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FICTION

## A View from Across the Soursop Tree

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“A View from Across the Soursop Tree” is a short story about a friendship between two young girls growing up in Jamaica.

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Phina was my best friend all the way from elementary school until our first year in secondary school when we parted ways. I was with her that cool Monday morning when Grandma Linda shook her from her dream and took her by hand to chop above her head on the soursop<sup>1</sup> tree in our backyard to cure her of her asthma. She was petrified when she saw the glistening silver machete, and she shat urine as Grandma Linda wheeled it above her head and landed it deftly into the tree. She collapsed shortly after, and her stained white top had fallen off her a shoulder, revealing the bud of her pubescent breast. I had rushed to her and held the shirt up to hide her shame from the giggling teenaged boys who looked on. When she regained consciousness, a shadow had come over her face in the dark, muggy room, and she saw me staring at her with what she would later refer to as “vigilant eyes.” Phina was cured of asthma from that day on but our friendship soured.

I remember when her words became sharp towards me. I had just returned from a long trip at Linstead Market with Grandma Linda. I struggled with a small crocus bag<sup>2</sup> in my hand and Grandma Linda balanced a basket of fruits and ground provisions<sup>3</sup> on her head. I remember being tired and trailed behind Grandma Linda. She was not in the best of moods for some pesky little runt had bent over, rolled up her skirt and had shown her backside to her. Grandma Linda wanted to spank the child with the roughness of her palm but refrained from doing so because she was the grand daughter of her best friend.

“These lickle pickannies nowadays,” she screamed at me, “are growin’ up without no friggin’ manners.”

I made no comment for although I was a boyish ten-year-old, I was astute as well. I loved playing dandy-shandy<sup>4</sup> and running wild in the bushes with the boys. Grandma Linda had warned me, with a furious right-handed fist punching the air, that if I ever loose my place, she would fist me down back in the earth.

“Don’t worry,” I warned her, “I’ll never be rude to you.”

Grandma Linda was the only person I had known since my parents died in a train crash in 1947. Then I was a shy, skinny-legged nine-year-old when I came to live with her. That was how I met Phina for she was always staring across the soursop tree to get a glimpse of me. Even though she performed raucous and outrageous tricks to grab my attention, I had pretended not to notice her. Grandma Linda had already warned me about her troublemaking habits and her widowed mother’s reluctance to control her.

I never really acknowledged her until that day, about a year later, when I went riding on Grandma Linda’s donkey through the rough trail along the orange groves. Phina had ridden up behind me on Perelandra, her family’s quarter horse, and had started to tease me. Spitefully she whipped the rear of my donkey and I went in full gallop, screaming all the way up to the Cunningham’s farm. She seemed disappointed that I had made it to such a distance and whispered something deviously about me under her breath.

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<sup>1</sup> Soursop—a sweet, green-skinned oval or heart-shaped prickly fruit that grows in the West Indies.

<sup>2</sup> Crocus bag—a coarse bag usually name from burlap that is used to store flour or rice.

<sup>3</sup> Ground provisions—roots used as a staple in Jamaica.

<sup>4</sup> Dandy shandy—a game played by girls in Jamaica where the ball is thrown by two children at opposite ends to hit the person in the middle. The goal is not to be hit by the ball.

“What did you say?” I asked in fury.

“Stupid Kingstonians!”<sup>5</sup>

“I guess I’m not so stupid if I can ride a donkey,” I replied angrily.

Phina’s idea of city folks was like most Chatamites. They thought that people who lived in the city could not do simple things like spreading their beds or washing their dishes but I proved her wrong by balancing myself on a donkey. She did not say another word to me until I saw her playing in the schoolyard at Lexington Primary School. She and a group of three uniformed girls had asked me to play a game of dandy shandy. She insisted that I be on her team while the two other girls joined up. I noticed that when she jumped up, spreading her legs apart most acrobatically to prevent the ball from hitting her, she laughed in the highest falsetto voice I had ever heard. That was what I liked about her best, that loud, fake sound that seemed to echo across the playground.

It was also on that day that I first realized that she knew my name. She had called me when I was about to leave the scene.

“M-a-a-a-jorie, M-a-a-a-jorie!” Her voice resonated like bells in my ears.

I turned around and saw her staring at me, liking me, beckoning me to become her friend. I had smiled at her for as she stood there I thought of her as being pretty. She was much taller than the average ten-year-old and appeared more sensible. She had naseberry-brown<sup>6</sup> skin and eyes with an oriental-slant, which were the color of hazelnut. With arms and legs spread apart, she shifted her hips slowly from side to side.

“Could you please come here,” she demanded.

“What for?” I asked.

