

one or two more times but he couldn't raise himself to take the bait. Beepat began to get silent.

Benjie had a bad case of sugar and it had got to the time when the doctors couldn't even slow down the ravages of the disease. The legs were going bad. They had to operate and cut and try to keep the rest of Benjie whole. But the sickness was too far gone and Benjie was too old. You can't only live on strong will. In the last month they cut him down four times, but he still hung on. The first time Beepat made a joke at Benjie's expense, but after that he didn't make any more jokes. Every time they cut Benjie, Beepat grew more quiet. The whole ward grew silent: no more Benjie and Beepat rowing. The time for that was over.

When they cut Benjie for the fourth time they brought him back up to the ward with his legs cut off just above the knees. He was hardly living any more but he was still alive. Beepat lit a *diya* in front of the greatest of his Gods before he lay down for the night. During the night you could hear Benjie's breathing across the ward. The *diya* by Beepat's bed flickered out and he fed it with oil a few times. Beepat lay awake late and then he composed himself to sleep. It was strange. When the nurses made their second morning round, when the birds had just begun to sing, they found that Beepat's sleep had eased into dying. It was recorded that his heart gave out, after respiratory troubles, and he died at 9.02 a.m. Benjie lasted until noon that day.

## Dry Bones

EARL MCKENZIE

There was an old slave who was no longer of any use on the plantation and was left to fend for himself. In those days there was nobody more useless than an old man, an old woman could at least look after children, but a man who was no longer strong enough to work in the canefield or the sugar mill was no use. He cost more to feed than he could contribute, so he was set loose to make do any way he could.

At first some of the other slaves shared their food with him, but since they hardly had enough for themselves, this didn't go very far. Besides, the old man felt guilty accepting food from people who had to work so hard. So he began spending a lot of time wandering through the bushes and living off such fruits and roots as he could find. Since he was old and shaky and couldn't do much walking, sometimes he would spend long hours just sitting in the sun and warming himself. After a while he began spending all his time in the bushes not wanting to be a burden to anyone. People on the plantation began to forget him. His body withered until he was almost all skin and bones. Slaves were sold to other plantations and new slaves were bought. Many of those who once knew him thought he was dead, and when people saw him in the bushes they thought they were seeing a ghost. The story developed that there was a skin-and-bone ghost who lived in the bushes. They called him Dry Bones.

Many strange things can happen to an old slave dying in the bushes. Dry Bones heard familiar voices in his dreams

instructing him how to prepare his soul for his return to his home in Africa. The voices said his soul must be completely transformed into the form of a bird. The voices instructed him and the process began.

One day a slave boy was walking in the bushes and he saw this huge white bird perched on the top of a tree with its wings outstretched warming itself in the sun. He took out his sling shot, loaded it, aimed for the bird's head and fired. The bird fell, bouncing from branch to branch, and finally landed on a guava tree where it rested with its head hanging down. The boy rushed to the tree and shook it until the bird fell to the ground. He noticed that the bird fell very lightly, almost without sound, and when he picked it up he was surprised to find that, in spite of its size, it was very light, almost weightless. Nevertheless he shoved the bird into the crocus bag he was carrying, slung it over his shoulder and began walking home.

As he walked along he noticed that the bag kept getting heavier and heavier, and bulges began forming in it. Then he felt hard things rubbing against his back and sharp points sinking into his shoulders. Quickly he threw down the bag. He heard a moan as the bag hit the ground, and he saw different parts of it sticking out as if something was turning over inside; the thing was quite big now, almost filling the bag. The boy was terrified and he turned and ran away as fast as he could. As he ran he kept repeating, 'Our Father! Our Father! Our Father!' When he got to a cross-roads he marked an X in the middle of the road and continued running home to tell his mother what he had seen.

A few weeks later the slave master and one of his slaves went bird shooting. The master carried his gun slung over his shoulder and the slave walked behind him carrying a bag in which he put the birds the master shot. They got to a tree and saw a huge white bird sitting at the top with outstretched wings warming itself in the sun. The master cocked his gun and got ready to shoot.

'No, sah!' said the slave. 'Please don't shoot it, sah!'  
'Why not?'

'Is an obeah bird, sah.'

The master chuckled. 'You people and your stupid superstitions!'

