



BUSHMAN

LISA LEVI

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are products of the author's imagination.

Copyright © 2020 Lisa Levi
Cover photograph by Lisa Levi

All rights reserved.

BUSH MAN

by

LISA LEVI

CHAPTER 1:

Jumbie in the night.

The Road out of town narrows as it pushes uphill, and bushes advance on it like an army re-claiming territory. Evidence of victory is the occasional house that appears, overgrown by vines and inhabited by trees. The higher you go, the sounds of town, the babble of conversations, of music and shouting, of dogs barking, doors banging, lose influence. Here, only the whistles, cries and howls of the wild beasts matter.

The sun sets behind the hill as a man moves through the bushes. His steps disturb no sounds, his passage barely shakes a leaf. He has a long staff in one hand and a sack under his arm. He makes his way down hill, shadow amongst shadows.

'No rain to save you tonight,' he mutters.

He reaches the road, and steps out of the soft bush onto the hard road. He pauses, only for a breath, before he begins to pour rice across the road. He pours until the sack is half empty and when he's done, he stands back to look at his handiwork.

'I going and get you skin,' he mutters.

On a ridge, above the road, an old silk cotton tree stands guard. Its high branches stretch up to embrace the sky and its long roots sprawl out like sleeping giants across the forest floor. A man stands among the giants, hidden in the shadows of the roots. He has a staff in one hand and a sack at his feet. The sun has set, and the night is young. He listens to the distant

clatter of the town on the breeze. 'If I have to put rice on the road every night for a month, I go do it,' he says. Then he snatches up the sack, and heads down the grassy ridge.

When he gets to the road, the man stops. He waits a few moments, listening. But the evening is quiet. Only the frogs and crickets talk, only the wind whispers, only an owl laughs. He steps from the shelter of the trees onto the open road and looks up. Stars prick the dark sky, and thick grey clouds drift a relief across the expanse. The man sets down his staff and opens the sack. He walks backwards, spilling rice as he goes. 'One night you go come out,' he mutters. 'You go come out.'

Back and forth, back and forth, the man moves, leaving a thick line of rice across the road. When the sack is almost empty, he stops and gazes up at the sky. A white sheet of lightning blinks on, and then the darkness returns.

On the hill the night is black as charcoal. Darkness is the ruler over the dark shadows of dark trees and dark bushes. No light from town reaches this high up the road, but a shadow moves. A man, hunched and awkward, shuffles back and forth across the road, ambling steadily from one side to the next. He pauses abruptly, and glances around. Under one arm is a sack of rice, and grains drip from its mouth as he surveys the night.

'Flock of ibis this morning,' he mutters. 'Red. Good sign.'

He goes back to his task; diligently pouring rice from left to right across the road. Back and forth, trailing a steady pittering stream of rice as he goes.

CHAPTER 2:

A man appears from the bush.

Imagine you sitting by the river. It's one of those perfect days; sunny, dry breeze blowing. You enjoying the blue sky, the warm stones, the sound of the children laughing in the clean mountain water. Nobody around but you, your family and birds calling in the thick trees. It's what it's about; life.

Then suddenly a man comes out of the bush, down river. Just appears from the deep green into the sunlight. Your heart catches in your mouth. Where'd he come from? He's tall, slim, dark skin. His hair is all natty, uncut, sticking out in clumps. He looks wild. His shorts are ripped, no shirt, skin smooth and shiny, and a long staff in his hand.

You sit up straighter. But what you going to do? How you going to protect your family; your wife setting out the picnic lunch, you pickni glowing in the sunshine? And the road, a good ten minutes away, through the bush. You lean forward, just in case you need the knife for the orange, or the bottle of juice, that would be heavy enough.

But the man, he ain't paying you no mind. He's just walking. You, you're watching him hard. How light he is on his feet, balanced, agile over the stones. He walks over the stones like he own the river. You know the staff is more than a walking stick. You don't move but your eyes follow him, and as he's getting closer you realise he's strong yes, but he old. There's grey in his long beard, in his natty locks, on his bare chest. His muscles are tight like a bantam fowl but the skin is thin.

Your shoulders back now. He's strong but he's old. You have a chance. You relax a bit as he reaches you. He glances over. You nod. -Afternoon papa, you say. And blink your eyes from the sun to try to see his face.

And he? He just nods, and walks right past you, nothing else.

So you watch him go, and in a few strides he disappears round the bend in the river. It's as if he was never even there. All you're left watching is bamboo hanging over the river. And maybe, for a few days after, you ask yourself, which part he came out from. Might even have asked yourself where he was going. But I tell you what you never asked yourself.

- how he living in the bush so?

Never cross your mind, not once. How he does live in the bush, old but strong, light-foot but worn, smelling of the forest.

CHAPTER 3:

A brown girl in the ring.

How Long in this bush now? Eh? Ten years? Twenty? Hah! A hundred! Mmmm. Smell that breeze. Remind me of a time. A time. Long, long time. Papa, I musta be bout... ten, nine. Young. Ten. Breeze blowing hot and sweet. Nine. Went all the way. Up St Anns hill. Mighta be eleven. Blasted spider, build y'nest elsewhere. Ten. Young. Didn't even realise how high up I went. Up, up. I did run from Mamie Rosa house. Old shack over the river. Long gone now. River was half-dry. Nine, musta be. This is the stone to move. M'mother was to come from St. Vincent, but she never come. Hah. Lampo-tampi-tam. Going away on a sailing ship, and if she don't come back... Ahh-ha, is this stone here have to move. Mamie Rosa try to hold me, but I run. Lampo-tampi-tam, on a sailing ship. And if she don't come back... Ahh....

Run to the bush. Don't know why. Don't know why. See a hummingbird on a red chaconia and just follow it. Lampo-tampi-tam. Orange balisia to yellow anthurium. Follow it. Pass under some big leaf plant and sit under a silk cotton tree. It making hot today, papa. See all kinda butterfly. And bird. See a tanager, red and shiney, bouncing on a branch. A yellow... ahh, the one with the tail. And some blue bird in a banana tree. Kiskadee, on a hibiscus, big like soursop. Didn't need nobody. Silk cotton drifting in the air like cloud. Bee buzzing. See two opossum. And a ocelot stop and watch me. What a day. Like they come out to greet me. L'spirit. Forest magic. Even the way the shadows move in the breeze, dancing with the sun, and the sound ah the river. Ahh. And the smell. Umm, like today, sweet and dry and green. Didn't want to leave. Didn't want to leave. Me and the bush was one that day.

Damn you, Ananse. Why you always string up you web in m'face? Always spider trap in m'face. Cha. This blasted stone tough, Papa! Come on... come... out! Ah-hah. Nice. Water go drain to that side, save m'bed when the rains come. And papa, they coming. Could feel it in the air.

Ahh, rains was coming then too. Only time I see Mamie Rosa cry. When I come out the bush ... Dig a gully to make sure. Feel like was a choice I had to make. She hold me and cry.

Ahh. Earth hard, hard, for so. Ten. Musta be. Cause wasn't long after the rains come. And she take me from the bush and send me school. Hard, hard like pavement. The house with the chicken wire fence. And the pomerac tree in the back yard. Sweetest pomerac ever. Ahh, papa. That wind blowing hot from the east. Might rain tonight self. And the hill need it. Everything too dry.

Cha, a nest ah bachac ants. Ahh, ahh, ahh. Blasted tings does bite hard. Cha. Even town must need the rain by now. The river does feed the reservoir, and that running like a stream. Too hot. Too hot. Had fire up the hill two nights back. Ahh, that wind say rains coming and wind don't lie.

