

said, his tone changing, 'You better come tomorrow with your hammer and fix that bench before somebody get kill!'

Ross had moved to the mirror and was looking at his head. Then he lowered himself into the barbering chair, 'You think you could give me a trim, Victory? I does really trim in Ayima, but I going to be up here now.'

'How you want it?' Victory asked, picking up the cloth once again.

'Now,' said Ross. 'It mustn't be too low. Cut down the sides, level off the back, and leave my nuff.'

Victory unfolded the cloth, went to the doorway and dusted it out, flop, flop, flop, then he came around behind Ross to pin the cloth around his neck. 'And, you know,' Victory said as he drew the ends of the cloth securely around Ross' neck, 'When you step through that door this morn-  
ing, I sure you was a fright.'

MARYSE CONDÉ (b. 1937)

## The Breadnut and the Breadfruit

Translated by Richard Philcox

I met my father when I was ten years old.

My mother had never uttered his name in my presence, and I had ended up thinking that I owed my life to her unbending will-power alone. My mother walked staunchly along life's straight and narrow path. Apparently she only strayed once to follow the unknown face of my father, who managed to seduce her before handing her back to a life of duty and religion. She was a tall woman and so severe she seemed to me to be devoid of beauty. Her forehead disappeared under a white and violet headtie. Her breasts vanished in a shapeless black dress. On her feet were a pair of plim-solls carefully whitened with blanc d'Espagne. She was laundress at the hospital in Capesterre, Marie-Galante, and every morning she used to get up at four o'clock to clean the house, cook, wash, iron, and goodness knows what else. At twenty to seven she would open the heavy doors after shouting:

'Sandra! I'm off!'

Twenty minutes later, our neighbor Sandra hammered on the dividing wall and yelled: 'Etiennise! Time to get up!'

Without further ado I would sit up on the mattress that I laid out each evening beside my mother's mahogany bed and reflect on the sullen day that lay ahead. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday were as alike as two pins. Things were different on Thursdays and Sundays because of catechism and Sunday school.

So when I was ten my mother bent her tall figure in two and came and sat down opposite me.

'Your father's a dog who'll die like a dog in the trash heap of his life. The fact is I have to send you to the lycée in Pointe-à-Pitre. I haven't got enough money to put you in lodgings. Who would lodge you, come to that? So I shall have to ask him.'

In one go I learned that I had passed my entrance exams, that I was going to leave my island backwater, and that I was going to live far from my mother. My happiness was so overwhelming that, at first, words failed me. Then I stammered out in a feigned sorrowful tone of voice: 'You'll be all by yourself here.'

My mother gave me a look that implied she didn't believe a word. I know now why I thought I hated my mother. Because she was alone. Never the weight of a man in her bed between the sheets drawn tight like those of a first communicant. Never the raucous laughter of a man to enlighten her evenings. Never a good fight in the early hours of the dawn! Our neighbors in tears would walk around with bruises, bumps, and split lips that spoke of pain and voluptuousness. But my mother, she modelled herself along the lines of Saint Thérèse de Lisieux and Bernadette Soubirou.

At that time—I'm talking about the end of the fifties—the town of Capesterre numbered a good many souls, how many I don't know exactly. Everything seemed drowsy. The teachers who had us recite 'the River Loire has its source in the Mont Gerbier-de-Jonc', the priests who had us stumble through 'One God in three distinct persons', and the town crier beating his drum 'Oyez, oyez!'

Only the sea, a crazed woman with eyes of amethyst, leapt in places over the rocks and tried to take men and animals alike by the throat.

Three times a week a boat left Grand Bourg, Marie-Galante, for the actual island of Guadeloupe. It was loaded with black piglets, poultry, goats, jerricans of 55% rum, matrons with huge buttocks and children in tears. One late September morning my mother made the sign of the cross on my forehead, kissed me sparingly, and entrusted me and my few belongings to the captain. Hardly had we left the jetty on which the crowd grew smaller and smaller than my joy gave way to a feeling of panic. The sea opened up like the jaws of a monster bent on swallowing us. We were sucked into the abyss, then vomited out in disgust before being dragged back again. This merry-go-round lasted an hour and a half. Women with rosaries in hand prayed to the Virgin Mary. Finally we entered the mauve waters of the harbor with Pointe-à-Pitre shining as a backdrop.

