

CHAPTER 1 – AN ARRIVAL

I arrived in Macaima in September, 1963. Petit Careme season. The island was one year a nation, free to practice what it meant to have a flag to hoist and an anthem to sing. We had a prime minister, a government sitting inside the Red House; our Governor General became a citizen. That year, too, we had retrenchment in the oil sector and disgruntled sugar workers triggered a series of union-led strikes not seen since the Water Riots. The PM, in an effort to take control, ordered a Commission of Inquiry to sniff out subversion in the ranks of the trade union movement. That September, four girls died in the bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, and hurricane Flora mashed up Tobago. In October, Mandela went on trial in South Africa; Cuba was in the midst of the missile crisis; nine Vietnamese monks were killed for flying their Buddhist flag; Martin Luther King delivered his *I Have a Dream* speech at the Lincoln Memorial; John F. Kennedy was assassinated; C.L.R. James published *Beyond a Boundary*; the Mighty Sparrow was crowned king of Carnival with “Dan is de Man”; the Beatles and Doris Troy had number one hits with “Love Me Do” and “Just One Look”; Elizabeth Taylor starred in *Cleopatra*; a woman was arrested and released without charge for selling souse and black pudding on a pavement in San Fernando; and a man was murdered on his hospital bed.

It was Sunday, midmorning. The village was deserted. I had no clue what I was coming to, but Macaima was where I had landed the job as temporary postmistress. People from town would be quick to ask: *Macaima, where on earth is that? No place on this island call by that name.* Maybe so, but I was there. See me, Annabelle

Bridgemohan, who had spent all my life in bright-lights Port of Spain, waiting on a junction for a Mr Elton, whom I had never met but who had promised to get me settled in the rental where I would spend the agreed-upon year.

I had done a three-year stint at the Port of Spain head office, though it seemed like an age. I needed more than a change of scenery or pace; whether Macaima would give it I hadn't a clue. *Life is a decision to live* my mother said to me when I told her I had accepted the Macaima post. She collected maxims like that. Maybe she had discovered what they meant. I did not want to live her life. When I landed the job at head office, the first thing I did was to rent a one-bedroom apartment on the edge of the city; small, but it was my space.

Until my arrival on Macaima Junction with nothing but my two suitcases, I hadn't realised that those words were still mine to learn. I was twenty-four and adrift. My relationship with my boyfriend Miles had come to a painful end; he had become increasingly bitter about my decision to end things between us and what he considered my unforgivable crime in choosing not to have our baby; my friend Thea had left the island for graduate school in the States and I could no longer put up with the conspiratorial climate in the office as management tried to fend off unionisation with divide and rule tactics. When I arrived in Macaima, I felt no more real than a ghost left over from another life.



Neville, the driver I had hired for the trip, pulled up alongside a shop on the Macaima junction and parked under its eave to escape the sun. He stretched in his seat, pushing against the backrest so much that I had to shift my legs sideways. He glanced back with slight amusement, his arm extended along the backrest.

– Miss, yuh sure is here you suppose to wait for... What he name again?

– Mr Elton. Yes. He said the shop on the junction. So I guess this is it.

– Well it look like he forget. This place deader than midnight grave.

– Give him a few minutes more. He said he would be here.

The repeat was more for my benefit than Neville's. He looked doubtfully at the empty road ahead and then at me.

– Okay, but I have to head back.

I sighed.

– Doh stress. I operate professional. I not going to leave you here stranded. Where is here again?

He didn't wait for an answer and seemed happy to fiddle with his radio. Static crackled. It was not long before he gave up and dozed off. With nothing else to do but wait, I tried to map Macaima's layout from what I could see. The junction was not a full crossroads, but a Y, formed by the arm of the road that broke off from the main road and travelled up into the hills. It was obviously the hub around which everything was arranged: shop, hardware, warden's office, post office, police station, and school – all sporting weather-beaten string pennants in the national colours, leftovers from the Independence Day celebrations. Everything looked, as you'd expect, closed for the day, including *Johnny's Shop and Bar*. The signage was sprawled across wooden, double doors and competed for visibility with all manner of advertisements: Coca-Cola, Guinness, Bata, Nestlé's Sweetened Condensed Milk, Trinidad Orange Juice, Holiday Foods, Solo – so the shop name could only be read when the doors were closed. Maybe it didn't matter. Competition can't have been a concern.

Everywhere burst with the verdant green of the wet season. Dog-bark and cockcrow, a ground dove's mourning call, tree-speak, river and sea-wash produced the sense of being looked at and listened to. I focused on the deserted road ahead, drawn to the point of light at the road's turn, where it disappeared. From the distance of the shop, you couldn't be sure whether the road curved inland and continued on or came to an abrupt end. At that point, the sky brightened so intensely it both attracted and disturbed the eye. The village was coastal and its elevation drew the eyes to the sea's expanse, a borderless zone that gave the illusion that the land was continuous with sky.