In town was the smell of the bush I miss. Mmmm, that smell. Town take it over. So much shops and big house, Papa. And the tram from Woodford Square, smell like petrol. Used to love to ride that. Town take over. Eh, eh, dark skin girl. Nah, nah. Days back. Papa. Where she come out? Forget she. Is no wonder I thinking bout town. Is she remind me. Town. House all jam up together and people everywhere. She look like... Cha. Memories does go too far. And what a young girl doing sitting on river stone with a fella, like that? Giggling, giggling. And he offering she to bite his mango Julie. Cha. Young girls too careless. Only one reason he was there. One. I run him off, yes. Like a pot-hound sniffing round a cook pot. Only had to raise up me stick and he take off with he tail between he legs. -Sorry Papa, he bawling. Hah. Skinny jackass. Hah.

Farmer Brown had a jackass.

Which was very sad.

The farmer himself was very slack ...

But she never run. Eh,eh. Watch me like she want say something. Ahh, papa.

This jackass of yours, Farmer Brown

The neighbours keep complaining...

Make m'heart jump. How she look like... Eh, eh. Same bright eyes. Eh, eh. Not today. Hear them racing back to they nest. Even the parrot know rain coming.

Farmer brown had a jackass...

CHAPTER 4:

Country boy to Saga-boy.

So Imagine, a motherless boy. No mooma, no poopa. Only had his Grandmother on his mother side. He was born in St Ann's but when he got a scholarship to the secondary school in town, they moved from high up St Ann's Hill to Maraval. At first the boy didn't like town, too noisy, too much people, but he always loved the music. Seemed like every street had somebody making music. Beating tamboo-bamboo, playing guitar, singing kaiso. And when his grandmother couldn't afford the books no more, and he had to leave the secondary school, he was glad. Cause that is when he get to hang around with the fellas from the kaiso tent. And is them man, teach him how to step in town, bouyah under his jacket, and chooker in he left pocket. And the boy could see himself becoming a kaiso man too. Like Lion and Tiger, Houdini, Pretender. He wanted to be like them man. Called himself, Young Instigator. But it was Parrot people name him. Mighty Parrot. Cause, he didn't have the singing voice.

Anyway, after a time the boy found a work in a chemist shop, in town. He was a big boy now and most afternoons, one girl or the next would pass in the shop to laugh and sweet talk with him. And he didn't mind, if was Rosita or Clementina, Louisa or Milta. He was one of the saga-boys in town.

Now, the man who owned the shop had a daughter. A big set girl, with a round face. And she started to help out in the shop. And the boy see how everyday she always dressed good, in expensive dress, with gold ear-rings, and bracelets that jangle jangle when she move her hands. And the boy, a practical young man, start to chat with her when she in the shop. Tell her jokes about the people coming in to buy they vetiver and bengue. Finesse her. -Doux doux darlin' you look so healthy. Doux doux darlin it making hot, let me buy you a snow cone. And she giggling and patting sweat from her chest with a handkerchief.

Well, one afternoon, the shop was quiet. Saga-boy was in the back room with the chemist daughter. They was putting medicine bottles on a shelf, and he, just to test the waters, so to speak, lean over and put a kiss on her. Right on the lips. She jump, but she didn't say no. And of course, one thing lead to the next. And with a, -I could only do that if we married, the boy find himself betrothed.

By the end of the year, forget all the girls waiting for him on Green Corner, the boy was married. That is the story. Seem like should have more. And you know it do, but then life could be so predictable.

CHAPTER 5:

Sweet Rosemary

Where This memory trying and take me? I don't want to go. Best leave in the past, papa. The eyes, the forehead. Look like... Best leave that in the past, with everything else. Nothing to remember, nothing to miss. Only thing I miss from them days is m'guitar. B, A, C-sharp. ...Mmmm. Could hear the strum of the chords as if it riding on the breeze. B, A, C-sharp. Singing m'kaiso. That is a memory.

Kaiso music make the heart feel free,

Kaiso music make you real happy

Kaiso music get you on y'feet.

Is carnival time on Fredrick street.

Tambooo-bamboo and tin pan on Fredrick Street.

That is a memory. Sing a song in a calypso tent. Drink a rum and extempo till morning. Go home as the sun coming up. Rosemary asleep in the bedroom. Ahh. Drink a rum and... Ahh, papa. Rosemary. Check the big-eye grieve watching me. Shoo. I ain coming for your nest.

Used to sing a song. No. No. Not that one. Wasn't a real song. Cha, memories rising up like the dust from this ground. Sweet Rosemary. Cha. We married in a church. Sweet Rosemary. On a Saturday. Big party at the father house in Belmont. Hah. Me and Rosemary. Breeze blowing strong again. Where I put the coconut? Sweet Rosemary. Ahh, papa.

Always glad when she see me.

Stroke m'head, in the morning

Rub m'foot, in the evening.

Hah. Was a joke. Was a joke. Just a song. I tell you build y'spider trap elsewhere, spider-man. Was just a 'ditty', a thing to make them man laugh. Eh.

Sweet Rosemary

Always glad when she see me.

Cook me dumpling in the morning

And cascadura in the evening.

Ahh, wasn't no lie, neither. She was a good, good wife. Keep the house clean, wash m'clothes. Papa. The fellas used to say was she daddy money. Ahh. Selwyn and Wilmot. Papa, all you man mouth was fire. Hah. I didn't care what nobody say. Never. Never talk too much in m'head. Laugh when I make joke. And love to cook. Ox-tail, fish stew, oil down, callaloo. Had the real sweet hand. Saint Rosemary. Cook whatever. Even when she had done cook something else. Saint Rosemary. Forget that! Saint Rosemary.

Lie down in bed when you ready,

But only in missionary.

No! No. Was the fellas, sing that, not me. Papa, friends does take you but they don't bring you back. Hah. Everything gone still now. Feel it. Sweat on m'back. Them nights in the barrack yard by Charlotte street. Hot. Used to have to dress good. Ahh. Grease down hair, comb it with a parting. Nice shoes. Slacks. A hat. Yes, a real town boy by then. Ahh. Rosemary used to stay home. Ahh. Rosemary. Kaiso fete and pan yard. You never say no. Ahh, too much memory. Come Oya, bring the rain. Rain does wash way everything.

CHAPTER 6:

Bush of Ghosts.

Outside of town moonlight defines the black hill with the silver it brushes over the trees and bushes. Outside of town the hill heaves in the passing wind; a mass of dense black shapes, shadows against shadows, that roll and stand firm as night governs and night creatures come out, scuffling for food, calling for mates, lapping at streams.

In a modest clearing a flame trembles on ashen earth. A meagre flame that defies the shroud of night and casts a small orange light over a man. His profile is stern as he pokes at the small flame. His beard is tangled and matted. His forehead is wide and square. His bony knees meet his thin chest as he works over a clay mortar at his feet.

'Twelve hot pepper, dry. Twelve green pepper, dry. Coffee beans. Just three.' He tosses the ingredients into the mortar as he speaks. 'Tobacco. Myrrh. Some oil, and dragons blood.' He reaches out and takes a warm stone from the edge of the fire and begins grinding the ingredients together. He works silently. The medicinal smell of the myrrh mingling with the sweet of the dragon's blood. The scraping sound of the stone against the clay repeating rhythmically. The night frogs crick, crick, crick. Soft wind sets the trees whispering.

A branch cracks, and the man looks up. Somewhere in the darkness an owl purrs. The man glances round. He stands up slowly, his eyes trained on the darkness.

'Aha, I see you,' he whispers.

The bushes crunch and crack.

'I see you!' the man shouts. 'Bloodsucker!'

There is a sudden rush of flapping wings and falling leaves. 'Not tonight!' the man shouts.

He reaches down and grabs a handful of paste from his mortar.