I spent three days without seeing my father, who was away 'on business' in Martinique. In his absence I got to know my stepmother, a small woman draped with jewelry and as rigid as my mother, as well as my half-sister, who was almost blonde in a pleated skirt. She ignored me disdainfully.

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When he leaned against the door of the cubby hole I had been allotted in the attic, it seemed to me that the day began to dawn on my life. He was a fairly dark-skinned mulatto whose curly hair had begun to grey. A web of wrinkles surrounded his dark grey eyes. 'What a damned Nègress your mother is, even so!' he laughed in a sparkle of teeth. 'She didn't even tell me you were born and now point blank she writes to make me "face up to my responsibilities". But I have to admit you're the spitting image of your father!'

I was terribly flattered I resembled such a handsome gentleman! Etienne Bellot, my father, came from an excellent family. His father had been a public notary. His elder brother had taken over his father's practice and his sister had married a magistrate. When at the age of twenty he had failed part one of the baccalauréat for the fourth time he had the brilliant idea of getting Larissa Valère, the only daughter of the big ironmonger on Market Square, with child. He was married off therefore in great pomp at the Cathedral of Saint Pierre and Saint Paul, four months before his daughter was due to be born, then appointed to replace his father-in-law who was getting on in years. Not for long! It was soon discovered that the daily takings of the ironmongery, substantial as they were, vanished into thin air among the men with whom he lost at cards in the bars of the Carénage district, the women he bedded just about everywhere, and the professional cadgers. Larissa therefore took her seat at the till and stayed there from that day on.

I was not the only illegitimate child of Etienne's, even though I was the only resident one. Oh no! After Sunday school there was a stream of boys and girls of every age and every color who came to greet their begetter and receive from the hand of Larissa a brand new ten franc note that she took out of a box specially reserved for this purpose. The stream dried up for lunch and siesta only to resume in greater force from four o'clock in the afternoon until night fall. My father, who never moved from his bed on Sunday, the Lord's Day, kept his bedroom door firmly closed, never letting a smile or a caress filter through.

In fact nobody found grace in his heart except for Jessica, my almost blonde half-sister whose grey eyes, the very image of her father's, seldom looked up from her twopenny novels. I soon learned that one of Etienne's mistresses had maliciously struck Larissa down with a mysterious illness that had laid to rest two other legitimate children—both boys—and that Jessica was the couple's greatest treasure.

Larissa must have been very lovely. Now gone to seed, there remained the fern-colored eyes behind her glasses and teeth of pearl that her smile

sometimes revealed. The only times she left the house were to sit straight-back at the till or to go to confession or mass. Up at four like my mother, Larissa, who had three domestics, would let no one iron her husband's drill suits, shirts, underwear, and socks. She polished his shoes herself. She prepared his coffee and served him his breakfast, the only meal he took at a fixed time. All day long he came and went, and his place remained set for hours on end while the ice turned to water in the little bucket next to his glass where the flies drowned themselves in despair. When he was at home, somebody would be waiting for him in the sitting room, on the pavement, at the wheel of a car, and he would hurry off to some mysterious rendezvous from which he returned late at night, always stumbling on the fifth stair that led to the first floor. I don't quite know how he became interested in me. For weeks he scarcely gave me a look and found it quite natural for me to be treated hardly better than a domestic, clad in Jessica's old dresses, wearing a worn-out pair of sandals and studying from her old books that were literally falling to pieces. On Sundays when Larissa was doing the distribution she used to give me two ten franc notes and I went to the 'Renaissance' to watch the American films in technicolor.

