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## THE NIGHT OF CHAMPA'S MATIKOR

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So, you want to know what happen that night, eh? The night of Champa's matikor. The Friday night before the wedding when all the women in the village and all the young girls went to the river to dig up pure dirt and collect clean water and to pray for blessings for Champa in she married life. To ask Goddess Ganga, who is the mother of rivers, and Mati, Mother Earth herself, to come to Champa's wedding and bless she with happiness and later on, with children. It was the duty of the already married women to show Champa what to do on she wedding night. To help them do this, they carried baskets of shiny, purple baigan to the river where they did sing rude chutney songs and dance to tassa drumming.

The only men at the matikor was the tassa drummers, and they had better stay far from the dancing circle, the women's circle. The women went to teach Champa the act by playing and dancing with each other using the long, firm baigan. All the women and the girls went except me. It was the first night of that bad flu I did catch that time. Me and my four young cousins was supposed to rub down Champa with hardi, that is, turmeric paste, during the matikor. The hardi does make your skin golden so Champa would be glowing for she wedding ceremony two days later on that Sunday. Only young, pure, unmarried girls, that is, virgins, suppose to put hardi on the dulahin, that is, the bride. I was the oldest unmarried girl although I was only two years younger than Champa who was eighteen. I was well looking forward to rubbing the hardi because you does get to pinch up the dulahin when you putting the hardi. Pinching does make sure the hardi get into she skin and make she glow.

But I couldn't go to the matikor because they did give me a dose of puncheon rum with honey and lime and it knock me out quick, quick. I sleep. But the sleep was restless, I was in and out of consciousness, like that sleep we does call dropsy. When you trying to wake up but no matter how hard you try you can't open your eyes or raise your head or your arms or your legs. It is as if a heaviness weighing you down. But you could hear everything that going on around you and it is like you dreaming and waking at the same time. And everything you hearing working its way into your dreams so you don't know what is real and what is dream. And is there a difference anyhow? And what is time now and time in the past and time in the future and what is the difference?

I remember the tassa drumming well. It rush like a sonic boom from outer space and enter your chest, turning it into a tassa drum too but the drummer is remote, beating the membrane of your flesh from some other astral plane. And all tied up with this body percussion is a sound like a chain dragging, dragging along the road tinkling the gravel as it moving along. And the only thing I know that does drag a chain in the night is a lagahoo. That halfman-halfbeast that cannot find peace -- that is destined to walk the earth forever. But then the next thing I know is bats flying all around the place, in the room, outside the window, in the sky and they covering the guava tree outside the window. The guava tree with the big white-fleshed fruits that are so sweet, is no wonder the bats are all over the tree. Except, each time a bat bite into a guava, the bat immediately turn into a woman. Imagine that. But is not any woman, is an Arawak

woman. So you have all these women, naked as you would expect, and I could see that they don't have any navel.

"Oui fout!" I shout, "What happen to allyuh navel?"

"We don't have navels. We are from the other side," one of the women answers.

"What other side you talking bout?"

"The other side from the side of the living."

"You mean the side of the dead?" I ask.

"We are not the dead. We are op'a, the unborn. That is why we have no navels."

"I could touch allyuh belly to see how it feel to not have navel?"

"Oh no, you are human. If you touch us we will disappear. We will immediately return to the other side."

"So what allyuh doing here?"

"We come to play. We sleep in the cave during the day and at night we eat guava and play with the living."

"Allyuh come to play with me?" My mouth drops open.

"No, we want to play with the men tonight."

"Well, allyuh wouldn't have any trouble finding men tonight because all the women and girls gone off to Champa matikor by the river," I explain. "Allyuh can't hear them? Listen, you go hear the women laughing and carrying on, singing rude chutney songs fast, fast in tune with the tassa drumming. And look, you see how they pairing off with a firm, long baigan between them, gyrating like nobody business."

But the op'a women not interested in what I seeing and hearing. It is as if they can't even hear and see what I can hear and see. They leave me and go looking for the men. These Arawak women without any navel find the men, except somehow all the men have turned into lagahoo. But that does not stop the op'a women from mating with the men. And this mating happen with the lagahoo and the op'a rolling around each other, coiling up like snakes. Imagine that. Afterwards, the lagahoo turn back into men and the men try to hug and kiss the op'a. Of course the op'a women disappear, because that is what happen when humans try to hug and kiss the women from the other side. They disappear. But the men who was lagahoo don't know this. The op'a women disappear leaving behind the men who are still dragging the chains behind them.