'I ready for you!'

He drops the handful of paste into the embers of his camp fire, and it sparks and spits. Almost at once, a cloud of smoke rises up into the air, mushrooms over the clearing, and the man falls backward. The smoke is thick and pungent. The man scrambles away as it reaches up and out. For a brief moment, in the play of shadow and light, the smoke takes on the features of a woman. 'I see you,' the man chokes out, and the smoke thins and spreads like a mist.

'Soucouyah can't touch me,' the man shouts and immediately starts to cough.

'Soucouyah can't hold me,' he coughs.

'I ready now, and you gon' die

When I catch y'skin I go make you cry.'

His throat stings and his eyes water.

'Aye yai-yai! Aye yai-yai! Soucouyah can't hold me!' he crows and stumbles to his feet.

Coughing and gagging, he staggers away from the fumes and smoke. 'Salt y'skin,' he wheezes. 'You go die.'

He hacks and coughs, lurching blindly through the bush to the river. At the edge, he slips on a rock and splashes into the shallow depth. His gasps of laughter echo over the water.

CHAPTER 7:

Limbo time.

Dig Out this wild dasheen. Go cook that tonight. Papa, things does change fast when they change. Have signs, if you looking. Like how that ants' nest getting big as if it overflowing, or how the parrot fly home early. Signs of the rain to come. Rain. Not a lot. Send a trickle ah water rolling cross the yard. Ahh, Rosemary. A sorrow cross a dry heart. Blasted brown skin girl. On m'mind. On m'mind. In town who was looking for signs? Work in the drug store. Play whey-whey, bit ah dominoes in Ram shop. Wasn't looking for no signs. Writing tunes with Wilmott and DeLeon. Ahh. Foolish fool. Feel y'coulda just turn town boy? Ah, papa, fool die for want of wisdom. Ahh.

Need more twig. Piece ah moss. Rosemary! She was frying fish. I shoulda see the signs. Just a small fire. Breakfast. The girl who did help was outside washing clothes. Juk-juk at the sink. Morning sun. A moth on the table cloth. First sign? Coulda be. Rosemary say she feeling tired. Could ah all be the last. But, so what, eh? Tired wasn't sick. Woman does feel sick the first months. Went work, carry on me session with the fellas, drink rum in Ram shop. Then she start looking pale, moving slow. Tell her, take it easy. Take it slow. Then she couldn't come out the bed. Well I notice then.

Ah it catch. Good, good. More twig. Just enough, just enough to... Yes. Father bring doctor. Medicine in bottle. Even send priest. Say all kinda prays. Nothing. Mr Uriah send incense for burning, and shining bush for tea. But she wasn't taking none ah that 'obeah medicine'. Ahh. Shoulda take the obeah medicine. Church girl. By the end ah September you gone. Dead. She and m'baby. Ahh. Block the breeze. Lose the flame. Just so. Just so. Life was sweet. Just so turn bitter. Bitter like mauby.

Eh, look the jap-sapania in the spider web. Beating around and just getting more tie up. Hah. That was me, papa. When Rosemary dead. Blasted fire gone out! Where the stone? Eh. Hide under the fig leaf. Hah. I couldn't hide. Not even in sleep. Close m'eye and was dead face I

see. Sit up whole night. And only thought filling m'head. How m'baby didn't even get chance to die. Ahh, papa. What a thing. What a thing. No chance even to die. How that could be? Why? Was too much. Where the rain to wash way memory? Ah, papa. Grief and pain.

Need more dry leaf. Eh. And after the nine nights... Ah the house feel empty. Silent. Could hear jumbie whispering in every corner. Death. Everywhere. Ah, papa. Didn't know, didn't know. M'fate was done seal. Come. Get this fire going again. M'fate was done seal. Come on, catch.

Ahh. Was me and the jumbie. Me and the jumbie. Inside that house. Dark house. In town. What benefit, these memories? He give we that house. Mr Walker. Mr Father-in-law. -Wedding present, my son, he say. Ahh. Yes, Mr Walker. Rosemary still gone. You come to the house. Just a next nail in a coffin. Forget! How forget? Come, bring yourself to the house. Ah, papa. Not to rub m'head. No. No. Come cause he hear talk. Nail in a coffin. Talk! I tell you, forget that night! Upsetting the morning.

Cha. It out again! Damn fire! Have to start over. Breeze coming in already. Get this blasted fire light. Jumbie! Cha. Is she do for me. Jumbie! Is you do for me. Sewing lies like she sew blouse and skirt. And he hear. And he sit there. Leave it so! Cha! Ruby sister, Pearl. Leave it so! How Ruby make baby for me. Lie! And I tell him so. Was Rosemary I marry. Rosemary! And we was going and have we own baby! We was to have we own baby. Ahh, papa. I didn't business with Ruby once I get married. Never. Maybe once. But not so. And she never say... No. That was she sister Pearl. The bitch!

Close that door. Don't want think them thoughts. Ahh, the fire catch. Throw dry leaf on the flame. Sky getting dark.

CHAPTER 8:

Dance the Bele

So Imagine a Bongo man come from Grenada, and a Bele dancer come from Dominica. Both land-up in Trinidad. No family, a cousin somewhere, maybe. The Bongo man worked as a carpenter on a estate, and the Bele dancer was working as a maid in a big house.

Anyway, one night, at a harvest dance in the village, come the new Bele dancer, to dance to the drum. Madras head-tie, the jip, crisp, colourful skirt sharp over her white cotton petticoats, and bangles on her wrists. Everybody notice her, especially the Bongo-man. He could only see one dancer that night.

But had a light-skin fella from Lavantil who noticed the Bele dancer too, and he didn't waste no time to ask her to dance. And while they was dancing he tried to get as close to her as he dared; close enough to smell the perfume on her neck, and for her long ear-rings to brush his cheek. But the Bele dancer didn't take to his style and after the Congo Bele she walk away.

Then it was time for the Grand Bele and everybody was watching to see who the Bele dancer was going to dance it with. The Bongo man rest his drum and walk over. The light-skin fella hustle up, but was the Bongo man the Bele dancer choose.

Aye, yai-yai dance the bele

Aye, yai-yai dance the bele oh

Aye, yai-yai dance the bele

La reinviere we go dance the bele

And as they dance, they fall in love. The Bongo man and the Bele dancer. La reinviere they dance the bele. Everybody could see it, including the light-skin fella.

Still, for weeks after the fete, the light-skin fella try all ways to seduce the Bele dancer, but he couldn't get a look in, Bongo man was always there. And months later, when pregnant

come, as it do, he decide to wash way the happiness he could see on the Bongo man face. And he went and visit a obeah man.

Well, whatever the obeah man do, day for baby to born come early. The nurse lady from down the road had to run quick to help. She light candle and boil water and bush tea. And for two days, the Bele dancer suffer and labor and cry out in pain. 'Til, finally, on the third day, out come a big, round, baby girl. The nurse lady cut the cord and hand the baby to the new mother. Then she start to massage the belly to help the afterbirth come out. And as she rubbing the belly, the Bele dancer moan, and blood and placenta rush out, and with it, a next baby with the caul wrap round the head. The nurse scream. And the Bongo man heart catch in he mouth when see the next little body, lying in the blood, as still as if it was dead.

Quick, quick the nurse lady peel the sac off the head, and the baby cough. The Bele dancer, reach up a hand and pulled the Bongo man closer. She whispered in his ear and before he could do more than nod his head, she collapsed back on the bed. Dead.

Feel like, should say the candle in the room blow out, or a shadow fly round the room, but death steal in too quiet for that. The light-skin fella was in the rum shop drinking babash when it happen. Hear the news when the nurse send for doctor, and he smile.