One day I was sitting in the yard studying for a poetry recitation. I remember it was a poem by Emile Verhaeren:

Le bois brûlé se fendillait en braises rouges  
Et deux par deux, du bout d'une planche, les gonges  
Dans le ventre des fours engouffraient les pains mous.

He loomed up beside me amidst a warm smell of rum, cigarettes, and Jean-Marie Farina eau de Cologne and tore the book from my hands.

'For God's sake! The rubbish those people teach you! Do you understand anything?'

I shook my head.

'Wait there. I've got just what you need!'

He plunged inside the house, stopping Larissa who was already busy laying the table: 'No, honey dear, I've no time to eat! Then he came back brandishing a little thin book: 'Now read that instead!' Larissa intervened and firmly took it out of his hands: 'Etienné! Don't fill that child's head with rubbish!'

I never did know what book my father wanted me to read, but strangely enough, from that day on the ice was broken. He got into the habit of stopping in the dining room near the corner of the table where I did my homework and leafing through my books, commenting: 'The Alps! What's got

into them to teach you about the Alps? I bet you don't even know the names of the mountains in this country of ours?'

'There's the Soufrière!'

'All right, next Thursday I'll take you to the Soufrière. We'll leave as soon as it's light. I'll take Jessica along too. It will do her good to get away from the twopenny romances by Delly and Max du Veuzit! Larissa, you'll prepare a picnic hamper for us.'

Larissa did not even bother to reply and went on checking the cook's accounts: 'A bunch of mixed vegetables for the soup. A bunch of chives. A box of cloves.'

I did not hold it against my father for not keeping his promises or for not turning up for his appointments. He was usually fast asleep when we were to leave at dawn. Or else he did not come home until midnight when we were supposed to go out in the evening.

No, I did not hold it against him.

If it had not been for him I would never have dreamed, imagined, hoped, or expected anything.

If it had not been for him I would never have known that mangoes grow on mango trees, that ackees grow on ackee trees, and that tamarinds grow on tamarind trees for the delight of our palates. I would never have seen that the sky is sometimes pale blue like the eyes of a baby from Europe, sometimes dark green like the back of an iguana, and sometimes black as midnight, or realized that the sea makes love to it. I would never have tasted the rose apples after a swim down by the river.

He actually only took me out once. One Saturday afternoon Larissa and Jessica had gone to pay a visit to the family and I was languishing away with one of the girl domestics who was as scared as I was in this old wooden house where the spirits were simply waiting for nightfall to haunt our sleep. My father burst in and stared at me in surprise.

'You're all alone?'

'Yes, Larissa and Jessica have gone to Saint-Claude.'

'Come with me.'

A woman was waiting for him on the other side of the Place de la Victoire: jet black with her lips daubed bright red and loops dancing in her ears.

'Whose child is that?' she asked in surprise.

'It's mine.'

'Larissa is really going too far. It wouldn't kill her to buy two yards of cotton! Look how the child's got up!'

My father looked at me and perhaps saw me for the first time in my

Cinderella rags. 'You're right,' he said, puzzled. 'How about buying her a dress at Sammyde's?'

They bought me a salmon taffeta dress trimmed with three flounces that clashed with my plimolls which nobody thought of changing. While we walked along, the woman undid my four plaits greased with palmachristi oil that were knotted so tightly they pulled back the skin on my forehead, and rearranged them in 'vanilla beans.' Thus transfigured, I took my seat in the motor coach, *Mary, Mother of All the Saints*, that rumbled off to Saint Rose.

Sabrina, who was heavy with child through the doings of Dieudonné, master sail-maker, was being married off. The priest, who was a good old devil, had closed his eyes to the bride's 'hummock of truth' and agreed to give the nuptial blessing.

