

Luck!

Cocoa-brown in color, with curly black hair, and weighing one hundred and eighty pounds, Andrew Caymer was a modest, God-fearing man of medium height. He considered himself fit enough for a thirty-seven year old with a sit-down government job as warden of Union Island. Caymer valued his position, and excepting one major bother, was content with life.

Especially proud of his heritage, he was Grenadine descendant of Black Caribs—an African and Carib mixed-race people who escaped St. Vincent when colonials began shipping them to Central America. Constantly warring against oppression, these runaway freedom fighters eluded slavery, that time, by moving to small Caribbean islands Europeans deemed unsuitable for their agricultural ambitions.

Worldly, fair-minded, and literate, Caymer felt his temperament suited his position. He had earned a Bachelors of Arts in Literature from UWI; a Lower Second, a competent degree better than a gentleman's Pass. He had studied hard, and being first in his family with a university degree, was proud of the achievement.

Nine o'clock on this sunny Tuesday morning, Caymer sat at his kitchen table reviewing paper work of his latest inmate; he preferred the term 'guest.'

Jemani Barata would be doing sixty days for stealing two coconut-bread loaves worth a dollar-twenty: a typically harsh penalty from the local lawgiver. Judge Luke Matthews, who also taught Sunday school, believed punishing minor offences discouraged greater temptations.

After being delivered by Prison Department jeep on Monday afternoon, when asked about the circumstances, Barata said, "It was two constables tired after a night shift, and dey spiteful 'bout it. Even after I explain how it was, and de nice baker ask dem to drop de charge, dey wouldn't. Is why life so wicked on police."

Not following the reasoning, Caymer said, "How's that?"

Barata waved his hand dismissively, said, “Leh we not get into dat. It doh matter! Get de picture. Morning sun just up ready to shine, and instead, it so distress to find de Jem hungry, it hiding behind raincloud. C’mon! So I passing through dis dirt track and notice a bunch of fat, ripe, silk fig tempting from behind a t’ick hibiscus fence, not t’ree feet high. So yuh boy just ready to do a straddle jump when two uncivilized dogs show up. Big like bulls, dey charging, and snarling from maws of white fangs, and springing stringy saliva from red, flapping tongues. *Oy-a-yoy!* Dat is what rush in on mih breakfast scene, discouraging every t’ing. So with all dat commotion, yuh boy move on.”

The young fellow seeming to stop, Caymer prodded, “So how the bread comes in?”

“O, dat. Well, by de time I get to de village, I so hungry, I ready to play goat and chew on bramble, bamboo shoot, any t’ing. Den I ketch a scent on de air, follow mih nose, and dere ‘round a corner, in front a bakery on a tray by de door is fresh loaves smelling like *Eat-Me!* How yuh boy go pass dat invite, eh? Den, as dey say, de rest is history.”

Elaborately shrugged shoulders made his point.

Trinidadian from accent, Jemani Barata was a couple inches taller than Caymer, about a hundred-seventy well-proportioned pounds, and twenty-two by his say-so. Although a flawless, hairless, olive-brown face did not support the claim, nor did his expensive-looking canvas gunnysack contain any identity documents.

That aside, a buoyant cheekiness boosted his bread story as he squared earnest, brown eyes with Caymer’s, and suggested an upside to the situation. “For me,” said he. “Dis is a vacation from de real world, living real life, and so on. To tell you straight, busted here for a couple months mean no worries ‘bout hunger, a safe place to close mih eyes, and a bathroom with a shower. No joke ‘bout dat, Bossman. Dis is serious luxury!”

Amused by the devil-may-care argument, Caymer smiled and nodded at the fellow; whose grins seemed overworking at assurances. In any case, Barata’s attitude fitted Caymer’s approach to crime and punishment; he tended to suit disciplinary procedures to personality.

That evening, after bringing him dinner in the cell, although Caymer locked him in, it was mere routine. His second brain sensed Jemani Barata and he was an agreeable fit.

Caymer was confident about this assessment after Barata had spent two days in the two-cell jail. This is a one window, one door concrete structure, roof and all, situated a dozen grassy strides from the jailor's residence; which itself is a galvanized-roofed two-bedroom, ranch-style home fitted with all modern conveniences. Topped with a coiled barbed-wire rim, a ten-foot high chain-link fence surrounds, and secures, the property within a fat, oblong acre favored with a sizeable backyard that boasts producing fruit trees; dwarf coconuts, mangos Starch and Julie, and sweet Valencia oranges. Midway to the backyard is an adequate fowl house. Two tall breadfruit trees near the back fence overdo at providing for foragers such as blue crabs, rodents, yard fowls, various roving birds, and opportunistic others.

Property of Prisons, the facility is built on land at the southern end of the island 'recovered and developed' three decades ago from a forest of hardy shrubs and tall, yellow grasses within which sea-birds nest.

These days Caymer and his lady are on an off period of their personal arrangement, so he lives there alone.

Eleven years ago, Caymer, then twenty-six, met Roxie Marath in the after-graduation fete at Cave Hill campus; the coming September she, almost eighteen, was entering U.W.I. to do first year Law. They introduced themselves, exchanged ambitions, laughing as if it were funny. They danced the 'achieving celebrants only' slow dance, and afterwards, sat and talked plans, he teaching, she learning code; then laughing again, and loving themselves more than anything else, they 'somewhat' committed to each other.