Well, you could imagine, Bongo man take it hard. He stop beating drum and meeting people in the barrack yard. He leave the estate and find work on the docks, lifting box and crate. Nobody never see him laugh again. Then, one night, as he was offloading a shipment of timber, tragedy. A rope snapped and the whole stack of timber fall down on the Bongo man. Fall right on his back. And in two weeks he was dead. A lot of people say it was obeah. Some say it was the Bele Queen come for him. But most of people just say, -oh lard, them poor girls, poor girls.

CHAPTER 9:

Suck me soucouyah, suck me.

Inside the small wooden house, everything is still. The air is musty and stale. In the bedroom everything is dark, except for a silver wash of moonlight that slips past the curtains and washes over a man, motionless as a corpse, on the iron bed. One arm is outstretched as if he's reaching for the half-empty rum bottle on the bedside table. As he snores softly, a flush of light appears at the window, an orange-red glow that peeps into the room. It slips under the window and slides down the wall, and creeps over to the bed. It has form as it moves, a head, shoulders, a limbless body wrapped in curling fire that casts more heat than light. It rises up onto the bed and floats over the man's prostrate body. It lingers close, pulsing, throbbing to his every breath.

The man moves and the flame moves with him. He thrusts his hips and it rides him, rising and falling, up and down, as if on a tide. Up and down, silently, up and down. A cock crows outside and the flame pauses. It slides, quietly off the man. Creeps back along the floor, slithers up the wall and back under the window, into the night.

-No!- The man calls out.

He struggles to sit up, looking around.

-Who there? He calls out.

Silence is the only response.

The man drops back to the pillows. After a moment he hauls himself out of bed, and staggers out of the bedroom to the living room, bumping into the sofa on his way to the front door. He rattles the handle, pulls and pushes to make sure it's locked. Then he moves to the window and pulls the closed curtains tighter. As if all his energy has been spent, he drops into the old rocking chair.

-Oh Lord, mama woy-woy. He mutters.

Despite the closed curtains, morning pushes the night out of the room. The bureau against the wall grows visible, the blue doily on the dining table, the bible on a shelf. Dogs bark, birds call, the neighbour's door bangs. The sounds of town waking, moving, going about its business penetrates the heavy silence of the room. The man doesn't move. Light shifts the shadows around him as the sun climbs into the sky, but he remains slack and motionless. Eventually the sun begins its descent and the shadows grow wider and deeper. The man sleeps.

As night settles in, a jumbie bird calls from outside and there is a soft tapping at the window. The man stirs but does not wake. A red glow appears under the front door. It bathes the floor in orange light. Quietly, a large flame squeezes under the door and into the room. It licks its way across the floor to the man. The only sound it makes is a soft crackle as it sidles up the chair and cautiously straddles the sleeping man. It wraps itself around him, rocking him back and forth in the wooden chair. The man mutters unintelligibly, but doesn't wake. Back and forth, the wood creaks, back and forth.

CHAPTER 10:

Ruby Rain Rain

Rain For So. A-hah, hah. Rain, rain. Wet rain. Tampo. Tampi-tam. Tampo-tampi tam. Jump yuh jump, dance yuh dance, is bacanal time, ta ta-tah tah. Tampo. Tampi-tam. Tampo-tampi tampi-tam. Jump in the mud and break away. Shake yuh hip so, and make a sway. Tamm-po. Tampi-tam. Tampo-tampi tampi-tam. A-hah-hah. Rain. Rain. Wet rain. Look m'bottle and spoon. Diggi-diggi diggi-diggi. Ha hah. That's the beat of the bamboo. Rain, rain. You reach.

Ahh, I drink you as you fall. And watch the river. Is river come down.

Eh, eh. What is that? That? In the water. There. Look like... Ahh. Ahh. Papa. Is a breadfruit. Ah-hah. Just a breadfruit in the muddy water. I seeing things. Ah-hah. Y'jackass. River wash down more than you expect. Dark, like smooth skin. Brown skin girl. She look like Ruby. Ah! Lightening. Rain ain stopping now. And the thunder. Ruby woulda laugh. Ruby was always laughing. And she had a laugh, papa. Make y'blood boil up and slow down, all at the same time. Hah. First time I see her I start humming a melody in m'head.

-Ruby, Ruby y'so sweet.

Like a mango I want to eat.

Ruby girl, y'so sweet,

Corner ah Belmont Circular Road. Hah.

Girl you sweet like mango julie...

Ruby, Ruby...

In a mas camp. Making costume. Hah. She laugh when I sing it. And I sing it again. And that was that. Everything was me and Ruby after that.

-Ruby, girl, you so sweet.

I going to pick you right off the tree.

Was she tell me to sing it in the tent. And DeLeon take the lyrics. Change Ruby to Dorothy and make a big hit with it. Hah. Tampo-tampi tam.

-Dorothy girl you so sweet.

He used to use m'lyrics all the time.

-Dorothy girl you so sweet, like a ripe mango to eat.

And when Mikey put a horn and Stello put a rhythm. Dah-dah dah, dahh. Oh yes. Almost get road-march. My tune. Even if was Deleon sing it. And me and Ruby... Ahh, papa, me and Ruby.

Ooh! Lightening again. Rain serious. Best check the gully. Bacannal in San Fernando. M'next big hit. Was Farrell sing it. And me and Ruby... Ahh, we dance jouvert to that.

-Pay the workers a fair price
or partner prepare to lose you life.
I say, Pay the workers a fair price
or partner prepare to lose you life.
Oil field bring the black gold
But wages freeze like it cold

Them days, papa. The next year DeLeon sing, Mr dog and Madame cat. Everybody was singing it.

Mr Dog chase Madame Cat,
But the winner was Mistress Rat.

That was road march material too. Me and Ruby jump Tuesday mas that year. And they play it whole day. Ahhh. Papa, them was the high days. We was dreamers. Hope m'bed still dry. Was going and make it big. Hope the gully work. Not looking good. Take kaiso to the USA. Ruby in diamonds and fur coat. Ah Papa. I was the fool in the rain.

Ahh. Ahh. And m'bed still get wet.

CHAPTER 11:

Fire, fire, in y'wire, wire

So Imagine you meet a fella, and he tell you he see a soucouyah. Ole people talk, right. But he's serious, he say he see a soucouyah. What you going to say back? You might mock the fella, laugh even, but I bet you listen. And, when you listen, what? You think you going to believe the story?

Well imagine it's a kinda old fella from country, still speaking patois like they do up in Paramin. Now, he doesn't come right out and say he saw a soucouyah, no, he starts off disclaiming. He says he can't say for sure what is a soucouyah. He says, all he could say is -it was l'spirit, a spirit. Because, well... he doesn't know if a soucouyah is a person, or if it is a bird -cest zozyo. He could only say that a soucouyah is a thing that is seen at night - epi lumiere - with a light.

Anyway, the story goes, that the fella left the village one day, around nine o'clock -lannwit- at night. And he was going up the road, when he reached by a silk cotton tree. He looks up and -moka lumiere. He sees a light at the very top of the tree. He says to hisself, -garçon, why is there a firelight at the top of that tree? The fella says he wasn't frightened, but something told him, -alle, alle- go, go, cause is a bad spirit. So he starts walking. And while he's walking he's saying to hisself, -pa gade viwe, pa gade viwe, don't look back. Eh, eh, after he reaches a good way up the road he decides to look. -We sa ka fet.- what does he see? A flame. A fire going up, and going back down. He says -yo ka joie, it was playing. So he starts talking to hisself again. -Alle, alle, garçon, don't stop. But he can't move.

The fella says, -compere, I hear bout soucouyah before, but I never see one. So, you ask him if he thinks it was a bird, and he says, -No, it wasn't no bird, because birds don't have fire on them.

