

Taking T

By

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There goes that particular sound of rubber spinning on gravel. The indifference of repossession. It's hard to keep up. I don't know for sure but I think it's the dark blue Jag this time. Eight steps of his clipping brogues and the heavy oak door slams back into its frame like a slap. More loose shards of plaster on the floor.

I'm always grateful for these voile (not net) curtains. A debutante's dream, they float like mist and mask my peeking. Yes, I can see the retreating car's backside. TNT 10. He would personalise every number plate. "Adds to the value, always sell it on." Another one of his vanities. Like this house. The Manor, Great Shoreham, Norfolk. Had to be a short impressive address with its listed leaking windows, creaking wooden floors and moaning banisters. Freezing. Tell guests to bring layers (which they do). Might as well burn bank notes and watch their ashes float up into the rafters, laughing at us with the pigeons. His folly.

Keys clatter on the monks' bench, one lighter. In his office (old pantry), I hear the indistinct murmur. The bluff false heart that means he's talking to Gordon (bank), Larry (golf), or Trevor (shooting). They're all the same, these spreading middle-aged men, Apart from the one with gym membership and city mistress. Rheumy eyes disappearing in a sea of face and absolutely no conversation because they're not really interested in women. The passing years confirm this.

Once I came out of the vanilla haze of early motherhood, I'd see him walking towards me but he was blurred, edgeless and I'd listen but his words seemed to fall into a hole in the middle of his sentences. United front at parties when

we can afford them. Marriage with mascara on. And I'll put up with a lot but I can't bear how nice he is to me when he needs to sell a bit more jewellery.

"Get you something really special when things are on the up." Husky whispers into the nape of my neck. Then he nibbles my ear lobe and I want to throw my palm at his cheek. Should have listened to Mother but I don't think even she would take pleasure in being proven this right.

Still, he's done two wonderful things. My boys. Miraculous how a few lost small moments in the dark can result in a new road. A medley of changing muscles, noises and expressions. I delighted in every step until Will stood in front of me with his Father's hairline and way of looking over my right shoulder to scan the horizon for more interesting prospects. I heard him telling me how surveying was too limiting and he'd had this idea that someone thought 'had legs'. It just needed investment and Dad could fix it. All I could think of was how that child had wandered from half-finished puzzle to bits of Lego to sections of train-track and finally end up kicking a ball disconsolately at the picket fence. He wanted the world to entertain him and when it didn't, he grew bored. Trikes, bikes, go-carts, horses, air guns – all briefly flickering candles. I pity his wife when he finds her. She'll be indulgent and blind, judging by those fine lines of debauchery already circling his twenty-four year old eyes like vultures. I love him as I should but I can't bear his superiority. It's so ill-founded and so different to Tom.

My Tom, who will come back this afternoon and somehow breathe warmth and light into every forsaken corner and make my world sing. You can't force that kind of connection. Like me, he's got commitment, direction, follows

things through. Degree, graduate training programme, career. Golden. Yes I know it's probably unhealthy but I won't lie to you. He's life.

And yet, it's not quite right. The air's too still. I made fruit scones. Finally off the 'phone, Roger's on his third but Tom's pulling the currants out and rolling them between his fingers. His head's dipped but I can see a half smile playing across his face.

"She's called Angelique and she's perfect." His voice cracks like it first did in adolescence.

At first I don't really understand what he's talking about. I can feel my gullet throbbing as the acid rises and my cheeks prickle as colour either floods in or drains out, so I reach for my bag and pull out my second favourite lipstick, 'Eternity'. Applying a coat without looking, I gain a bit of time without having to keep my mouth calm.

"Oh?" I say eventually.

"This is it Mum. She's beautiful, kind, loving, hardworking, family-minded and everything I've been looking for. She's...she's very like you actually.

We...want to have a local wedding."

"Marriage!" Roger barks and I rearrange the scones, averting my gaze because I can't let Tom see my eyes.

"I can speak to the vicar," I hear my tongue offering, "but the church gets very booked up."

"Actually, Mum, we were thinking of keeping it simple. On the beach. Just a flower pergola and the families."

Roger's right eyebrow arches.