I did not see when the man appeared at the junction. He leaned against the dazzle of galvanized sheets that partitioned a gateway at the side of the shop, apparently waiting for something or someone. It was not long before I discovered what: a package

passed through a square opening cut into the sheeting. The man put some bills into the hand of whoever had served him and said something as he stuffed what looked like a flask wrapped in newspaper into his back pocket. The exchange awakened Neville, who assessed the scene from his rear-view mirror and slapped the dashboard knowingly.

– Big Sunday, but he too thirsty to wait!

Neville turned so that he could face me with that slight glow of amusement on his face I had come to recognise. He tapped his wristwatch. Time was up. The face of the shiny silver Timex with a black band was gently rubbed clean on the sleeve of a cotton shirt, densely populated with colourful parrots. Along with his black slacks, it was no doubt his self-prescribed uniform. I had learnt, on the way in, that he also worked the airport. Money was good driving tourists to and from their hotels for greens.

– Time to head out, Miss. I on the clock.

I looked about the junction. The man who had made the purchase was casually looking our way.

– Is not my business, Miss, but I hope yuh didn't come quite here to take flambeau to see in daylight what already in plain sight.

He grinned sheepishly.

– Why would you say that? You don't know a thing about me.

– Is only joke I joking.

Neville shook his head and focused all his attention on wiping, yet again, the Morris's already immaculate dashboard. I had overreacted, but I didn't want to give him the impression that he could voice his assumptions and opinions without rein. One thing I had learnt from Thea was to draw the line when it came to what she called *protecting the sanctity of your soul case*. And she was right. I second guessed all my gut reactions – a symptom, she joked, of unclear politics. Already I missed her, but the plans she had for her life meant leaving the island to further her studies; and I had been, at the time, committed to my relationship with Miles.

The man who had been at the galvanized gate was now perched dangerously on a broken chair he had propped up against the shop, making himself a brazen spectator of our waiting. Neville was growing restless. The plush crimson fabric of the seat-cover, which had irritated my legs and arms for the entire journey, was

fast becoming intolerable. I shifted to the opposite side of the car. Neville noticed and ventured another more cautious question.

– You want me to ask if he know about your concern?

He indicated the man on the chair. I looked at the man, now clouded in exhaled smoke.

– I sure Mr Elton will be here.

Neville checked his watch. I was pushing my luck but I had picked up that Neville was not unreasonable.

– Okay, but five minutes is all I have.

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Punctuality was important to Neville's service. His newspaper ad had offered in bold type: **Prompt, Reliable Transport. Any Place. Any Time.** As promised, he arrived exactly at ten o'clock and parked his black Morris at the front gate. When I emerged from the house and shut the door behind me, I could see his curiosity piqued as he moved briskly to relieve me of my luggage, making sure that I was well settled into the backseat before taking his place at the wheel. He glanced at the front door expectantly and then back at me.

– Like yuh travelling solo, Miss?

I nodded. He bounced the starter and then turned to fix his gaze on me as if to be sure I was committed to my departure. I focused on the road ahead and he followed my lead, adjusting himself in his seat before manoeuvring the car onto the street. We drove towards the arc of the Queens Park Savannah. Traffic was Sunday morning easy. There were a few joggers and strollers. Most people were probably in their houses, post-church, post-market. Maybe they were reading newspapers, preparing for the midday meal, packing a car for the beach.

We passed the line of mansions, the Botanical Gardens, then the Governor General's house where pennants in the national colours flapped in the breeze. Later that evening crowds would gather for the special independence celebration concert. Maybe Miles, Yolanda, James and the rest of the gang from the office would be there. My stomach had cramped as Neville negotiated the roundabout to the Lady Young Road and climbed the mountain through Morvant after passing the spot called *the lookout*.

Miles had once parked there to show me the city at night. It was breathtaking – the pulsing lights, the silver platter of the Gulf

where ships from all over the globe sat waiting their turn to offload at the port. I knew so little of the world, those places that the island was connected to by years and years of trade, and how trade was what began us as a place.

As we travelled south, the realisation that I was shifting worlds sank in. I had left nothing behind but the empty rooms where I had lived for the last three years; all my ghosts were with me. Macaima was the future, or so I tried to reassure myself. Mrs Bailey from Appointments had handled my transfer and provided what she could as a general guide to the village. She had never been there herself but was certain that we would find it with little trouble. The village was on the southern coast, closer to the eastern peninsula, but had to be reached from the western end. On the eastern side, the coastal road through Mayaro and Guaya came to an abrupt end long before it reached Macaima, so the only access by car was from the west. Her help for getting me settled there included making phone contact with this Mr Elton. He was a friend of a friend who would be able to assist me with a decent rental for the year. She was right. Mr Elton, who was the warden in the district, was more than willing to help and had promised to meet me at the junction on the day of my arrival.