-Fire? You ask,

And he nods. Serious, serious. So you ask how big it was.

And he says, -the lumiere? It was small like this, and then it get big like this. l'cest'ah piti, l'ah twape gwan. It was getting smaller and then getting bigger. And it was lighting up and going up and then going down. -Yan ga moute, yan ga descen. He says -it was playing. Yo ka joie. It was playing.

Well you don't want to believe the fella, eh, but... it's the way he's telling the story. He believes what he saw. And he's frightened still, you can tell, remembering the fright. So, you ask him, just to be clear, if it was a soucouyah, and he nods and he says, that's what they say it was, soucouyah.

-They?

He says when he told people, the person said to him, -Garçon, that was a soucouyah.

-But soucouyah is a woman, you tell him.

And he says, -Yes, soucouyah is a woman. A woman who can fly. Who can take off her skin at night and fly in a ball of fire. Peel off her skin and twouve ko diable, come like a devil, and the devil control her. And is only one thing stop a soucouyah from sucking you blood, he says. -Salt!

-Salt? you repeat.

-Soucouyah can't take salt, he promises. -If you find where they hide they skin and put salt on it, you kill the soucouyah. The fella takes a long drink of his rum and shakes his head. -If the fire I see was soucouyah, he says. -I don't know. Cause as it come closer, kowui vant a te. He run for his life, and it never catch him. And never, sise san dewo, suck his blood.

And then, just so, the old timer start to sing.

-Well, Long time people say

Spirit and duppy will take you away
Don't doubt me, Long time people say
Jabless and lagahoo make you stray
Catch you in the dark on a full moon night,
Take you spirit or take you life
So careful how you go
Or devil eat your soul
And you never going back home

Singing, manje, devowe, man sot zye, sot lam e

Have all kinda bush folk
The mother of the river call Mama Glo
Believe me, have Papa Bwa too
Living in the bush with the Lagahoo
Have Dwens with they backward foot
And Moko jumbie waiting on the road
Under the Silk Cotton tree
Lose you soul if you sleep
So careful of who you meet.

Singing, manje, devowe, man sot zye, sot lam e

Black bee bringing news
A jumbie bird call, mean a body dead soon
Bad luck to play with shadows
And maljeaux always follow a cock crow.
Throw down salt to stop soucouyah
At night, enter y'house walkin backward
Cause you never know

if jumbie trail you home

And don't take money from the road

Singing, manje, devowe, man sot zye, sot lam e.

-What you go do?

CHAPTER 12:

Abo Mama

Rains Was good to me. Ah, give thanks Mama River, for the wabeen I about to eat. Shado beni leaf in the belly that is the secret. Bit ah wild garlic too. Ummm, smell that. Johnny Grotto was a fisherman son. Yeah, yeah, yeah m'boy. Hah. Johnny Grotto was a fisherman son. A long time ago. ... Wha?! ... A voice? ... A woman voice. Shhh. ... Frog. ... Cricket. ... Nothing. ... She follow you from the river. ... Don't hear nothing. Have a way bamboo could talk like woman. ... Shh. ... There. ... Ahh! There! Ooh. Ooh. There! She there! I hear her.

What she want? What you want Mama? She crying. Don't cry Mama. Leave me be. Not that name Mama. No Mama. Leave me be. Was only a bottle I went for. That was all. Oh goood, Mama River. I went late. Night. Didn't want nobody see me. Wasn't looking trouble. Went late. Slip round the back ah the shop. Hear me, Mama. I was going in. I was going straight in. 'Cept she was there, Mama. Over the road from Ram shop. On she front step. She was smiling. Oh, Mama is the smile catch me. Oh lard, Mama. I stop to look see. Only to see, believe me. Never plan nothing. Never.

Ah, Mama, the smooth-skin pickni, was sucking at she breast. I see it. The pickni, and the smile. And a vexation flare up in me. Like this fire here. Log on a fire. Tight in m'chest. As if a spirit in me. In me, Mama. And I feel... I feel the bruise on m'thigh. And I feel... I feel sick with the rage. The smell of the frangipani. Everything turn upside down, Mama. Don't vex with me, Mama River. Wasn't my fault.

Oh, lard. Footstep! Stay back, Mama. Hear me. Was the jumbie. Was the jumbie, why I say, what I say. Mouth open, 'tory... Oh, Mama. If she wasn't ah sitting there that evening... If I had just go straight in Ram shop... If it wasn't at that exact moment she sister Pearl bring out the oil lamp. And the glow from the lamp round Ruby head... Ahh, Mama, she look so beautiful. Mama, she look so beautiful.

But I didn't have no control, Mama. Was the jumbie conspire against me. Tell me she sitting there like a blasted queen ah Sheba. No wedding ring on finger... Oh, Mama. Have mercy. The word come in m'head, and before I know it, it out m'mouth. Soucouyah. I never mean it, Mama. Soucouyah. Was only a word, Mama. Can't blame me for a word, Mama. In the beginning. The word. What word? That word come in m'head. And come out m'mouth. Didn't have no control, Mama. Was the jumbie.

Oh Mama. Don't take me to the river, Mama. I was sure! Sure, sure. At the time, I was sure. Weep for me Mama. How I was to know it would'a catch fire. Would'a carry on the wind? Wasn't me to blame, Mama River. Soucouyah. And that is the thing come forth. Soucouyah.

-Soucouyah take he wife. They say. How I could know they putting flesh to word?

-Ruby is a soucouyah. They talk. Talk spread like infection.

-Soucouyah suck she blood. Gossip, Mama. But Mama, I didn't know. I didn't know. Oh Mama. I didn't know. But, I did believe. Forgive me Mama, I did believe. I put rice. To protect myself, Mama. Everybody know that. Put rice. I put it round the bed. By the front door. Rice by the back door. Every grain she have to pick up. One by one. Everybody know that. Mama, understand. I was burning with a fever. Hot. Hot. Mama leave me be. Go back to the river. Wasn't me to blame.

Oh lard! Hand wet on m'shoulder! No! Mama! I not looking. Not looking. No see. No see y'face. No lie Mama. Morning sun was wasn't up when I went for the walk. Nobody shoulda be out that time. Mama, Mama, cock didn't even crow yet. Take you hand off m'shoulder, Mama. It heavy. How is I to blame? What she was doing there? The soucouyah.

M'heart jump when I see her. Hustling up the Maraval Road. In a nightie. A nightie, Mama! No slipper on her foot, no scarf on her head. Damn it! Mama, I is a man. Just a man. What she was doing there? At that time ah the morning? -Ruby! I call her, and she look round and stop. Ah, Mama River, I was wrong. I know I was wrong. I call her a she dog. A bitch. I was wrong. I call her a hag, a ole whore. Up the Saddle Road. I blame her. Say she kill m'wife. Call

her... Soucouyah! Suck m'blood, spread ole talk. And oh, Mama, she never say nothing. Nothing.

We was up the hill road when she stop. Why she stop? Turn round. Look me in m'eye. She brown eye shine with tears. She say how she don't know who I is no more. How even if was my baby... Even if was, Mama. She would ah be too shame to tell people is mine. Oh, Mama, what she say... The jumbie flare up again. And I grab her. By the arm. Grab her hard. She breast all rub up on me. Ahhh, Mama. Why she was out there, that time ah morning?

She try and pull way. Pull hard. And I let her go, Mama. I never force her. I let her go. And Mama, I swear. Is only then I notice the bag she carrying. A brown paper bag. And as she pull way, the bag rip. And of all things, Mama. Is rice spill out. All over the road. Rice. And Ruby drop to she knees and start trying to scoop up the rice. Why, Mama? She look like a crazy woman trying to put water in a basket.