He aimed and fired. The bird fell, bouncing from branch to branch, and finally landed on a guava tree where it rested with its head hanging down. The master rushed to the tree and shook it until the bird fell to the ground. The slave noticed that it fell very lightly, almost without sound.

'Pick it up,' the master commanded.

'No, sah!' said the slave, his eyes wide with fright.

'Pick it up I say!'

The slave was trembling. 'Is a ghost-bird, sah!'

The master looked around for a stick. The slave dropped the bag of dead birds he was carrying and ran off into the bushes crying.

'The blasted fool!' said the master.

Then he picked up the bird. It was a bit light for its size but was heavier than it had appeared from the way it had fallen. He put it in the bag, threw the bag over his shoulder and began climbing the hill.

He had only gone a few yards when he felt the bag getting heavy. At first he thought it was just because he wasn't accustomed to carrying loads and because the hill was a bit steep. But he soon felt the bulges forming, the hard things rubbing against his back, and the sharp points sinking into his shoulders. He was about to drop the bag when he felt two bony hands fasten around his neck, and two bony legs gripping him around his waist. He cried out and tried to shake the thing off, but the weight kept increasing.

'Help!' he bawled out. 'Help! Help!'

'When you picked me up, you picked up your troubles,' said Dry Bones.

'Let me go!' the master panted. 'Let me go!'

He began to struggle again to get rid of Dry Bones. They fell to the ground and rolled over but Dry Bones held on. The dead birds from the bag were now strewn all over the grass. In his fright the master had almost lost hold of his gun.

'When you picked me up, you picked up your troubles!' repeated Dry Bones.

'What do you want from me?' the master pleaded.

'Take me back to your house and feed me.'

'But I can't walk with you on my back, you're too heavy.'

'But it is easy for you to carry a bird.'

The weight lessened, and when the master turned around he saw the white bird standing in the grass and watching him. He picked up the dead birds and returned them to the bag; the white bird then slipped into the bag by himself. The master threw the bag over his shoulder, picked up his gun and began walking towards his home, not certain whether he was awake or dreaming.

After about a quarter of a mile he met his overseer on a horse. His overseer was his own son that he had had with one of the slave women.

'Seems you had a good day's shooting, sir,' said the overseer.

'And I'm dog-tired too. Why don't you help me carry them? You may have a few of them if you like.'

'Sure, sir,' said the overseer, 'and thank you very much.'

The master gave him the bag. 'I'm going across to the mill,' he said as he started walking in the opposite direction.

The overseer slung the bag over his shoulder and rode off.

Suddenly he felt the bag getting heavier.

'What the rahtid is this?' he said.

Then he felt the bulges forming, the hard things rubbing against his back, and the sharp points sticking into his shoulders. Suddenly the bony hands gripped his neck and

the pair of bony legs folded around his waist. The overseer began struggling to free himself. With the increased weight and the struggle above him, the horse began galloping.

'Let me go!' cried the overseer. 'Me say let me go!'

'When you picked me up, you picked up your troubles,' said Dry Bones.

The horse was galloping faster now, and in their struggling they lost their balance and fell to the ground. They rolled and tumbled in the road. The overseer began cursing a lot of bad words but Dry Bones wouldn't let go.

'Is what the hell you want with me?' said the overseer.

'Take me home and feed me.'

'But why should I feed you?'

'Because I am Dry Bones.'

'Dry Bones!' breathed the overseer. New sweat broke out all over his body and he trembled. 'You're Dry Bones the jumbie! Oh, let me go! What do you want with me?'

'Right now I am half man and half spirit,' said Dry Bones. 'Take me home and feed me.'

With his head bowed and tears rolling down his cheeks the overseer began walking toward his house with Dry Bones fastened to his back.

The overseer's wife didn't like the idea of her husband taking this emaciated old man into their home and she showed her resentment openly. The overseer put Dry Bones in the storeroom and gave him food. He didn't tell his wife how he had come by Dry Bones because he felt sure she wouldn't believe him. She would think he was crazy. So he told her he found the old man in the bushes starving. In fact he was even afraid of mentioning it to his boss for fear of being laughed at and declared mad. The whole thing was like a bad dream and he kept hoping he would wake up and be rid of it. But the old man in the storeroom was real enough and had the appetite to prove it; he couldn't get enough to eat. He often complained of

being cold, and at his request, the overseer put him in an armchair in the yard every morning so he could warm himself in the sun. Flesh began to appear on his bones. The overseer was afraid to raise the question of the old man's mysterious appearance in the bird-shooting bag; it was as if he felt that by not discussing it, it would simply go away. But there was no way he could just rationalize away the old man's presence in his house, for everytime Dry Bones looked at him the message in his eyes was clear – "Try to get rid of me and there will be trouble."

