Dead had come up and catch him unawares, with no chance to get ready nothing. So back to the land of the living he'd come; or even he never left. He bring back the smell of the funeral flowers and perfume, and frighten us into running out the house to sleep with Aunty Jean, or Aunty Millie. So, *throw way something that belong to he*, they said. That something was the conch shell. That prize conch he always say come from Barbados, that he used to hold up and blow, ghostly eerie cry like bad news coming, till he put it to we ears and we listen to the ocean rushing. Now we too cursing after it like hellfire, because is curse you have to curse the ghost so he can know he not welcome here. And although part of we feeling sorry for we Daddy trap up in there, there was a certain *licentiousness*, that pleasure we had to cuss, as previous to that we can't even say *Damn* or *O God* for fear of licks or a mouth wash out with soap.

"You *Rass!*" I bellow, liberated.

But Mummy, eyes red and knuckles white, pull me up sharp.

"That's enough, Margaret!" she scold. "Quite enough."