

Toronto; classmates and professors wrote of their sadness at the loss of so much potential.

Andrew wrote.

A short sweet tentative note. He told me to have courage, in that halting awkward way of his. His letter made me think of winter, of Canada, the bracing cold, the anonymous order. I put off writing him back. He wrote again. He gave me his telephone number and said, if I ever felt like it to call, collect. I sent him a card at Christmas. He cabled me on my birthday and he managed to get fresh flowers delivered to me.

I like Andrew, I like his decency. I know he loves me. I care, but I don't love him. I could never love him . . . not with all of my heart.



A flashing relay on the overhead monitor says that Lily's flight has just landed. The crowd of greeters surges towards the glass sliding doors. There is movement behind, of officials, and a false start of expectancy as a maintenance crew emerges.

I am with my back secure against a pillar and eyes front. I continue to review the long division of the past six years, the deep root of my feeling for Lily is still irrational. All my expectations are trained on those doors that open by magic.



Johnny's family sent a delegation to insist I come and go up country for a visit. I went for a weekend to star in a comedy of errors. They, in all their up country pragmatism, had made a match for me with one of Johnny's cousins, a young lawyer. They made it clear that he was quite a catch for an ageing widow like me.

Johnny, you always said, 'We only make the choices that we can live with.' Why couldn't I settle back into the lurching insolvency of Guyana like you? With you. Canada was a red flag that I waved between us, at our marriage. For that I feel guilt, for that, Johnny See, I am sorry. But of all the things I have felt in my life, regret is the worst.

That Sunday night as soon as I got back to Georgetown I sat down and wrote Andrew a letter. I told him I was coming up to Toronto for a visit. And I asked if he could meet me at the airport.

Mesdames et Messieurs.

We have just landed.

Bienvenue au Canada.

## JAMES BERRY

### *Miss Dorcas*

Like all other property owners on the island, Mr William Brooker lived on a hill. His home was named The Haven. High above the main road it looked down haughtily, dazzling the eyes with its whiteness in the sun, far from the clatterings of the village. In clear view, only half a mile away, the sea stretched wide and blue to the skyline. When the sea gave a breeze, the gaily striped awnings heaved around the veranda and the neat bougainvillea arbours waved a bloom of bright red in front of The Haven. Here, in the distant past, Miss Dorcas had lived for eleven years. Now that Mr Brooker had heard that she had been buried he told his gardener he wanted the carpenters to demolish her cottage straight away.

The gardener understood: nothing of Miss Dorcas's memory should be left visible. The gardener galloped off on the big bay horse towards the district. The road divided Mr Bill's vast acres of coconut palms, pimento, logwood, lime trees and his grassland cattle. At the extreme end of the property the gardener pulled up the powerful horse and dismounted. He held the reins and climbed up on to the road banking and stood on clean-trodden ground.

Children and adults alike had always stood here at the fence to have a peep at the strange Miss Dorcas. Fenced round inside the property, on its hand-sized area of land, her two-roomed and box-like cottage was almost hidden. Overgrown hibiscus and crotons thickly knotted practically concealed the little place that cows, horses, mules, donkeys grazed round. And because she kept her gate barricaded, even food supplies – delivered by a village grocer, paid for by Mr Bill – had to be left over the fence.

Peeping through the foliage, the gardener saw, as he well knew, that the resident lady was not there. The place still had its plaited weeds. Its dug stones or stones merely collected were still there, arranged into their many sculpture-like heaps. The many wreaths of leaves were there laid at the roots of shrubs and at the custard apple and soursop trees. She had sometimes grown vegetables to their full maturity; other times she had pulled them up and replanted them constantly. It was believed also

that sometimes her little home had been chaotic with everything scattered everywhere; other times it had been spotless and completely orderly. In the same pattern, sometimes she would be seen in dirty rags; other times she would be fully dressed in her best clothes, with her hair styled and all her beauty aids on. Dressed up like that, she used to sit outside in the wickerwork chair, rocking, stroking her cat, singing:

*Mr Bill, Mr Bill, Mr Bill  
I wish your colour would change  
Mr Bill, Mr Bill, Mr Bill  
I wish your colour would change  
From a backra boy to a darky boy  
I wish your colour would change . . .*

The gardener remembered standing right here watching Miss Dorcas rock and sing her song over and over till darkness covered her. And each time he had left her there still singing.