Finally the overseer decided he couldn't live with the strange situation any longer. He had to discuss his problem with somebody. So late one night, after everybody in the house had gone to bed, he crept quietly out of the house and went to seek the services of an obeah man. The obeah man lived alone in a little wattle-and-daub house beside a river. There was a light in the house when the overseer got there. He knocked on the door and the obeah man opened it. He was jet black, had thick uncombed hair, and was stripped to the waist. A small wooden carving of a grotesque head hung from the necklace of red cloth he had around his neck. In the middle of the floor a black candle burned surrounded by bones and various kinds of herbs. The obeah man told the overseer to sit on the other side of the candle, and then he sat down facing him. The overseer explained that he wanted to get rid of Dry Bones.

"You want me to kill him?" asked the obeah man.

The overseer shivered. "No, I just want to get rid of him."

"But how you going to get rid of him unless you kill him?"

The obeah man's eyes shone in the candlelight.

"If he was just an ordinary man I wouldn't mind too much," said the overseer, "but he has these powers."

"Powers!"

The overseer explained how he had come by Dry Bones.

"Ah!" said the obeah man. "Everything is perfectly clear

now. You will have to get rid of him."

"But how?"

"Return him to the bushes."

"But he will starve to death. He's been eating like a glutton since he came to my house."

"That is bad," said the obeah man shaking his head. "He is trying to return to this world but it is too late. You don't begin the journey he has started and turn back."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. This is not a matter of too much importance to you. But that old man began learning something important in the bushes. People always learn something important in the bushes. Jesus. Moses. You must take him back to the bushes. It is the only way to save both him and yourself."

"But what am I to do?"

"Leave it to me. It is my business to see to it that he makes his journey home."

The overseer paid the obeah man and set off for his home.

The following morning, at the usual time, he put the old man in the yard to warm himself in the sun. Dry Bones leaned back in the armchair and began enjoying the warmth of the sun on his skin. He had just eaten a big breakfast of roasted breadfruit, fried pork with ackee, and rich coffee sweetened with coconut milk. The sky was clear and blue with a few puffs of white clouds pushing up from behind the mountains. Dry Bones stretched and relaxed again. Then he began daydreaming about his concept of a perfect lunch: mackerel and ochroes cooked in coconut gravy, boiled green bananas and tender St Vincent yam, followed by a tall glass of soursop juice.

Suddenly the sky darkened and he looked up. A huge hawk was circling the sky above him. It passed over the sun again, darkening the yard momentarily. It came closer and perched on a branch of the avocado pear tree at the

edge of the yard. It stared down at Dry Bones and pointed its head at him as if taking aim before swooping down at him.

'Pin-ya!' it cried in a harsh piercing voice. 'Pin-ya! Pin-ya!'

Then it swooped.

Dry Bones cried out as he saw the opened talons coming swiftly toward his face. But they didn't scratch him, they just brushed his face as the hawk rose in the air again and perched on a branch of the breadfruit tree at the other side of the yard. Before Dry Bones could catch his breath the hawk swooped again. This time the wings brushed hard against his head and the talons ripped his forehead. Dry Bones tried to get up but his body wouldn't obey his will. The hawk was perched on the pear tree, again its head pointing at him, preparing to swoop again. Dry Bones stared into its fierce eyes. Suddenly he realized with horror that the eyes were those of his old slave master, and he noticed that the bird's entire head was being transformed into that of the man who had once owned him, and who had worked him to the wreck he had become. The hawk swooped and Dry Bones cried out, beating it away with his hands. The hawk was on the breadfruit tree now, and when Dry Bones looked at it he saw its face was becoming that of the book-keeper whom he had once caught raping his woman. The hawk swooped and he cried out again. From the pear tree the hawk aimed at him again. Its neck stretched toward him, and it became so long it was like the whip with which he had been beaten so many times. The hawk swooped and he struggled to fight it off, but he was getting weaker and weaker, and he didn't feel he could withstand it much longer. He raised his eyes to the breadfruit tree. The hawk's face was now that of the overseer. It swooped and Dry Bones cried out with all his heart.