The wedding ceremony was being held in a spacious house circled by a veranda and built somewhat negligently amidst a tangle of bougainvillea and allamanda a few feet from the sea that gave a daily show under the sun. A table several feet long had been set up under an awning of woven coconut palms stuck here and there with little bouquets of red and yellow flowers. In each plate the women were arranging piles of black pudding, as big as two fingers, together with slices of avocado pear. A band was already playing under a tree and the flute of the hills answered the call of the *ti-bwa* and the *gwo-ka*. I did not mix with the group of children as I thought their games quite insipid. I preferred to listen in on the conversation of the grown-ups whose coarse jokes I guessed without understanding them. That's how I found myself beside my father whose tongue had been loosened by too much rum:

'We don't get two lives Etienne. Down there under the ground there are no wooden horses and the merry-go-round has stopped turning. We're all alone, cramped in our coffins, and the worms are having a feast day. So as long as your heart keeps beating make the most of it. Don't take any notice of people who say: "Ah, what a bitch life is! A crazed woman who knows neither rhyme nor reason. She hits out right, she hits out left, and pain is the only reality." Let me tell you, that woman. . . . Unfortunatly somebody intervened and I never knew the end of the story. When my father returned his mind had turned to other things.

'My parents used to tell me: "We are mulattoes. We do not frequent niggers." I never understood why. My best friends are niggers you know. The first woman I made love to was a negress. What a woman! Ah, what a woman! When she opened her legs she swallowed me up! Your mother was the same. What a woman! Mme Delphine recommended her to Larissa for

the ironing as she did wonders with her instruments. And not only with them, believe me! Unfortunately, she had a serious frame of mind. Fat Lebris had filled her head with all sorts of tomfoolery about Mary and virginity. She used to sleep in the attic. The afternoon I set upon her in poverty-laying hands on the pauper she was reading "The Imitation of O Lord Jesus Christ." You should have heard her beg me: "Let me be, Monsieur Etienne, God will punish you. Let me be!" You bet if I let her be. . . . And instead of rebelling against the calvary of my poor ravished abk raped mother, I uttered a raucous laugh. I laughed chickenheartedly.

'Each time it was one hell of a job. I'm sure it was all pretense and I enjoyed it as much as I did. And then one morning she disappeared. Without a word of explanation. Without even asking for her wages. Larissa was furious. . . .'

Another crime to add to my list: I showed no signs of pity for my mother; neither for the terror of her discovery and her flight to her native island nor for the family lamentations, the neighbors' malicious gossip and that pathetic gesture to cover my illegitimacy, the name of Etienne's daughter of Etienne.

When we got home on Sunday around three o'clock in the afternoon Larissa, who had never raised a hand against me, gave me a thorough beating, claiming that I had lost my best school dress. I know what infuriated her; it was this growing intimacy with my father.

My mother saw it immediately. Hardly had I set foot on the jetty where she was waiting than she ran her eyes over me significantly and said 'You're very much his daughter now!'

I didn't answer. I spent the Christmas holidays barricaded behind the hostile silence that I had raised between us, the unjust cruelty of which only understood too late, much too late.

I didn't realize to what extent she was suffering. I didn't see the taut features of her face droop and slacken. The wheeze in her respiration, keeping back the grief, escaped my attention. Her nights were wracked with nightmares. In the mornings she would plunge into prayer.

The intimacy with my father soon took an unexpected turn from which I obviously did not dare shy away. He entrusted me with little notes to hand to all the girls at the lycée who had caught his eye.

'Give this from me to that little yellow girl in the fourth form.'

'And this one to the tall girl in the second form.'

It soon became a genuine commerce of billets-doux. You would never imagine how ready they were, these young girls from a reputable family

seen at church on Sundays, closely chaperoned by father, brothers, and mother and stumbling with beatitude on their return from the altar, how ready they were to listen to the improper propositions of a married man with a reputation.

I devised a daring technique. I would approach the coveted prey while she was chatting with her classmates in the school yard. I would stand squarely in front of her and hand her the note folded in four without saying a word. Somewhat surprised, but unsuspecting, she would take it from me, open it, start to read and then blush deeply as far as the color of her skin would let her. My father did not exactly treat the matter lightly.