The gardener turned, leapt directly on to the horse's back, shook the reins and galloped away fiercely. Coming towards the village, he turned off the main road. The sweating horse blasted loose stones behind it along the rough uphill road until it was pulled up on level ground at the cemetery.

Miss Dorcas's grave was by the roadside. The gardener took off his cap. He sat there on the horse staring at the heap of freshly turned-over red dirt that had given space to Miss Dorcas in the ground. He imagined the tallish white-haired lady nailed up in the wooden box, cold and silent. From his early childhood Miss Dorcas had been a legend to his village people. When he started at The Haven, though there was no need for it, she herself had given him his first meal in the kitchen. Within a few months she had left, had to leave. He had only known her kind, approachable. The gardener turned the horse round and thundered away as ferociously as before, this time going on Mr Bill's errand.

When he came back to The Haven with the carpenter's reply he saw that Mr Bill was uneasy. He was pacing up and down the red-tiled veranda. The gardener hid behind the arbour. Between the clustered bougainvillaea he fixed his eyes on Mr Bill: a hairy and tropic-tanned arm was fastened in the pocket of his khaki shorts while the other clutched his pipe to his mouth. He was obviously distressed. The gardener's eyes gleamed between the small leaves. This man has every right to suffer, he thought. Let his conscience eat him up like ants feeding on the heart of a tree gone bad. He wouldn't disturb him. The

gardener looked behind him and edged away under the eaves of the house and went to the backyard. He sat down on the grass he had mowed two hours before under the branches of the spreading flame tree.

Miss Dorcas's death had stirred the gardener to an unexpected rage beyond his grief. Her death seemed to challenge him with a new and reckless kind of responsibility. He felt pressed there was something for him to do about it. He wiped his hairless brown face with his damp cap. He could taste old sweat mixed with the new, knowing his forehead would soon be damp again. Thoughtfully he raised his head and looked out towards the hill covered with rows of coconut trees. A wide field of hot air shimmered like the ripples of a stream. Cows lazily chewed their cud while the faint breeze stirred a ghostly shadow of coconut leaves over them in the afternoon sun.

The gardener clasped his thigh. Some burrs caught in the frazzled ends of his short trousers had pricked him. He began picking out the burrs with new anger. Mr Bill had given him these cast-off trousers. They were too large, in waist, buttocks and thigh. Mr Bill was like that: he didn't give you anything new or good. He tossed people away when they'd given him their best. Poor Miss Dorcas was caught with that.

Everybody in the district knew Miss Dorcas was the best-looking among all other girls. All the men of his father's time said so. Knowing how to be warm and modest, rounded and curved in all the right places, she was the most appealing from Negril to Morant Point, they all said. Her deep brown eyes, her voice, her smiles and slim legs carried her like a princess. Though living alone with her poor granny, she was kept and shaped with a certain kind of pride, everybody said.

Miss Dorcas could have married Mr Felix King, the Parochial Board representative, a man who these days owned lands from mountain to sea and took truckfuls of coconuts and bananas to market, but her granny threw him out. She could have married Mr Walter Hoffman the tax collector but her granny threw him out. The Reverend's son had eyes on Miss Dorcas but her granny put him off. All the other men who hung around with their favours and gifts practically came to blows with Granny. Then Granny got Miss Dorcas a place at the backra-house, saying: she wants her only person in the world to do things nicely, to learn to be respectable and be respected, to get away from all no-good man-hawks. — on sharks.

Miss Dorcas had been quick to learn and Mr Bill had been quick to notice her. He watched her in the garden, about the house and about his meal table. Miss Dorcas began to have supper with him and he began to go to her separate quarters at night. Mr Bill gave Miss Dorcas a room in

The Haven. She took on management of the servants and everything and became the mistress of the household.