She had always seemed to be the quintessential little rascal for she led a group of girls who followed obediently behind. Quite frankly as well, she appeared to me to be a most unpleasant girl despite that pretty face of hers.

“I thought you didn’t like Kingstonians because they were ‘stupid,’” I commented sarcastically.

“Well”, she replied brazenly, “I like you.”

That was how our friendship started. I joined her as she cut her familiar path leading the girls into the schoolyard. She had given up all her friends to stand by me, and Grandma Linda cautioned me about her occasional outbursts of emotional and fanatic spells amid her infrequent asthmatic squeals.

“I’ll be careful,” I assured her, every time I would run out to play with Phina.

But Phina proved to be a good friend until our falling out and we parted ways. It was as if a tractor had cut across our path and we could not reach each other as we had done before.

The block was so tremendous that it caused us to go our opposite ways. She had always been a recalcitrant little waif, ignoring the rules of her parent while she roamed around Chatam. As her tag-along, I would go with her at her behest but the consequences I suffered on returning to Grandma Linda’s home were rather severe. Grandma Linda was a stern and protective woman ever since she lost my mother in that terrible crash of ‘47. She would set down direct rules for me to obey and would warn me beforehand about the consequences that would befall me if they were not followed.

“I’ll put the tamarind switch to yuh behind if yuh no back by four,” she had told me one morning. I must have been about eleven and had been roaming about with Phina all over Chatam. Stories had surfaced about “Linda’s Boy,” which was what they called me, raiding neighbors’ mango trees, uprooting their roses and firing slingshots from behind bushes at passersby. Grandma Linda had looked like a madwoman, as she swung her hemlines over to Phina’s yard to complain to her mother that her daughter was a bad influence on me. She returned minutes later drenched with water from head to toe. Mrs. Iocinth, Phina’s mother, had thrown an enamel wash-basin filled with water on her.

“Marjorie! Come here to mi,” she commanded. “I don’t want yuh to play with that chile! Yuh hear mi?” she screamed while shaking me.

“Yes, Grandma,” I replied with sadness.

I tried to explain to Grandma Linda that Phina was indeed the true culprit and that I was only her tag-along but she would not listen and shook her fist at me.

Our friendship cooled after that episode and Phina’s asthmatic spells became more frequent. About a year later, Mrs. Iocinth, Phina’s mother, came running at Grandma’s Linda door begging for her assistance. Phina had had an asthmatic attack and she lay blue-lipped in her bed wheezing heavily and scratching her chin. Grandma Linda was at her bedside rubbing her chest with camphor oil and administering a dose of

<sup>5</sup> Kingstonians—people who live in the capital city of Jamaica. They are said to be ignorant of provincial ways.

<sup>6</sup> Naseberry—a sweet, brown-skinned fruit native to the Caribbean.

ganga<sup>7</sup> tea. She had carefully instructed Mrs. Iocinth to put some of the ganga leaves in a bottle of Bay Rum and continually rub Phina's chest. But that antidote did not work and that was the reason why Grandma Linda prescribed chopping above Phina's head on the soursop tree that was in our yard. At first, Mrs. Iocinth went into an emotional state bellowing at Grandma Linda for wanting to wound Phina for leading me a stray. She could not conceive the idea of a razor-sharp instrument being swung above Phina's head despite witnessing the ritual performed on other children several times.

"Yuh will kill her, I tell yuh! Yuh will kill her!" she screamed at Grandma Linda.

But Grandma Linda took her hand softly and empathized with her fear of losing a child since my mother had died leaving a deep wound in her heart.

"She'll be alright. Alright a tell yuh," warned Grandma Linda.

Grandma Linda was a skillful magician who had cured several neighborhood children of asthma with the wheel of her silver machete. She had always boasted that her chops were so swift that she frightened the children out of their asthma. A ritual was always carefully prepared before she measured the children on the tree. Each child would be scrubbed clean and dressed in a starch-stiff white shirt; their hair should never be braided before this sacred act was executed. Grandma Linda never confessed why every detail had to be just so but it was quite apparent to her believers that she was a blessed healer.

Phina's case was the most difficult of all situations Grandma Linda had ever handled. Upon hearing her decided fate, Phina went flipping around Chatam whenever she was not ill, spreading a dangerous rumor to distant neighbors that Grandma Linda was going to hack her to pieces. "Fannie," the concerned mistress of Cunningham Farm had gone with an inquiring apprehension to Mrs. Iocinth to seek a better understanding on the matter. Others called the constable and sent him to Grandma Linda to investigate the story. Each person was calmed and left the scene convinced that Phina was only delirious about the event that was about to befall her. Grandma Linda, however, had to persuade the constable that Phina's ritual was not going to result in her death.