-Get up. I tell her. -Get up.

But she just keep trying to save the rice, Mama. And same time the dog start barking. Miss James dog.

I tell her, -Leave the rice. Leave it.

And next thing, Miss James come out to see what have she dog carrying on so. And she spot Ruby.

-Soucouyah!

Is she say it, Mama. She say it. And Mr Austin look out he window. And was like everybody start come out they house, Mama. Shouting.

-Watch the soucouyah!

-Catch the soucouyah!

And somebody run up, Mama. Oh, Mama. One of them run up. And give Ruby a kick. Wasn't me, Mama. And somebody have a broom stick, and they start hitting her, Mama. And people throwing stone. And people cussing her.

-Jamet! Jakabat! Jumbie!

Oh, Mama. They was shouting and slapping and kicking.

Oh, Mama River, I back away. Back away. Didn't want no part of it. And sometime, Pearl. She sister. Pearl. She twin sister. Come running down the road. And when she see is Ruby they beating so. Oh Mama. She only family left, sister. Mama, she bawl. A one long, loud bawl. And she grab up Ruby. Oh lard, Mama. She hug up the body. And blood. Blood all over. She dress, on her hand, her face. Set me free, Mama. Hugging she dead sister. Oh Mama River. Was a bad thing to see. And when she turn on them and call them, animal, and leggo-beast. Call down Ogun, call down Oya, call down Moko Jumbie. Mama, all them good town people take shame. And the crowd part. Red sea. And Pearl look up, Mama, and she eye catch me. And Mama, she point she boney finger at me, and she say...

-Is you to blame!

Don't take me to the river Mama. Give me peace.

CHAPTER 13:

The one about the seer woman

So Imagine you meet a old woman in the country. See her standing on the side of the road and decide to give her a hand. She looks so old and tired, with a headtie on her head and a sack at her feet. Is only after you pick up the sack you realise it's chickens inside. She laughs when you ask her about it, but she doesn't give no explanation. She directs you to follow her off the main road and up a dirt track.

So, you bumping and scraping along, and she keeps saying -you soon there, you soon there. But the track just keeps going on and on, and the chickens getting heavy. After about half hour you finally reach an old shack, and as you put down the sack, she offers you something to drink. You don't want to stay, but you don't want her to think you're scorning her hospitality either, so you say yes.

Is then you notice the ribbons tie up in a calabash tree, and the bamboo poles with the coloured cloth. But before you could give apologies and go, she's back outside with the cup of juice. So you take a sip and it's then she says she is a seer. You half choke and hope it sound like a chuckle. She say she see you in a dream the night before, and did know you was going to give her a lift.

Well, you don't know what to say. You just stand there with the cup in y'hand. And she pat you on y'arm, and she say how in the vision she see two road, and you choose the road that take you to the river. And when you reach the river, Mama Glo rise up out the water and pull you down into the river.

Well, you too fraid to stay now and too fraid to go. You sweating. And the old lady laughing. -Don't worry, she says. -Mama throw you back. And she laughs and laughs. You start to relax a bit. It's a joke, right? The kind y'grandmother would tell you to frighten you. But then

all of a sudden the old lady gets very serious. And she says, you was lying on the river bank and a flock of parrots rushed out the trees. Parrots is a good sign. But a ball of fire shoot out after them. And that is a bad sign. Then three, eighteen, thirty-one cobeau circle you like kite. And that is the sign of danger and death.

The back of y'neck go cold as she talking, and you step back, but she hold you. Her hand strong, so you can't move. And she say, the cobeau drop down and pull at y'flesh til you was just skeleton bone lying on the ground. But is the saman tree shed leaves upon you, and the roots twine round y'legs. And bachac ants step in y'eye, and worms creep up y'throat, and jap spania build nest in y'ears.

-No! You shout, no. You don't want to hear that. So she let you go and smile. '-Lanmo tale difini, she say. -Death does come in threes. Well you had enough by now. You put down the cup and hustle out her yard. -Is a good sign, she calls after you. But you keep walking, and you don't look back.

Well, you tell y'friends bout the lady, and they laugh, and you laugh with them. But inside you not laughing.

CHAPTER 14:

What the wind say?

Wind Say is time for a break. Ahh, papa. Time for a rest, Oya, say. Best place for a sleep. Right here on this rock. Ahhh. Is what warm afternoon and cool breeze make for. Let the bush whisper a sleep song... Wind stroke you, til you half-asleep. Ahhh, the trees singing a chorus. Hush. ...Sound like somebody call m'name. Ahh, wind like to play. Is only the bush.

Ahh, papa. Long, long time since a body say m'name. Neville. Ahh. Pass over river, and pass over river again. Look at the flowers and look at the flowers again. Hah. Ain seen nobody in days. Brown skin girl. Hah. Brown girl in a ring. Tra-la-la-la-la. Look like Ruby. Brown girl in a ring. Trahhh la-la-la-la-la. But before that. Not a body. Not since before the dry season. The dougla fella, come in the bush to hunt. Hah. Pull some vine round he foot and he fall. Watch him the whole way down the hill. He never see me once. Hah. You sure you ain dead? Ah-hah. Nobody to say no. Kill m'self off a cliff. Was the story in town. Hah. Well if I dead, I dead. Make m'peace with that. The trees, the sky, the earth. Is enough to have the bush call m'name. Don't need no other.

Ahh. Hear him sing. Hah. Hmmm, Hmm-Hmmm. Up high in the mango tree. Yellow bird
You sit all alone like me.

Ahh. Wind in bamboo rustle. Oya say, of m'old friends, none remain. Lloyd used to say Pearl was bad luck. Mam Schuck say bringer of tears. But wind say, -What done, done. Rather listen to the sound of the bee, Oya. Sound like peace. Don't want to remember no more. Is time for rest. Ahh. Ananse, you build a house here too? You not frighten it blow way? Pearl old house always look like it would blow way. One good hurricane and it gone. But it still there. Down the hill.

Ahh. Warm stone feel good on m'back. Ahhh. Could lie here whole day. Did watch it and watch it. Ahh. What it matter now? So what, I hide in the bush and watch. Watch her hang clothes. Watch her feed fowl. Watch her sewing at the window. Days. Nights. Hah. I watch and watch. And then one day she carry the chile and go out. And I went in. Hah. Look in cupboard. Look under bed. Wardrobe. Lift up floorboard. Ahh. Look in Ruby bedroom. Smell like baby powder. Little little dress, little little vest. Had a bassinet. Where Ruby get bassinet? Ahh. Under the sink. By the ceiling. Nothing. No pestle, no calabash. Not even a empty biscuit tin. Hah. Couldn't think where she was hiding the skin.

She hide it good. And wouldn't ah find it, neither. 'Cept she come back. And I had to dash out the back door and duck under the house. Cobweb in m'face. Mud and chicken-shit smell in m'nose. Looking to see if she coming out in the yard. Hah. And she stop in the kitchen. Right on top m'head, papa. Hah! I hold m'breath. Ahh, ahh, ahh. And who would ah guess? She start to sing.

-doh doh, petit popo, doh, doh, petit popo...

Hah! Pearl. Singing, papa. And each step she make send dirt down on m'head. Ahh. Ahh. Never hear Pearl sound so before.