Then Mr Bill wanted to marry a backra girl. The man arranged with friends in town to take Miss Dorcas among their servants. When he broke the news to her Miss Dorcas leapt on the backra man like a wild cat. Next day, a dramatically changed person, she was taken to hospital. And Miss Dorcas never recovered from her derangement. After months in hospital she came out with every hair on her head gone white.

Only a black cat Miss Dorcas asked to have from The Haven; and it would seem only a fortnight or so before her death the last of its descendants died.

Uncannily, Miss Charlotte came into the gardener's head. He remembered the time Miss Charlotte had called him to saddle her horse without any previous warning. He didn't see how it was connected to Miss Dorcas and abandoned the thought. In fact there was a connection.

Mrs Brooker had been sitting on the veranda of The Haven. She had read through the day's newspaper and other newspapers and magazines from England. It was before lunch, not time for an afternoon nap. Her finger- and toenails had been reddened and her fair hair washed. The sun poured down wonderfully over the well-kept lawn and garden, over the tops of trees down to the sea. Mr Brooker was out on the property somewhere. In her white playsuit she felt immaculate and lovely but bored. An irritation suddenly seized her and then a drive for adventure, for mischief, for anything. It struck her: for all the six years she had lived at The Haven she'd never seen Dorcas. She called the gardener and told him to saddle her pony.

On her own, Mrs Brooker rode a short way along the drive of royal palms then turned right through the gate and came into the property.

She rode slowly through animals and the shadows of coconut palms, down the hill, and came to Miss Dorcas's cottage fence. She dismounted, tethered the horse and stayed outside the wild hedge and called, 'Dorcas! . . . Dorcas! . . . Dorcas! . . .'

Miss Dorcas came slowly along a track under the tall shrubs and stopped, staring at Mrs Brooker, the strange fair-haired lady dressed in white.

'How are you, Dorcas? . . . Managing? . . . I am the lady at The Haven these days . . . ' Mrs Brooker became engrossed, absorbing the strange figure and presence. Barefooted, Miss Dorcas was dressed in a long robe-like dress, made of dry leaves. Her hat was also made of

leaves. 'So, you are Dorcas!' Mrs Brooker said to herself. 'Wish we could talk.'

Voluntarily, Miss Dorcas came closer slowly till she held the wire fence. Both women faced each other closely. Steady and strangely calm-looking, Miss Dorcas's eyes were as clear as a child's. Intense, the blue eyes were busy, trying to assess the confronted oddity. 'Dorcas. As woman to woman, I want to ask you something . . . Is it — is it true you had three miscarriages — fathered by Mr Bill? . . . Is it true? . . . ' It seemed Miss Dorcas searched herself. She slowly looked away and down. 'Is it true? Try and remember . . . You'd know who told me. Someone who's become a friend. But nobody at the house will say . . . You see, knowing could help me. I want to have children and used to think the fault was his. Will you try and remember, Dorcas? Will you? And tell me? . . . '

Miss Dorcas slowly lifted her head, stared at Mrs Brooker and turned away, towards the open sunlight round her cottage door.

Mrs Brooker remounted the horse. She cantered away over the hill and said nothing to Mr Brooker about her visit.

The gardener groaned a sigh. Village people believed Miss Dorcas was not yet forty years old. It was odd too that nobody pushed their way in to assist her. He remembered that Miss Dorcas had really belonged to Mr Bill and Mr Bill was not part of the village. He remembered that his own father secretly took fruits and vegetables and left them over the fence for Miss Dorcas and sometimes she did not touch them. Suddenly apprehension seized the gardener: suppose it wasn't Miss Dorcas that worried and bothered Mr Bill! Suppose the man didn't have any conscience at all!

Presently Mr Bill's great voice came bellowing over the backyard. Because the gardener had not reported back to him from the carpenter he was wild. Then the gardener's face showed so much pleasure that it irritated and added more to Mr Bill's fury. Mr Bill roared at him, wanting to know how soon the carpenters would smash down the building and have the fence and overgrowth cleared. They would come in the morning, the gardener told him. Mr Bill puffed his pipe and walked away.

The gardener caught hold of the lawnmower and gave it a great push. He whistled a joyful hymn as the mower ripped through the grass.