

VELMA POLLARD

My Mother

For Marjorie

The Lexington Avenue train raced into Fourteenth Street station like a runaway horse and miraculously came to a stop; belching forth such an army of fast-moving bodies that I flattened myself against the stair-rails in sheer terror. But I survived, and after the first flight of stairs, stood near a tiny candy shop in the station, to let them all pass.

I stared, but only at the blacks – the strangers whom this heartless machine had rushed out of Harlem, out of the safety of the familiar 125th Street and into this alien city; to dingy stores and tiny disorganised offices or to other vague connections: Canarsie, Long Island, Jamaica, etc. They were all running, in some way or other – in careless abandon or in crisp, short, overbred paces; the women's girdles and eventually their coats, controlling the obviousness of the movement; the men's coat tails flapping at the inevitable slit below the rump.

The men, whether they were briefcase types or lunchpan types, all wore little hats with short brims. It was a cold morning. In New York twenty-three degrees is considered cold. The women didn't need hats. Cheap, curly wigs hugged their temples protecting their black youthfulness and hiding their kinky strands. Fifty acknowledging thirty, needs a wig. For some reason the real hairline tells a story even when it is dyed black. And here the merciful cold allowed for the constant sweater or the little scarf that covers the tell-tale neck.

Everybody was running and everybody looked frightened. But you could see that all this had become natural. This speed was now normal and because they couldn't see their own frightened faces, they couldn't recognise their fright. When you answer long enough to a name that for one reason or another is wrong, and when you live long enough with a face that is always wrong, a frightened look grows on you and becomes an inseparable part of you. I looked at them and became numb with a kind of nameless grief. For I had seen my mother for the first time in all those tense women's faces, in all those heads hiding their age and gentleness beneath the black, curly wigs.

The little journey was a ritual. Very early, the first or second Saturday morning of the month, my grandmother and I would walk to Anne's Ridge and get in the line at the bank. I would sign my name on the money order made out to me and we would soon move from the Foreign Exchange line to the Savings line. I never knew how much money came, for the exchange from dollars to pounds was too much for me to handle; and I never knew how much was saved. But I always felt, one Saturday every month, that we were rich.

Sometimes we stopped in the big Anne's Ridge stores in town and bought a new plate or two, sometimes dress material and v-e-r-y occasionally, shoes. Then we stopped in the market for the few things Gran didn't plant and Mass Nathan's shop didn't stock.

The journey home was less pleasant. I never ever noticed the hills on the way back; not because they were so much less green but because it took all my energy to think up little stories to help me block out Gran's monthly lecture. It always had to do with ingratitude. I'm not sure now how she knew the extent of my ingratitude long before I even understood the concept of gratitude. It had to do with the faithfulness of her daughter working hard in America to support me so I could 'come to something' and my not trying to show thanks. I was no great writer; but Gran saw to it that I scratched something on an airletter form to my mother every month and that something always included thanks for the money.

Gran never made it clear in what non-verbal ways I should express thanks. I had to do well at school; but the teachers had a sort of foolproof mechanism for assuring that – those were the days of the rod and I meant to be a poor customer for that. So school was okay. But the guidelines at home were less clear. An action that one day was a sign of ingratitude was, next day, a normal action. It seemed that the assessment of my behaviour was a very arbitrary and subjective exercise and depended partly on Gran's moods.

Now I understand what Gran's dilemma was like. She herself did not know what she had to produce from the raw material she was given if her daughter's sacrifice was not to be meaningless. She had been set a great task and she was going to acquit herself manfully at all costs; but she was swimming in very strange waters. And her daughter could only work and send money; she couldn't offer guidelines either – only vague hints like the necessity for me to speak properly, however that should be.

Every year we expected my mother home on vacation and every year she wrote that she was sorry she couldn't make it. But she always sent, as if to represent her, a large round box that people insisted on calling a barrel. It was full of used clothes of all sorts, obviously chosen with little regard for my size or my grandmother's size. I never went to the collecting ceremony. This involved a trip to Kingston and endless red tape. I merely waited at the gate till the bus turned the curve, gave its two honks and slid along the loose stones to a halt to let my grandmother out. Then the sideman would roll the barrel along the top of the bus and shove it to his comrade. Immediately the bus would honk again and move on.

Nothing smells exactly like my mother's boxes. It was a smell compounded from sweat and mustiness and black poverty inheriting white cast-offs. I still remember one of those dresses from the box. With today's eyes I can see that it was a woman's frock; a woman's short voile frock for cocktail parties or an important lunch. And I was nine or ten then. But I wore it with pride, first to the Sunday School Christmas concert and then to numerous 'social' events thereafter. And even now, that low-slung waist or anything resting lightly on the hips has particular charm for me whether or not the beholder's eye shares my judgement . . . There were blouses and shoes and hats; something to fit almost everyone in my grandmother's endless chronicle of cousins. We accepted our ill-fitting fits and wore them with surprising confidence.



Every year we expected my mother home on vacation. But she never came. The year I was in third form they flew her body home. I hadn't heard that she was ill. I felt for months afterwards that my very last letter should have said something different, something more; should have shown more gratitude than the others. But I could not possibly have known that that would be the last.

When the coffin arrived it was clear that nobody from Jamaica had touched that coffin. Sam Isaacs may have kept it a few days but that was all. The whole thing was foreign — large, heavy, silvery, straight from the USA. And when they opened the lid, in the church, so she could lie in state and everybody could look and cry, it was clear that my mother too had been untouched by local hands. She had come straight from the USA.