"I have done this over a dozen times," I overheard her tell the constable. "Go and ask these people about what I can do."

Grandma Linda had built her confidence by curing children of their asthmatic attacks over the years. Even since I was nine-years old, I had seen village people from neighboring districts come to cure their beloved ones. There was Mr. Chin, the Chinaman, who had brought along his indolent mixed-race daughter, Kay. He had explained to Grandma Linda that even his ancient Chinese herbs could not cure the girl whose complexion had become so pallid from sickness that people had begun to ask him if she had undergone some mysterious blood-letting sessions. Kay was so fed up with her illness that when her time came, she took her place dutifully on the bark of the soursop tree with her wavy brown hair gently blowing in the morning wind. She was cured of her malady instantly and walked away high-chested like the resurrected Lazarus.

Phina was convinced to undergo the asthmatic ritual during her twelfth year. By that time we no longer saw eye to eye. I had thrown off my childish way by giving up dandy-shandy and running wild in the bushes with the boys. We had several bitter quarrels that usually left us furious and not speaking with each other. Grandma Linda said that I was maturing and had become more responsible. Phina had matured too but in a different way. She no longer was the troublesome girl who courted danger but had become an ultra-sensitive feline, scratching through any dark obstacle that seemed to block her way. Her penchant to incite others against me was the game she played to put a wall between me and our friends. Grandma Linda warned me that she was only acting that way because she was afraid of being chopped on the soursop tree and that I should keep clear of her until she had gained more confidence on the issue.

So I hardly understood the shadowy rumor she later spread among the Chatamites after she had awakened and found herself groggy in the tiny, dark room. I had felt concerned for her for when her time came she had to be blindfolded and led to the soursop tree. I had taken her by the arm with such tenderness, ignoring the grudges she held against me. The only hint of cowardice she displayed was the slight jerk of her body when I placed her on the tree at the mark that Grandma Linda had made after measuring her the previous day. She knew that she had reached her destination and that the ritual was about to begin. It went so swiftly that she collapsed shortly thereafter and had to be lifted to her room. I had stayed behind, to wipe away any sign of sweat and to see at first hand that she came to full consciousness, without any guile in my heart. That was the reason I became somewhat disconcerted when she later referred to me as watching her with "vigilant eyes."

"What does it mean?" I had asked Salome, one of our schoolmates.

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<sup>7</sup> Ganga—marijuana plant. Jamaican use its leaves to make tea and for other medicinal purposes.

She sat in a queue with several other girls who had given me dirty looks as I passed them by. Salome had always been strong-minded and more logical in her thinking. I had gone up to her in private and called her aside to inquire about the rumor but I was not prepared to handle what she told me.

Phina's words had always been like a dull sword that cut jagged through the raw skin. Its effect was difficult and left an infectious wound that could kill if it could not be healed. So when Salome explained that Phina said that I had pulled up her white shirt to reveal her breast to the boys who had stared on at the occasion, I was stupefied.

"She said that the 'evil' way you looked at her caused her to remember," she added.

I could only bury my head into my hands and weep. I said nothing after that.

Grandma Linda advised me later that sometimes friends have to go their separate ways, so therefore, that was the choice I made. It was much easier than quarreling with Phina all the time. So that summer when our school broke for vacation and Grandma Linda told me that Mrs. Iocinth was sending Phina to Kingston to live with her sister, my heart literally leaped from my chest. I began to think about our short, intermittent and tumultuous friendship. It truly had been tempestuous and lacked trust. One minute Phina would be daring and adventurous reeking havoc around Chatam like a storm while the next minute she would be cussing and scratching like a feline. For some strange reason I had surmised that this happened because she was slowing descending into a state of mental decline.

"Are yuh sure?" I asked Grandma Linda with a twinkle in my eyes.

She had nodded her head in a manner that suggested that I must not mention the news to anybody. She said that Mrs. Iocinth confided that Phina was acting a little bit "crazy" and that she thought if she got away to meet new friends she would be better off. I stared at Grandma Linda in bewilderment because I wanted to confess to her that I too had witnessed the "crazy" actions in Phina's behavior but understood that she wanted the issue to be laid to rest. Bad episodes in people's lives must not be discussed in the presence of Grandma Linda.

"You'll be better off too," she said as she gave me a confident pat on my shoulder.

"Will I truly be?" I asked her with a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

I wanted to run out of the house to try and talk to Phina before her departure. I wanted to tell her that she had wronged me by soiling my reputation. But what good would the expulsion of feelings do to her?

"Just give her a chance to start a new life without going back to the past," warned Grandma Linda.

I tried to calm myself for a feeling of deep regret came over me at the thought of the deeply carved wound Phina had inflicted in my heart while she escaped to freedom.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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