“Not here then? I mean Ripley Sutterton on the coast’s nice but really breezy, old chap.”

A current’s pulling me into my own little eddy.

“No...Her family are from Grenada. Her mother’s very respectable and her brother’s a policeman. So there, really. Such a lovely place.”

I can tell that he’s smitten. When I look up at him, he seems far away as if he’s retreated to the other side of a long telescope.

“Where did you meet?”

“On Grand Anse beach, Grenada.”

“Let me get this right. She actually lives there?”

Tom breathes in deeply, filling his lungs like gun barrels.

“I didn’t even know you’d been to Grenada.”

“I started in Jamaica – but I just got bored, caught a boat.”

“A boat,” Roger moans “bit itinerant, isn’t it Thomas? All rather sudden.”

“It may seem so but it’s been four months and I’m more certain than I’ve ever been.”

“I’m sure they have some nice churches there, Tom.” I don’t want to plead. I want him to think I’m taking it seriously.

“They do, but listen folks.” He slips off the sofa and rests his hands on my knees. Roger’s filling up a whiskey tumbler.

“I want you both to be there. It’ll be a great holiday. Do you good to just chill.

Relax. Wear something floaty and not even shoes, feel the sand on your feet.”

And then I feel something icy and metallic fly into my ear, work it’s passage and come to rest, near where I suppose my heart lives.

Roger clears his throat.

“Don’t know about that. Bit loose!”

“Well Dad, you don’t want to seem stuffy, too English!”

“I am English, Thomas!”

I’m chilled but not shivery. I lift his hands from me and mustering all my strength, stand.

“I shall buy a new hat, Tom. We have standards below which we will not slip. I have never compromised my accessories for anyone. These people will have to elevate their thinking to meet ours and not visa versa.”

I see him wince but pour myself a sherry. As I leave the room, Roger draws back his shoulders and I hear him say, “And I will take my best panama.”

Everything is broken. Loose fairy lights hang like dejected bunting. The juice bar is permanently shut, its paint peeling and faded by the ceaseless battering of the wind and salt. At the pool, four umbrellas hang like a line of sulking close-winged birds over eight loungers, laced together to prevent their theft. Roger has managed to erect one but the material is so worn that one can see straight into the sky above. The others are redundant as they have no pins to secure their poles. Each day the level of water in the pool falls, showing ever more of the chipped mosaic tiles on the sides. We are in our second room (416). Our first was covered in a fine layer of dirt over floors, doors and bathroom and on our first morning I had awoken to find myself lying in sodden bedclothes with the floor a lake. Later the Rep had explained that the hotel hadn’t been sufficiently damaged in the hurricane two years ago to receive a government grant. It had had to make do. Some rooms were fine, others

hadn't been used since, but with the cricket coming, everything was being opened up, re-vitalised.

"Re-vitalised' isn't a word I'd have used," Roger told the sofa curtly after the Rep had disappeared. His boldness knew no bounds once the danger of confrontation had passed.

Now we overlook a small park with a roundabout and four benches permanently occupied by a clutch of grumbling, middle-aged men who swap sitting positions and nurse beer cans. Last night, after an hour's sleep we were roused by a constant low thud of bass-lines, drums and monotonal ranting. I concentrated on my breathing and, while Roger spitefully yanked the bedclothes and raved about primitive subliminal torture, I tried not to wonder about Tom and his body curled around her as they slept. And tomorrow we will finally meet.

We have learned to cope with the idiosyncrasies of the restaurant. It is always deserted which is no bad thing – the staff could not have coped otherwise.

Our waitress is Georgiana but prefers to be known as Gin. Roger ignores the menu. "Cereal with milk please, dear, and tea."

"Toast for me."

"D'you mean the continental?" Gin asks slowly as she painstakingly writes.

"Does it have toast?"

"Oh it got everything. Will you be wanting banana or pumpkin bread with that?"

"Banana...if I must."

“I’ll just go see if we got any.”

“And I would...”

Too late, for Gin has begun her long Saharan slog back to the kitchen.

We exchange one of our looks of understanding.

She arrives back with a milk jug, some decanted frosted flakes and the remains of a smile she’d grown briefly in the kitchen. She places the lidded jug by his left hand.