When my mother left Jamaica I couldn't have been more than five or six, so any memory I had of her was either very vague or very clear and original — carved out of my own imagination with patterns all mixed up,

of other people's mothers and of those impersonal clothes in the annual barrel. The woman in the coffin was not my mother. The woman in the purple dress and black shoes (I didn't even know they buried people in shoes), the highly powdered face, framed by jet black curls and covered lightly with a mantilla, was not like any of the several images I had traced.

The funeral couldn't be our funeral. It was a spectacle. I don't suppose more than half the people there had actually known my mother. But it was a Sunday, and the whole week that had elapsed between the news of her death and the actual funeral made it possible for people from far and near to make the trip to our village. Those who were from surrounding districts but had jobs in the city used one stone to kill two birds — visit the old folks at home, and come up to 'Miss Angie daughter funeral'.

It wasn't our funeral. It was a spectacle.

The afternoon was hot; inside the church was hotter. Outside, I stood as far as I could from the grave and watched several of them pointing at me, their eyes full of tears: 'Dats de little wan she lef wid Miss Angie.' Near to me was a woman in a fur hat, close fitting, with a ribbon at the side. She wore a dress of the same yellow gold as the hat, and long earrings, costume jewellery, of the same yellow gold.

I could hear the trembling voices from the grave —

*'I know not oh I know not
What joys await me there . . .'*

— and fur hat, beside me, trying to outdo them so her friend could hear her:

'A didn't know ar but a sih dih face; is fat kill ar noh?' (My mother was rather busty but that was as far as the fat went.)

She didn't wait for an answer but continued: 'A nevva sih wan of dese deds that come back from England yet.' (No one had taken the trouble to tell her it was America not England.)

'But de reason why a come to see ar is becaaz I was dere meself an a always seh ef a ded, dey mus sen mih back. Is now a sih ow a woulda look! But tengad a lucky a come back pon me own steam . . . An you sih dis big finneral shi have? she wouldn't have get it in Englan' you know. Since one o'clock she woulda gaan an' if they cremate ar, while we drinking a cuppa tea, she bunnin'.'

'Wat?' asked her audience at last. 'Deh gives tea? an peepie siddung?'

'Man, deh put dem in someting like ovin, an by dih time we jus' drink dih tea, you get dih ashes an' you gaan . . .'

They had stopped singing about my mother's joys; the slow heavy dirge was now 'Abide with me', sung with the Baptist rhythm sad and slow, though I hardly think it is possible for that particular song to be anything but sad and slow, Baptist or no Baptist. I looked towards the crowd. They were supporting my grandmother. I knew she wasn't screaming. She was never given to screaming. She was just shaking as great sobs shook her body and her hands seemed to hold up her stomach. It was pointless my trying to comfort her; they wouldn't let me. Two old women were holding her, Miss Emma, her good friend, and Cousin Jean who was more like a sister than a cousin.

Next day I went alone to my mother's grave to push my own little bottle with maiden-hair fern into the soft, red earth. When all their great wreaths with purple American ribbons had long faded, my maiden-hair fern started to grow.

I had never known my mother. I had known her money and her barrels and my grandmother's respect for her. I had not wept at her funeral. But that morning, in the subway station at Fourteenth Street, in the middle of nowhere, in the midst of a certain timelessness, I wept for her, unashamedly, and for the peace at Anne's Ridge that she never came back to know, after the constant madness, after the constant terror of all the Fourteenth Street subway stations in that horrifying work-house.

I saw my tears water the maiden-hair fern on her grave to a lush green luxuriance. I was glad I was a guest in the great USA and a guest didn't need a wig. I would take no barrels home with me. I saw my mother's ancient grave covered again with its large and gaudy wreaths. Like the mad old man in Brooklyn, I lifted from a hundred imaginary heads a hundred black and curly wigs and laid them all on the ancient grave. And I laid with them all the last shapeless, ill-fitting clothes from the last barrel. The last of the women had hurried away. I wept for my mother. But I rejoiced that the maiden-hair fern was lush and that we had no longer need for gaudy wreaths.

LAWRENCE SCOTT

King Sailor One J'Ouvert Morning

*'It's a feeling which comes from deep within,
A tale of joy or one of suffering,
It's editorial in song of the life we undergo,
That and only that I know is true calypso.'*

MIGHTY DUKE

'Come down J'Ouvert morning, find yourself in a band', the first line of the long-time calypso was an insistently repeated refrain: at first hummed; humming breaking into simulated pan; 'ping pong, ping pong', hummed again; 'ping a ling, ping a ling ping pong, ping a ling, ping a ling ping pang, pang pang', hummed by Philip Monagas with pressed lips as he felt the spirit rising inside of himself this carnival Sunday morning as he stepped out on to the cool terrazo floor on the veranda of the modern concrete apartment up in the Cascade Hills overlooking Port-of-Spain.

'Come down J'Ouvert morning, find yourself in a band', Philip whistled. He could whistle the tune too but he could not remember the rest of the words and no one else seemed to sing them either, this long-time calypso. Just the one line and then the humming which accompanied the way he found himself walking and moving these days, easy and fluid, and then almost on tiptoe wanting to spring into the air. 'Come down J'Ouvert morning, ping a ling ping p'ding.' It was a kind of invocation, a prayer repeated many times like a mantra which induced and welcomed the madness of the masquerade, Carnival.

Since returning to the island Philip Monagas had been looking forward to the carnival.

He wasn't a tourist and he didn't want anyone taking him for a tourist. He was from here and he wanted to be seen and known for that. It would have to emanate from him, himself inhabit a costume which would come alive when he moved. He saw wings, the wings of the red devil and the butterfly Papillon, Moco Jumbie reaching for the sky on his long stilt legs. He would have to come out and be, be from here. He