Ahh. But is then self I find it. Hand slip on the ground. Dip in a hole. And a old crocus bag come up. With a box make from wood. Have a woman carve on it. Nice work. Smooth. Look like she dancing in a long skirt. Nice work. Eh-heh. And I open the box. And was only some dust inside. Some kinda dust. But I know. I know. That is where she does keep it. In that box. Ahh, I get full up, with a kinda excitement. Me heart race. But I feel a kinda dread too. Wanted to laugh out loud, and bawl, all at the same time. Reach to get the salt. And papa! Pain dig in m'foot. Feel was a nail or something. At first. But no papa. Snake. Mapipire. Small and brown, but the dirty yellow tail say poison. Ahh, ahh, ahh. It latch on to the side of m'foot. Teeth dig in hard. And the damn thing wouldn't let go. Hold on tight. Papa. Had to grab it by the head and pull it off. And two drop ah blood rolling off m'foot. And all the salt waste in the dirt.

Push back the box in the hole. Foot was burning bad. Crawl out from under the house. Didn't care if she see me or not. M'breathing get heavy. Head feel dizzy. The poison move fast, papa. Had to get back in the bush and find the moringa. Eat about ten, twelve seed in one go. Vomit and shit whole night by the river. Hah. Hah. But I know. I know. I know.

I watch. I watch. First night, I see Lagahoo come down the road with he coffin. Chains dragging in the dirt. Lanmo! Next night. A pig was squealing in the dark. Kouchon! Maljo! Papa, I watch til sun up. She never come out. Third night. Ahh. Third night. Hide behind the croton bush. Moon was full. See her step to the yard. Like she dancing. Disappear under a shadow.

Try to see. Couldn't see nothing. Then a flapping I hear. L'spirt danse. And a red flash, dash up in the mango tree. Fire! First was big. Like log fire. Then get small. Shrink down. And drop to the ground. Ah, papa. Long trail of fire. Move round Mavis mother house. Papa! And move up the road. Ahh. Papa.

Didn't waste no time. Cross back to the yard and slip under the house. Sly mongoose. Dog know you name. Ah-hah. And the dog next door bark. Hah-hah. Sly mongoose. You ain have no shame. I creep round in the dark. Hah. The plan was simple, papa. Rice to slow her. Salt to kill her. I did throw rice on the road to slow her down. I was to take the box with the skin in it. Take it back to m'camp. She woulda have to trail the scent to me. Night growing short, she woulda have to come and find me. Had me slingshot and rock salt. Right on m'hip. Ready. Then, when I had her on the ground. Hah. Was going and open the box. And let her watch, as I pour salt all over the nasty, nasty, nasty skin. All over. Til it shrink and dry up. Hah. And the morning sun woulda catch her. Ahh, papa. Burn her out, like she burn out my life. Ahh, ahh. I make m'plan and Ogun laugh. Hah.

Papa, I see that night clear, clear, clear. Big moon. Everywhere bright, shiny. Silhouette of the pawpaw tree, shadow of the house. Sky full ah stars. Ahh, papa. Had the box. Plan in motion. Ready for action. Ready for action. And then just so. The baby flash in m'mind. Ahh, papa. And like everything slow down. I look to the fence, m'escape to the bush. I look back to the house. Faces rush round m'head. Ruby. Rosemary. M'mother. Mamie Rosa. Ahh, papa. Was trying to make sense of what in m'head. Ahh, ahh. I hesitate.

Things speed up after that. Whoosh. Woosh. Sound like bush fire blowing. Big ball ah fire come out the dark. Fly over the house and into the mango tree. Fire at the top of the tree. Tree not burning. Papa! Hot iron in m'chest. I reach for the slingshot, and the sack ah salt with it. Didn't take one eye off the bitch. The flame get long. Stretch and lean down like she reaching for me. Take a two step back. Raise the slingshot and aim. Universe stop. Was just me and the

fire. Shoot a salt ball. Bloodsucker! Right in her belly. Hah! She drop. Like breadfruit. Tumble down through the branch, and land on the ground. At m'feet.

Ahh. Papa. The flame was big. Licking the air, like she trying to eat me. Feel the heat like waves. Like a pulse. Breathing on m'foot. Take a next two step back. And inside the fire. Ahh, papa! Inside the fire. Black and red. I see her. Ahh! I see her. 'Cept. 'Cept. Inside the fire. She look so skinny and weak. Not like in m'vision. Trying to pull herself off the ground. Pull herself up. But keep dropping back down. Ahh. Ahh. Feeble and weak.

Eh. Watch, the cobeau. Like kite. Circling. Circling. Something dead to eat. Ahh, ah, ah. They say a soucouyah own by the devil. Control by the devil. Papa, I don't know. Don't know bout that. All I did know was, plan was in motion. Only one thing leave to do. Shoot the cobeau.

I tell m'self I ready. -You ready, I tell m'self.

The box did fall bout two foot from where she was lying. I snatch it up. And she, like she trying to crawl out the fire to reach me. Papa. Ahh, ah, ah. M'hand tremble. Her face was pushing out the flame. Pushing the fire. Papa, anybody see that, they hand tremble. Couldn't find how to open the damn box. Trace the wood, ridge of the skirt. Push, and it open. And as soon as the lid come off... Ahh, papa. The skin... The skin. Like it have it own life. It slide out the box. Just roll out. And as it roll, it unravel onto the ground. Never see nothing so. Eh, eh. Face, arm, body, leg, foot, toes, fingers. Ahh, ah, ah. A whole skin. Cold, and soft like leather, when it brush m'fingers. Papa. Make me scalp crawl.

But I was ready. Pull out a next bag ah salt. Ready, I was ready. Send the jan gaje back to hell. And she know. She know. Cause, she grab m'foot. Same foot with the snake bite. She two fire hand. Grip m'foot. Hold m'ankle. Hold on tight. Face like a skull. Coming for me. Teeth grinning. Big eye. Black eye. Red fire, papa! M'foot was hot. Like a shackle leave on the coals to hot. Ahh, ah, ah. I grab a handful of salt. A full, handful. Ahh, papa. A full handful. I was ready.

'Cept, a wind rush down the hill. Just rush down the hill. Make the trees shake. Make the bush grumble. Even the old fowl wake up and make a cluck. The mood change. Like the night get vex.

Hah. And the baby cry out. Like a ocelot in the night. Cry out. A worrying sound. A baby in the night. M'head start spin. Spin round. Feel like a dream. Hear a voice. -What bout the baby? And m'hand come like statue. Couldn't move. And the wind in the bush asking the same question. -What bout the chile? Ahh. And the ocelot-cry on the night again.

Clouds now. Moon gone. Everything dark. Live a eternity. And the wind say, -Dark path on dark path treading. I hear it! I hear it, papa. And I drop to m'knees. Knees just collapse, papa. Drop the salt in the dirt. And turn m'head from the sight ah Pearl, burning in the flames. And she know. She know. She let go m'foot. Drag herself cross the ground. And from the corner ah m'eye. I see her jerk, and slide. Back inside the skin. Sound ah the flame just go out. Fire just shrink, and dim, and disappear. Inside the skin.

Ahh, papa. Was darkness round us after that. Darkness. And she sit up. Naked and hunch over. I couldn't say her name. I open m'mouth. But... She stand up. Straight. Shoulders back. Lift her chin. Ahh, she didn't look at me, papa. Didn't look to me. But, ahh. Papa. She look like Ruby then. With she back to me, in the darkness. Like Ruby. Watch her limp to the house. And go inside.

Ahh. How many seasons since? The past is just stories now. Ananse know. Hah. I see his spider web in the window when the light come on in the bedroom. Hear Pearl. Voice hoarse, but gentle.

-Come po-po. Don't cry. Shhh. Aunty save you from the hairy man.

Hah. That's what she say. The hairy man. Hah. Was the first time I look, and see m'self. Ahh, papa. Me was a jumbie too. Me. Ah-hah hah! Ah-hah-hah! Me was a jumbie too! Papa! I leave the box with the bele dancer, right there on the ground. I take up me staff. And I went back to bush. Me was a jumbie too. Ah-hah hah.