“No banana bread today, only pumpkin.”

“Well I’ll leave it but I was about to ask for tea.”

“I might try some.” Roger offers, “Is the pumpkin finely grated?”

Gin’s pen alights from the page like a bird on hot tar.

“It’s bread, Sir.”

“Well, lets have it anyway, eh.” He replies expansively as he pours the milk and nods at the twittering chorus of birds watching from the sill, before glancing down.

We both stare at his flakes, which are quickly losing form as the boiling milk steams and hisses like magma around them.

“I see.”

“It is rather.”

“Excuse me!” I project my voice backwards, which becomes more of a caw in the process but never fails to get attention. Gin is already returning with a plate of prettily sliced fruit that she places in front of me.

“Your fruit platter, Ma’am.”

“Yes thank you but my husband’s cereal has been ruined by the hot milk. So could he have more and also some cold milk.”

Gin is stupefied.

“Cereal comes with hot milk only.”

“It leaves the cow warmish, I’ll grant you, but you receive it cold. Could we have some more cereal please but with cold unheated milk? Thank you.”

I have a tendency not to be argued with over these sorts of issues – pedantic I know but it’s because I’ve got so little control over anything important.

They will meet us on the beach where we have been once and left terrified.

Today I am more prepared for the mass of locals who gather and shriek at each other under the only sheltering trees and the incessant infantry of traders whose false smiles fall into scowls once their wares are rejected.

Anything and everything is for sale. Sooner or later one will wear your resistance down with their necklaces of nutmeg and mace, icons of dolphins carved from driftwood and banana leaf baskets filled with dubious spices.

Yesterday I was finally defeated by a tall man wearing a multicoloured woollen hat, who sank onto the end of my lounge and pulled a coconut from his bag.

Throwing it high into the air, he caught it on an opened palm while laying an enormous unsheathed knife across his lap. The tip rested a couple of millimetres from my right foot.

“Just arrived? I’m Raoul. Let me give you your first taste of Grenadian nectar.”

He lifted the blade and swung it sharply onto the hairy skin. It split into two perfect halves. He laid one half onto the canvass, rose and crouched beside me bringing the other half towards my lips. I froze, mesmerised by his rotting teeth.

“I’ve always loved fresh coconut.” Roger trilled and I knew he couldn’t be relied upon.

I took the husk and drank some of the sweet warm liquid, keeping steady eye contact with Raoul before passing it to Roger. He almost shook his head but thought better of it.

“You know what you need?” Within seconds Raoul had leapt over my bed tugging at his belt until a scrap of yellow material came free. Roger visibly shrank as Raoul stood behind him and tied the bandana over his head.

“Keep that fine skin protected Sa’.”

“Thank you.” Roger whispered.

“Now I’m just gonna chop this up and ask you for thirty EC – that’s ten for the protection and twenty for the nut.”

As Roger silently handed over the money I thanked Raoul. A lesson learned. Men carrying knives just want your money not your lives.

Now we sit and wait. I see Tom walking along the water’s edge. His hair has already turned that white blond others pay so much for. His blue and white tie-dye shirt flaps open. His torso is flat. Yet, I can still see the rounded belly of toddlerhood. His hand extends protectively across to her forearm. I allow myself to look. A tiny doll. Curls cluster close to her scalp. Her skin is paler than I expected. She keeps her head half-tilted towards him. It is at once wise, demure and seductive. The coquette’s triad. As they come closer he loosely salutes and I wave hysterically back. In their wake another older woman follows. The mother who I’ve decided to hate?

She spreads out a large blanket on the sand and places her bags in one corner. Tom pulls me into his arms and I enjoy a brief moment of ownership until he steps back.

“Angelique, my mum Ruth. Roger, my Dad, Dominique.”

Our palms drift aimlessly through the air and find each other. No hint of moisture or nerves. We all sink down, birds softening their wings into water.

“How is the hotel Ruth?” Dominique’s honey and gravel tone override the beach buzz.

“It’s adequate thank you.” I am willing to be polite.