My little darling,  
Ever since I saw you on the Place de la Victoire I have been madly in love with you. If you do not want to have a death on your conscience meet me tomorrow at 5 p.m. on the second bench in the allée des Yeuxes. I'll be waiting for you with a red dahlia in my buttonhole. . . .  
Waiting for an answer in which I hope you will accept.

The effect of such an epistle was radical. Before class was over the victim would hand me a folded sheet accepting the rendezvous.

While I was in form three a new pupil arrived, Marie-Madeleine Savigny. She had just arrived from Dakar where her father had been a magistrate and her African childhood had given her an aristocratic languor. She called her sandals 'samaras' and her mother's domestics 'boyesses.' Every able-bodied man in Pointe-à-Pitre was eaten up with desire for her, and my father more than the rest.

When I brought her the traditional billet-doux she cast her hazel eyes over it and without a moment's hesitation tore it up, scattering the pieces of paper at the foot of a hundred-year old sandbox tree. My father did not consider himself beaten. With me as the go-between he returned to the attack the next day and the next. By the end of the third week Marie-Madeleine had not given an inch while my father was an absolute wreck. Back home on time he would be watching for me from the balcony and then rush down the stairs as impetuous as a teenager.

'Well?'  
I shook my head. 'She won't even take the letter from me.'

His face dropped and he became the outrageously spoiled little boy he had once been. He had been his mother's favorite, his grandmother's; his father's sisters and his mother's sisters, who showered him with kisses, turned a blind eye to his caprices and called him voluptuously 'Ti-mal'. In June Marie-Madeleine caused a stir by not entering for part one of the

baccalauréat. A few weeks later we learned she was to marry Jean Burin Rosiers, the fourth son of a rich white creole factory owner. Great was the support! What! A white creole to marry a colored girl? And not even mulatto into the bargain! For although he was a magistrate, Mr Sav was but a common copper-colored nigger! As for the mother, she was coolie! Such an event had not occurred since 1928, the year of the terrible hurricane, when a Martin Saint Aurèle had married a Negress. But family had turned their backs on him and the couple had lived in poverty whereas the Burin des Rosiers were welcoming their daughter-in-law with open arms. The world was completely upside down!

Everyone had just regained their calm when Marie-Madeleine, who no longer needed to lace herself up in corsets, exhibited at least a six-month old belly in her flowing flowery silk dresses.

My father joined in the rush for the spoils. In the middle of a circle of lecherous listeners I heard him recount, without ever trying to deny the fact, how he had tasted Marie-Madeleine's secret delights but unlike her had not let himself be caught red-handed.

I spent an awful summer holiday on Marie-Galante. Since I was soon to enter the lycée in the rue Achille René-Boismenuf and take physics chemistry with the boys, my mother got it into her head to make me a wardrobe of clothes. She went down to the Grand Bourg where she bought yards of material, patterns, marking crayon, and a pair of tailor's scissors. . . . Every day when she came back from the hospital there were unending fitting sessions. I could not bear the touch of her fidgety hands and her grumbling: 'This side hangs all right. Why doesn't the other do the same?'

On Sunday, August 15, I refused to accompany her in the flared dress was so proud of. She looked me straight in the eyes: 'If you think he will give you why doesn't he pay for your dresses?'

It was true that for the three years or so I had been living with my father I had never seen the color of his money, except for Larissa's two brand-new notes. I was doomed to gaze from afar at the books in bookshops, the perfume in the perfume shops, and the ice creams at the ice-cream parlor.

Whenever she had the opportunity, my mother sent me two or three dirty banknotes with a note that always read: 'I hope you are keeping your affectionate maman, Nisida.'

I was thus able to buy my exercise books and pens and fill my ink with blue ink from the seas of China.