The trip to Macaima was a welcome challenge to Neville and, although it was his first time there, he didn't seem to need directions. He drove instinctively, making good time by first heading south towards San Fernando, then cutting through Ste Madeleine and Princes Town, not seeming to mind the winding roads, the potholes and the endless terrain of green, broken only by a few villages and scattered farms. He talked with enthusiasm about cricket, politics, religion; he whistled plaintive songs I could not name – or listened to the radio, upping the volume whenever a calypso aired.

Neville needed no audience. His own enthusiasm was entertainment and affirmation enough. I didn't mind. He kept my thoughts at bay. As we were breezing through deep country, and the road stretched on and on, he adjusted his rear-view mirror so that I was in full focus. He had a question:

– Miss, who yuh running from? I go come myself and brace him. No joke!

He posed so playfully and so poignantly that a laugh burst from me. He winked knowingly into his rearview, and with no more than a breath, moved on share that his father used to help prepare the pitch at the Oval, and that he could still get him a free pass to any match.

– I know all-dem fellas: Sobers, Worrell, Kanhai... Nevo is how they call me.

I let him run on as he skipped through anecdotes that included his last daughter, Ria. He told with unrestrained pride how she loved water and that he was teaching her to swim.

– She is a little fish. Smart too bad!

He explained, too, with enough detail to wake up hunger, the correct way to cook curry duck.

– Plenty people make mistake and think coconut milk or chadon beni is my secret ingredient. All dem thing important, but that is not it. Is not even pepper – though scotch bonnet is essential. How to cook a good curry duck is to slow-stew yuh pot. If yuh have to add water, use only spring. Fresh. Nothing else.

He glanced back.

– Guess where I learn that from?

He didn't need a response.

– River lime.

He laughed good-naturedly, enjoying his own narration, and reached into the glove compartment. That was the first appearance of the neatly folded orange dust-cloth, which he slid almost lovingly along the already oiled dashboard.

– I bet you cyah guess why my car so nice-an-shiny?

Before providing his answer, he worked his way with a single, uninterrupted swipe from his side to the passenger's, following the contours of the surface, then folded the cloth and put it away.

– River water. No chlorine to leave spot on yuh vehicle. Now listen to this one. Is good advice. Drink cocoa tea, pure ground when nighttime come. That good for any heart condition and yuh sleep like baby.

His revelations, I felt, was his way of saying his place had taught him what he needed to know.

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When my five minutes grace was up, Neville again indicated that

he was ready to leave. We both knew that his remark about my being forgotten by Mr Elton had unmasked my earlier efforts to sidestep his questions about my move to Macaima. He sighed deeply and scanned the junction once more.

– Miss, I going to have to leave you here.

I got out of the car, perhaps too abruptly. He had been more than generous with his time but I was anxious about being left alone. He went to the rear and removed my luggage from the trunk. The lid held shut after two forceful slams. He noticed that I had jumped at the noise.

– Lock problems.

I managed a smile as he deposited the suitcases close to where I stood.

– I have to make tracks – wedding in Carapichaima. I driving for some aunties and I done get warn not to be late. I drive them maticoor night, too. They not easy. Yuh ever went – maticoor?

– No, I haven't.

He feigned disbelief.

– Nah, Miss. Bacchanal fuh so! Yuh should go one. It guarantee to relax yuh stress – so I hear. Anyway, Miss, I gone. Things go work out.

He cleared his throat.

– Yes, they will, Neville. Safe trip back.

He hopped into the driver's seat.

– Call me whenever yuh ready to leave inside here. I go be on time, and on spot.

To the man seated on the broken chair, he hailed jovially:

– Soldier, watch-out for d-lady. She waiting on somebody.

The man saluted and the radio in the Morris, which had lost and regained the station's signal countless times on the way in, suddenly came alive. Neville upped the volume. The speakers blasted – *Dr. Kitch, dis is terrible...* He howled with delight.

– Oh LAARD! *Dat* is tune!

– Play it Mr Dri-VA. Play I-T.

Neville complied. The request came from a woman who had entered the junction balancing a heavy load on her head. She carried herself with a straight back, her neck long and perfectly aligned, and even in clumsy tall tops she walked with sass, moving

easily into a rhythmic chip, waist turning, shoulders moving as she went on her way, but not before her comeback:

– Bring it Dr Kitch. I more than A-ble!

Neville bawled again and made a perfect U-turn along the road that had brought us into the village, leaving me at the junction with the lyrics of “The Needle” playing on.