“Just somewhere to lay our heads really” Roger says airily. As if he hadn’t moaned constantly about the bed, the bedding, the light, the air-conditioning, the toilet, the shower, the towels, the balcony, the view, the everything.

“Oh? It’s good to be comfortable, though. I wish our home had been big enough to invite you. Can I offer you some tea, Ruth?”

She produces a flask from nowhere while Angelique riffles through the many crocheted bags and hands a paper cup, smiling. Her brow lifts hopefully, saying ‘Take this. Like me’ but I am not ready so I receive it with a slight nod to her chin.

“Thank you Dominique.”

“We’d love to share our plans for the service and the breakfast with you folks. Would you like to come and have supper with us tonight? Ian will collect you and bring you back of course.”

I wonder who Ian is but realise this is more than an invitation. It is a precipice. I glance at Tom. His apparent nonchalance. Here is where I either share or lose him.

“That’s very kind of you Dominique. We’d love to.” I sense the tightness release in every chest. As if we had just left port and set the first sail.

Ian is a white-haired wiry Englishman who used to teach German until he came to Grenada with his wife. If she is Dominique, it is unclear. His eyebrows cavort un-tethered and he wrinkles his nose if asked a question. As we climb into the heart of the island, he knowledgeably swings his battered van across the half-made, pot-holed roads and with little prompting, he talks. The bridge we cross was built by the Japanese in exchange for Grenadian support for its whale-hunting enthusiasm. The ongoing road construction is a patchwork of international aid and palm-greasing, preparing the island to host the ICC World Cricket tournament in a stadium built with Chinese money but where the Taiwanese anthem was mistakenly played on inauguration day. The collective squirming of the gathered officials was only witnessed from a distance but provided much mirth in the wider community who can’t afford the inflated ticket prices and content themselves with their own beach games and highlights. They are learning to bury their resentment towards their colonial past and moderate their fervour for independence, at least in the presence of the cash-spending English.

I only see the beauty. A jungle of banana trees that spur exotically amongst the cocoa plants and a multitude of minutely described cascading flora. It is not Ian’s knowledge but his affection that touches me. And it’s also clear from the blistered bronzed gaps that Grenada’s heart has been broken. Hurricane Ivan had rolled over the flanked hillsides, decapitating and uprooting the precious slow-growing nutmeg trees and income sources as he went.

“Couldn’t more be planted?” I ask timidly.

“It’s pointless, they take at least ten years to fruit. Maybe they never would have stayed. They were ex-pats like me, brought by the sugar traders from Indonesia. No, it was hopeless really. We Grenadians have had to learn how to adapt; adopt; and at each turn of losing a little, we maybe gain too. After Emily, we reproached ourselves for not praying enough. When Ivan came you couldn’t get us off our knees. Here we are.”

We turn into a narrow entrance, obscured by a tumbling fringe of bougainvillea. A car without wheels rusts underneath a corrugated tin roof. The house, if it can be so called, is raised on brick plinths. There seem to be two storeys but it’s hard to tell. I don’t look at Roger.

Ian turns to us, beaming.

“Hope you’re both hungry.”

I glance at his sun visor that holds a photo of two half-smiling children. He notices my gaze and passes the snap to me.

“My adopted children.” He says proudly.

Are they Dominique’s?

He continued. “Well they adopted me really. After Ivan, they just turned up one day and never left. We also have a cat called Toulouse.”

I am horrified.

“But what about their real parents? I mean, don’t they mind?”

“Possibly... but unlikely! There’s a very different attitude to parenting here; And if children find their families wanting, they just move on until they find ones they do like – mine have stayed for three years so I think it’s working out.” He dips his head with a mixture of modesty and emotion.

While I can't understand, I admire his openness. How easy could it have been for any Englishman to abandon that sense of order, of law, in favour of a more organic, instinctive justice? I return the photo.

"You must be very proud."

"I am. We've taught each other a great deal."

It's Dominique who comes to the entrance.

"Welcome, welcome. Please."

She grabs both my fluttering hands within hers as if trapping a butterfly.

"The kids are bringing bread. Would you care for iced ginger beer or tea?"

"Whatever's easier Dominique, thank you." I don't want anything except to go home.