When school started again in October my father stopped his traffic of billers-doux. I felt so frustrated, deprived as I was of my mean little mission as a go-between, that I would have gladly drawn his attention to the pretty chicks (that's how he used to call them) who scratched around untouched in the school yard. I soon discovered the key to the mystery. He had fallen head over heels in love with the very pretty wife of a Puerto Rican tailor by the name of Artemio who had opened his small shop on the rue Rébaul. Lydia was a righteous woman. Or perhaps quite simply she did not like my father. She talked freely to her husband of these constant advances that troubled her, and the husband, hoththeaded as Latins are wont to be, resolved to give the brazen fellow a lesson he would not forget. He hired the services of three or four bullies, one of whom was a former boxer nicknamed 'Doudou Sugar Robinson.' They lay in wait one evening for my father while he was striding across the Place de la Victoire and left him lifeless at the foot of a flame tree. Around midnight Larissa was presented with an inert, bloodstained body. Transfigured, she swooped down on her husband, who was finally at her mercy. For weeks it was a constant traffic of herb teas, poultices, frictions with arnica and pond leeches destined to suck out the bad blood. Once the doctor had turned his back carrying off his sulfamamides, in came the *obeah* man with his roots. Every Sunday after the high mass the priest popped in to describe the flames of hell to the notorious sinner.

My father never recovered from this misadventure. In his enthusiasm, Doudou Sugar Robinson had fractured his eyebrow, crushed his nasal bone and broken his jaw in three places. All this knitted together again very badly and the good souls of Pointe-à-Pitre shook their heads: 'God works in mysterious ways! And he used to be such a handsome man!'

But above all, it was his pride and his morale that took a beating. My father realized he had become a laughingstock. He became easily offended and susceptible. He quarrelled with his best friends. He lost that vitality that had made him so popular with the ladies. He became sad, vindictive, and whimpering.

As for me, with the typical cruelty of teenagers, I hastened to keep my distance from the hero who was no longer a hero and who shuffled around harking back to his former conquests. I began to look at him in a new light. What exactly was he worth?

I was pondering upon this when I learned that my mother had been taken to the hospital.

Less than one year later she died of cancer, having hidden the first symptoms from everyone.

## Altamont Jones

'If you don't want to live here you can blasted well leave, you know?'

Her voice was high-pitched and tuneless. Somehow I felt this was beginning, not an ending, so I slackened my pace.

'Every night you come een ere wid you face mek up like you smel something ar you jaw puff out like frag a go chin cucubeh. Mi tiad fih lool pan sour face. A bet a no so you sour up wen you a gaah upstairs Maas Isaac shap to dat dyan red gal!'

I couldn't hear any response. I knew there was none. I couldn't see any thing, so I couldn't judge the sourness of the face. But everything seemed clear to me. He was trying to be good tonight. He had come home. He hadn't gone to the damn red girl. He had hoped to be greeted with a smile and perhaps a hot meal and eventually to improve on the awful mood he had brought from the job.

I could imagine the man establishing a mental distance between himself and the trade. My mind flashed back to a Canadian city, a bus stop or a cold pavement and a woman, dancing round an impassive man, pointing her index finger in his face and screaming angrily in French while he stared stonily into space. This local counterpart was probably staring into space and focusing totally on the red girl. She wasn't pretty; cute perhaps but not pretty. She never even offered him anything to eat. She would offer him a cigarette, his brand, and curl up in a chair across from him. Come to think of it there was never a bite of food in sight. He could have a cup of coffee if he wished, nothing else. Perhaps she always ate before he came perhaps she ate in a restaurant; he didn't know and he didn't care. He went to her for peace and he got it. He wouldn't pretend he didn't get anything else . . . but so what? No big deal! The big deal was her silence, like a cat, even her slippers were soft so when she moved about, the few times she moved about, it was soundless and unobtrusive.

'Yes, you nat answerin', the high-pitched female voice continued. 'I know dih trick so dat everybody will seh I am a virago an you are a nice quiet man. All dih same you cyan fool dem; far everybody know seh saaffi tivva run deep; ih hln, deep an dutty?'