Rainy season. Dry season. Ten rains? One hundred? Eh, eh. What it matter? Lying on this rock, as the sun set, that is for me.

EPILOGUE

A little girl plays in the backyard of an old house. Her hair is in plaits with coloured ribbons on the ends. She sits in the shade of a lime tree with a cloth dolly and an old saucepan from the kitchen. She makes pretend soup with weeds, seeds and dirt.

-And when you eat all y'supper,' she tells her dolly. 'Y'could go and fly in the trees. But you have to eat it all up.

A cloud slips in front the sun and the little girl glances up as the light shifts. She pauses. She tips her head one way and leans to the side. In the shadows behind the croton hedge, she's sure she can see a man. A dark man with matted hair and a long beard. He stands under the breadfruit tree watching her. The little girl jumps to her feet. She's sure it's the hairy-man her aunty warns her about. The hairy man who will take her away. She feels to cry, clutching her dolly tightly against her belly. But the man isn't doing anything. He just stands there.

The little girl waves at him, and the hairy man bows his head. Then he turns away, and the next moment she can't see him. The bushes behind the house are as they always are. The little girl thinks that the man was strange, but she doesn't think that he was as scary as her aunty described him. She wonders if he lives by the river. She sits back down on the dusty ground and decides not to tell her aunty about the man. She knows her Aunty will be upset and make her stay inside. She stirs the ingredients in her pot.

-If you be a good girl, she says. -And eat up all y'supper, we go fly this evening.

She sits the dolly beside her and pretends to feed.

About the Author.

Lisa Levi is a Caribbean writer based in the UK. She is the author of **Journey as the Wire Bend up River Where the Story End** (2000), as well as short stories and poems.

Bushman was adapted and produced as an audio drama, **Neville: Bushman** in 2020. You can listen to **Neville: Bushman** or find more work by Lisa Levi at **river-stories.com**

A glossary of Caribbean words and terms can be found at **<https://river-stories.com/references-and-readings-caribbean-calypto/>**

Lost Chapter:

The Vision

Damn Monkey! Trailing me through the bush? Leave me! Cha! Grunt y'grunt, howl, y'howl. Y'noise don't change nothing. Howler monkey feel they can... Mash! Go. Go! What done done. Can't change. Ah Papa. Even in the bush. Man business is not monkey business. Mash! Go back and hide up in y'chenet tree! Dammit! Nothing coulda go different. Cha!

So I run. So what? Don't mean I ain no man. I run. Run. Run, from what they do Ruby. Run from Pearl eye. Had to run. All I was seeing. All I was feeling. Ruby and Pearl. Grief and guilt. Ah Papa. Ruby and Pearl. Sorrow and shame.

Run through the cemetery to get to the bush. Through the cemetery. Ah-ah. Not even looking. And m'foot catch up in a mango root. Hah. Nearly even fall in a open grave. Hah! Living running from the dead, papa.

But was a darkness chasing me. And a noise. Following me. Sound like, some kinda animal deading. Ah, papa. ...And was me. Me! Bawling so loud I sure the whole world shake. Hah. And I run, run like I sure I see the devil. Pearl boney finger and she accusing eye. I know I run up the ravine and cross the river. Run up hill. Run. And the ringing in m'head talking only one talk. Dead. Ruby. Dead. Rosemary. Dead. Dead. Soucouyah. Words hunting me down, papa. Pearl. Witch. Maljo. Hag. Jumbie. Dead.

Ahh, ahh, ahh. End up by Mam Schuck. The obeah woman. Hah. That is what they call her in town, -Mam Schuck the obeah woman. Never mean no respect by it. No respect. But is she save me.

Didn't even see the shack at first. Only notice the old ribbon tie up in the calabash tree. And the bamboo poles. Is only when I come round the pink poui tree I realise where it is. Place smell like sour mud and ripe banana. Hah. Nearly didn't go in, papa. But she was done standing in the door. Mam Schuck. Old. Bend up and old. But she eye shine. She head was tie up in a

white cloth, and she was wearing a long skirt like she just done mashing cocoa on the plantation. She raise she hand.

-Vini, vini. She tell me. -Vini manje.

And I follow her. Didn't have nowhere else to go. Went up the steps and inside the shack. And inside was dark. A table? A bed? Kinda see that. See a picture ah white Jesus and a picture ah black Mary on a wall. Don't really remember much else. Inside the house was dark.

And she take me outside, to the back ah the shack. Had some chicken pecking at the dirt ground. A big, old cast iron bowl. The kind they did use for boiling the sugar. Had some rows ah herbs and vegetable cultivating. Ahhh. And on the side ah them, had a big, wide hole in the ground. Big, bout three foot wide, and two foot deep... and bout six foot long. She lead me to the hole. Put her hand on m'head and say something. Don't remember the words. But, she tell me, have darkness riding me. Lanmo tale difini. Them words I remember. Death does come in threes.

So I drink the grugru tea from she boglet, and take a taste of the fowl and the rice, the coucou, and the goat she sacrifice. And she sing.

-Tin'a-O, Tin'a-go, Ni-go D'es et ai, Tin'a neye-ba.

And she give me bush bath. Beat me with the broom call the shey-shey-rey. Light a candle and burn a incense. By the time she tie the blue cloth over m'eyes and make me lie in the hole, I was ready. To bury on the mourning ground. She cover me with a old crocus bag and then scape dirt over it with a rake. Give me instruction to stay for three days, but I ain sure how long I was there for. All I could tell is what I see.

I see Mamie Rosa. Tears in her eye. She give me a hug in she strong arms, and she weep. Then she show me two paths leading into the bush. One going down. One going up. And she say it ain have no good choice in this life only a better one. Next thing, I on the path going up,

but the path rough, and stone and ting digging m'foot. And then I reach a river. And like river come down. The water brown, flowing fast, and all kinda branch and mud coming down in it. I see a coconut bounce past. And then just so the water rise up. And it take the shape ah Ruby. Was Ruby, yes, but not. Was the water still, dripping and flowing. And she reach she hand out and she grab me and pull me down into the river. Down, down to the bottom of the river.

And then was in a big house. Round, and make outta mud and river stone. I look in through the window and see Rosemary, sitting in a chair. And then I see Pearl. She was stand up in a corner behind Rosemary. Was dark and at first I didn't know what she was doing. She look strange, moving kinda awkward and funny, elbows out, hands behind her back. Is when she start pulling at the side ah she face I understand. She peeling she skin off, like if she peeling zaboca. And as the skin folding down, wasn't no blood and flesh underneath. Was like embers, red and black, like charcoal curing in the ground. And she step out the skin, and bend down, and roll it up, and put it under a floorboard.

Next thing I see was a ball ah fire fly up in the air, like a arrow of flames shoot up in the sky. And it disappear over the trees into the dark green shadows.

Then I see a flock a parrots, calling and shrieking as they fly out the trees. And as I watch them, I start to feel a sorrow and regret pressing down inside me chest. And I drop to the ground. And next thing, I lying on the ground and I looking up in the sky. And it clear and blue. Blue, blue. And three, eighteen, thirty-one cobeau circling round, like kite gliding on the wind. And then just so is cobeau drop down, big and ugly, with they grey vulture head looking like death. And they start pulling at m'flesh. All ah them crowding over me, pulling at m'flesh. Til I ain have no body left. Til I was just dry bone, lying on the ground.

And then the bay leaf tree shed she leaves down on me, and the roots of the tree twine up round me legs and arms and face and I become the earth and the roots and the rotting leaves. And I could feel the bachac ants stepping in m'eye, and the worms moving up m'throat and the jap spania wasp building nest in m'ears. And I get to know the forest.

WIRE BEND

STORY END