We sit in a cool dark room. The men sidle off and witter about the cricket.

They have it so easy.

"I thought we could chat about the weekend before we eat."

I struggle to contain my childish feelings of exclusion

"As you know they wanted to keep it uncomplicated, but my cousin's a chef at the White Sands – and we have a lovely table there for the meal. They'll do it nicely I know."

I nod wondering what else to say. "What about a cake? Or is that too formal?"

"Yes, I've baked a cake. We don't tend to ice here because of the heat but

Angelique and Tom have chosen a decoration. Would you like to see it?"

"Oh well...I...I don't want to trouble you." Actually, I don't want to have to admire it. We wander into the kitchen. It is tiny and spotless and on the small stove sit two ancient simmering pans. The smell is fragrant and spicy. She

leads on to a cubbyhole where a cake is covered with fine mesh netting. She lifts the veil slowly to reveal a dark fruit cake topped with a wreath of ribbons worked into two encircled hands. I picture her here, mixing and turning the hot fruit, carefully filling the lined tin; hovering as it bakes; fretting as she watches it cool and wishing she could taste a little to be certain it was the best she could do. All the alchemy and love in baking. I let go of my unnecessary tiers and overworked filigrees of royal icing.

“It’s perfect, Dominique. Well done!” Her chest and chin rise a little and her mouth curls in pleasure.

“D’you think they will honeymoon anywhere?” I haven’t felt I could ask Tom.

“I don’t get that impression to be honest Ruth. Maybe they’ll take a long weekend sometime soon – but you know it’s a busy season and we all have to get back to work.”

I still a sigh. This is supposed to be the best time. Normality will smother it so quickly.

There is a large photo above the door. A factory with a younger Dominique in the centre of a group of scarved women.

“Is this work?”

“It was. The nutmeg processing plant. I was there for twenty years.”

“You obviously enjoyed it.”

“Well...it was a way of life. Let’s take our tea onto the veranda, Ruth.”

Once again it’s miniature but overflowing with plants and in the garden below sit rows of vegetables and a large fruit tree.

“That’s my quince. It makes great jam.”

“D’you miss the factory?”

She cradles her drink and looks down.

“I try not to think about it. Sometimes as I walk up the fine corridors of the Hamilton, changing towels, I get a whiff of the past. Sound familiar? That dark plant was like a labyrinth, trapping the sweet mystery inside. You stood at one end and all you could see were these shelves of red mace and thousands of graded nuts on vast sliding drawers. And downstairs, a mountain range of bulging sacks, ready to be exported. Everything the outside world knows about Grenada in this one fine little nut. How can it convey our rich history? You English have colonies, big global footprints to root you. Truthfully, when Ivan howled over and the tornadoes whipped up a frenzy, we hid under tables and mattresses, watching our roofs ripped off and the cars lifting and disappearing, I just thought of the trees, all that stolen beauty.” She breathed in deeply. “Yet...you move on. You forgive the unforgivable. We’re poor but not diminished. What we do does not define us. Can you understand that?” She stares at me over the rim of her brown mug. Her dark liquid eyes search me like underwater torches. I lean forward, trying to leap into her but it’s too hard. I’m too small and too distracted by her dignity, by her grace.

“I’m not sure, Dominique. I think so.”

She smiles. “Ian should take you round the island. Show you the sights”

“I’d like that. Do you and Angelique work together?”

“No, she braids hair for tourists, mostly on the beach.”

She is deliberately straight, daring me to object.

They appear in the gateway, holding each other, as one. Tom radiates around her, a living aurora, an iridescent glow. Dominique may have seen this before

but I watch their cells divide and mutate into this unified creature of love and know I am powerless and unexpectedly, admiring.

The goat stew is deeply satisfying. I notice Roger has several helpings. I too indulge. It defies description. Fatless yet full of complex flavours, it does not cloy, it seduces. My own rice is a constant disappointment yet these delicate grains separate willingly, allowing each herb and spice to slip through their nets. Dominique and I exchange the odd glance. I feel warm, without combat. Until a fleeting moment. Tom's left hand strays to Angelique's belly and rests. In turn, her hands home onto his and they both look down and then up into each other's eyes. Their tender smiles tell all and I need air. I ask to go home. Dominique is watching and I push away her sympathetic arm, maybe too brusquely. I gasp thanks. I am an old dry fool whose passages are atrophied from lack of use. I understand nothing and everything.