'Is what do you?' a voice came from the door of the house.

He turned and saw the overseer's wife standing at the door with a dish in her hand.

'The hawk!' he cried, 'the hawk!'

'Which hawk?'

He looked up at the tree but the hawk was gone.

'There was a hawk there mad to kill me,' said Dry Bones.

The woman hissed her teeth and went back into the house.

Dry Bones looked up into the tree and the hawk had reappeared. It stretched its head toward him and again took on the appearance of the overseer. Then it swooped. Dry Bones fell into a dead faint. When he came out of it the overseer's wife and her servants were standing around him, and they were saying that he was out of his mind.

The following morning he did not want to be left alone in the yard but no one would stay with him. As soon as the servants left, the hawk appeared and resumed its torture. It kept swooping from tree to tree, and before each swoop it took on the image of some painful association from his wretched life. It also began scratching him persistently, and when he rubbed his face with his hands he saw blood. He wished he could faint but he was unable to. The hawk kept reappearing at intervals throughout the entire day. By evening Dry Bones was a mass of blood and pain.

The following morning he pleaded not to be put out in the sun.

'Put him out,' said the overseer's wife. 'Is he begged to be put out, so he must be put out.'

The hawk reappeared as soon as they left. Dry Bones struggled out of the chair and began dragging himself across the yard toward the protection of the bushes. The hawk followed him and kept up its attack to the edge of the yard, but it did not follow him into the bushes. Dry Bones turned to see if it was watching him but everything was quiet and the bird was nowhere to be seen. He waited for a few minutes and then began re-entering the yard. Suddenly

he heard the screeching of the hawk in one of the trees, and he felt it on his back tearing him savagely with its beak and talons. He cried out and began dragging himself toward the bushes again. Each time he tried to re-enter the yard the bird attacked him. Finally he gave up the struggle and resigned himself to the bushes once again. He began dragging himself toward a nearby clump of trees. As he hauled his body over the grass and stones his tears mixed with the blood that streamed from the scratches on his face.

Dry Bones returned to living off fruits and roots. He shrank again to skin and bones. And soon he began hearing the voices in his dreams again, telling him how to come home.

Late one quiet night, he died while sleeping on his bed of dried leaves in a bamboo walk. And as he died a white bird rose up through the bamboo leaves and began following the path of the valley toward the sea. It got to the coast and soon was moving across the large, dark blue ocean.

His bones are still scattered through the bushes, and many people see them without knowing what they are. But once a year, very late at night, a white bird can be seen in these bushes; it is the ghost of the old man come to collect another splinter of his bones.

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## Visiting

ROGER McTAIR

'There should be bridges between islands,' Solomon said, looking over the bay. Clapham wiped the bar's counter thoughtfully, and said, 'Yes, sir.'

'Hey! Cut out the "sir" business,' Solomon said, 'all my friends call me Sol, or Sol-oh; get it, sol-oh. I'm just a Trinidadian from over the sea; one hour by plane. If we had a bridge between Bridgetown and Port of Spain you could drive in eight hours.'

'Can't drive,' Clapham replied. 'All I have is an old Raleigh bicycle.' He wiped the already spotless bar again and again.

A light warm breeze agitated the palm trees and well-cut decorative shrubs and the hot scent of flowers mixed with the salt tang of the sea. The music from the hotel stopped and the sound of the rolling sea took its place. Clapham stopped wiping the counter and waited, attentively.

A small group of men and women walked down the gravel path that led from the hotel grounds and parking lot. They sat on the other side of the circular outdoor bar, exchanging jokes, laughing and talking. Solomon turned on his stool to contemplate the bay. This was the last day of his vacation and he felt a little melancholy. He wished there was a moon over the bay. He whistled some bars from 'Mood Indigo'. There were lights twinkling out to sea. Must be an ocean liner touring the islands, Solomon thought.

'That's Ellington, isn't it?' Clapham asked under his breath.