Except it look as if one of the op'a women turn into bat instead of disappearing and she drag away one of the chains when she turn into bat and somehow it find its way into my bed. But when I touch the chain, it change into a spot of blood. Imagine that, metal chain changing into hot red blood. The heaviness is still weighing me down and I cannot get up to see why this is so. My chest is still a tassa drum but now I notice it move down to my belly and my belly too is throbbing like a drum with its own remote drummer.

Except this new drummer is forceful and hurting my belly. And now I in the canefield on the opposite side of the river and the drummer is coiling around me like a mapepire snake, drumming, drumming on my belly. The cane stalks tall and tasseling, swallowing me, hiding me from the rest of the women and girls who dancing and singing on the other side of the river. I open my mouth but it is as if my mouth disappear from my face like how the op'a navels have disappeared from their bellies. I cannot make a sound even though my belly feel as if it will burst wide open and spill all the blood in the world. I must get this drummer off me. I must wake up. I try raising my arms and legs without success.

Where them Arawak women? I need them to come and kiss this drummer, to make him disappear with them but they have all gone. I remember the bats. I squeeze my eyes close tight, willing the bats to come to me and they come. I am surprised, but quickly I make them take hold of my arms and legs and raise me up above the tall, tall cane, away from this drummer that has caused all the blood in the world to flow from my belly. The weight lifts. I wake up. My bed wet. There is darkness all around. There is total quiet. The singing and drumming has stopped. I feel the wetness on the bed and smell my hand. There is the scent of blood mix up with another strange scent. Is it animal? Sweet? Guava? Full of fear? Maybe is all of these scents mix up together. What is it? How did it get on my bed? And why I still hurting in my belly when the drummer done disappear?

What happened that night? All I know is that when the women and girls of the village return they find me on my bed drowsy and without my underwear, with blood on the bed. Who do this to you, they question and question.

“The remote drummer?” I answer hesitantly with my own question.

“What remote drummer? You lose your mind or what?” questions Tanty.

“The lagahoo?” I try once more.

“Girl, you smoke ganja or what?” ask the next door neighbor.

“One of the men from the village?” I say this without any conviction whatsoever.

“I did know it. I did always know that fella who does live by heself in the old house down the road was a damn neemakharam. A no-good and look what he do now. Spoil the chile. How she could ever get married to a good boy now?”

“No, is not him,” I interrupt quickly.

“Is not he? Well who then?” Everybody crowding, crowding round me and I could hardly breathe now.

“I don’t know,” I shout so loud that everybody scatter. Except that is when I see my mother. She only now come home because she had was to go and fix up the bedi for Champa wedding. She had was to go and help Champa mother mix the pure dirt and the clean river water to make the mud and build the altar where Goddess Mati and Ganga Mai will sit to bless Champa and she husband on their wedding day.

“Oh God, my beti, my beti, who do this to you?” my mother cries, wrapping me up in she arms. “What allyuh looking at? Leave if allyuh can’t help we. Leave we alone.”

“Ma, I don’t know what happen.”

“Shush. Shush. I here now. I so sorry I wasn’t here to protect you, my beti, my good daughter. I so sorry,” my mother wails.

I hear someone say that it is a good thing that what happen to me didn’t happen to Champa. You could imagine the trouble for Champa mother and father if after working so hard to find a good boy for Champa, and spending so much money for this wedding, that something like that happen?

“And why my daughter don’t deserve happiness too?” My mother shout at the crowd of family and neighbours. “Why my daughter don’t deserve a good boy and a matikor and a proper Hindu wedding, eh? Why? Why? Why Goddess Mati?”

Only the bats and the Op’a women from the other side know what happen that night. But since then I always wonder if Champa belly hurt on she wedding night. Did she belly hurt as much as mine did hurt that night of she matikor? And did she learn anything, at she matikor, to stop the hurt? Could she teach me something to make me forget? But I don’t have the courage to ask she. I don’t have the courage to look at the face of the remote drummer, even now when he return to drum on my naked, sleeping body. The pain is too great. Maybe, when I get to the other side and I no longer have a navel, a navel that hurts so much, I will ask the Op’a women to tell me what happened that night.