At the room, Roger seems to have re-discovered parts of himself. As he slithers and slides over me, an unfamiliar, un-holdable fish of citronella and emollients, I feel nothing but impatience. When he had resigned from lusting me it had seemed like a business decision. To enquire or need explanation would have been like lifting the tarpaulin on a rain-soaked wreck. Afterwards he slips off into sleep and I feel his rivulets of sweat roll off my abdomen. Drops of clarity. Is this it? All I have missed and mourned? Easter drums roll in the distance.

It is a blistering day. If I were in England on this Friday before a wedding, I would be whirling with arrangements. There would be flowers, pinholes, cake-stands, hymn sheets, guests, hair, outfits, hats, marquees, table decorations, political table plans, relatives, forced smiles....

Roger has befriended Michael, a blind cripple who courses the beach looking for trade.

“Ruth loves a foot massage. Don’t you Ruth?”

“Sorry...yes...sometimes...I...”

“Can I give you a beautiful one today, Ma’am?”

The little man swivels round in the sand and lurches towards me.

“Uhm... very well.”

I move reluctantly down to the end of the bed and extend my foot into the sightless man’s waiting hands. Fumbling in a worn canvass rucksack, he finally pulls out a large succulent leaf which he starts to milk to release a pale green gel. This he rubs vigorously over my feet. It is too harsh and I am in agony as my feet creak and curl in protest.

“Is Aloe Vera, Ma’am. Is all healin’.”

“Oh I’ve heard of it.” Roger says emphatically.

Then why don’t you have the sodding massage, you pompous sod?

“There’s no pain it can’t reach...all 100% natural.” He tells the air between Roger and I.

At this moment the rising wind grabs the end of my metal lounge and swings it up to thwack the back of my skull. Shock shoots into every corner of me, forcing bile out of my open mouth.

“No more!”

The two men bolt sharply.

“Did I hurt you Ma’am?”

“No...but that’s enough...thank you...” I am panting because I don’t want to weep.

Roger pays the man and then he retreats into the sea. I watch his balding burnt head bobbing in the water. From time to time he waves tentatively.

I don’t respond. I see the sand between us and realise I have just indulged him for the last time. Dominique has hunkered down onto her familiar blanket without my noticing.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Fine. A little tired but fine. Tea?”

I find myself chortling.

“I really appreciate you bringing a flask every time, Dominique, but you don’t have to.”

“I always take tea to the beach.” She replies loftily, as she cocks her pinkie.

“When is it due?” I ask shyly.

“September. Same month as Angelique...we think anyway.”

“She’s not sure of her dates?”

“Oh Angelique’s very sure. No I mean we don’t know when her own birthday is, so we just celebrate the day she came to me.”

“Right.” I keep my voice low and gentle, knowing that Dominique will once again be scrutinising my face for tremors.

“She was just there one morning with soles as leathery and cracked as a camels’ but her palms were soft like silk.”

“Where had she...?”

“I don’t know and no one ever came. She stayed so I guess I suited and I’ve been blessed with watching her sweetness blossom into this beautiful spirit, who loves your son so deeply.”

I reach out and lightly touch her hand. Our eyes are level.

“Yes. I can see that. What can I do to help?”

We make plans and lists. Later Roger crouches in front of me.

“Sorry about earlier Ruth. Listen old thing, soon as the service is over, we’ll have to go back...there’s trouble with...”

I try to concentrate but his words evaporate like rising steam. Let him take his trouble back to the bad-tempered March skies, under which he will pretentiously fiddle away his life.

“I’m staying on, Roger.”

I find myself lying in the shallow water, my puckered, pigmented skin hanging in folds like a puppy Boxer. My third finger has a fresh white rim where the ring had sat. Further out, the endless waves rear, raise their fists and thump the beach, leaving their surf to fizz around me, hissing like distant rain. A breeze ripples through the palms before lifting into the vague howl of a stronger wind.