During those early times Caymer saw them as a cute, though unbalanced, June/September couple, she vivacious, he jealously tolerant. Sober Time eventually spotlighted his error to be their upbringings. Her folks were upper class Vincentian professionals; mother a head nurse, father the agriculture minister. Roxie was their brilliant child, a guitarist in a chamber music quartet, at ease with attention.

Caymer's folks were weekend market vendors who sustained themselves by making garden; their specialty was ground provisions and quick-selling short crop greens like lettuce, peppers, and tomatoes. His father, when necessary, was a capable carpenter. The family's financial security was a Jamaica Hope milk cow. As a youngster, Andrew was a competent all-rounder at cricket, and by dint of dogged study, a scholarship winner. He had a tendency to reticence.

One of Barata's first questions was 'How you find dis job?' which Caymer had heard before. Except this time, before he could respond Barata was saying how it seemed a '*best ever deal.*' He declared that he craved such a position, with quiet time to think, and definite duties to keep him on task, and so forth. He went on and on about his perceived merits of the dull-as-a-rock jailor's job.

Unexpectedly, never having heard such an upbeat version, as Caymer listened, he found, and perhaps sympathized with, some interesting facets.

On the third day when Caymer brought him lunch, Barata greeted him, "Hey, Bossman, I want you to know dat before I move on, I t'ink I'll enjoy dis li'l stay in yuh concrete keep."

His term for the cell catching Caymer's attention, it sparked a hope Barata then blazed alight by asking, "You carry any reading materials? I mean books, magazines, comics, any t'ing with writing or pictures?"

The question welcomed like an invigorating sea breeze, Caymer said, "I think I can satisfy your request in short order."

Caymer routinely offered guests a copy of either, or all, of five books picked from his personal library, namely, Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*, Dale Carnegie's *How to win friends and influence people*, Edgar Allen Poe's *Short Stories*, Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* by Derek Walcott.

His reasons were imprecise, though generally community minded. Maybe because everyone knew everyone else in this little Grenadine isle, crime was petty and low. At the job going on ten years, Caymer never had more than three guests at one time, all of whom he knew, one being a cousin. His basic intention with the books, then, was to help guests pass the time, improve their minds, and maybe, create a positive interest.

Most unusual about Jemani Barata was that by end of the first week he'd read every book, and after finishing each, had been eager to discuss its content.

He had explained his approach to discussion. "Bossman, I cyar handle words so good, but I tight with ideas. So I asking you to leh me know how you see de story, and what you like 'bout de players. Dat way I could jump in and react from what you t'inking. I mean like yuh version of t'ings."

Although the process was unusual, Caymer went along for two reasons; first, it allowed him to recall and refresh pertinent data that'd support debate, and second, he was simply curious about the young man.

So he complied; giving premise, characters' traits, and outcomes of the particular book, just story basics. The result was definitely worthwhile, for having *consumed* those five books, Barata brought up such impressive insights in discussion, Caymer would find himself nodding as he murmured, "I think you have that right!"

The nonchalant young fellow was a shrewd thought provoker!

Midmorning Tuesday of the second week, they were in the backyard rescuing fallen ripe mangos from beaks of roaming yard fowl. Standing around a pile, discussion about pros and cons of drying clothes by hanging on sundrenched clotheslines, versus a wash-and-dry machine, strayed into subject matter relating to Caymer's latest breakup; this without mentioning his Roxie by name. Still, defending Nature becoming uncomfortable, he tried ending the conversation by saying, "Right or wrong, it's God's will. So about it, I say, Amen!"

To which Barata responded sarcastically. "Bossman, I doh know you, but is as if you support yuh doh-care God with lotsa might. As far as I could see, yuh God does make statements in a sign language humans cyar understand. Some say dey do, but dey never really. To me, dis way yuh God escaping responsibility for all dem horrible happenings on dis earth he claiming to own. See what I mean?"

Taken aback, Caymer shot him a stern look, said, "Isn't that a bit rude? Suggesting the Almighty is deceptive?"

"Bossman, dat's how yuh boy see it. Seems a reasonable conclusion!"

"Come on, boy. Don't you believe in an infallible God?"

“I wouldn’t say dat. I t’ink a lot a’ people believe in one God or de other because dat excusing dey personal situations. Me, I trucking with Luck! If I have to believe in a supernatural, it going to be mih angel Lady Luck.”

He shrugged shoulders in that’s-how-it-is fashion, and grinned teeth white as sea salt.

Not at all amused, Caymer shook his head, silently disapproving.

“Listen, Bossman,” said Barata. “Don’t take on me like dat. You wouldn’t if you had *my* experience. Maybe mih story might explain better?”

Caymer shrugged indifference, grimaced and said, “Go ahead, man. Tell all. Fly the talk.”

Jemani Barata squatted and leaned back on the smooth trunk of a mango Starch tree. “I sure you know,” he began. “A sea bath is not de same t’ing to everybody. According to personal beliefs, more dan plain washing, it could be a cleansing of yuh soul, contrition, a cure, or a blessing. You know dat, right!”

“Yes. I know that. It also depends on which island you from.”

“You sure right ‘bout dat. Obeah not heavy in every one. Well Bossman, when I was old enough to understand, mih Mammy gi’ me details of a business she did because she was dis own-way, teenaged mom who offend she dad, and *he* was a serious Dahomey obeahman. The real deal! As a revenge lesson, he put a light on she head. So to atone for she disrespect, when I turn four, mih mammy take me to a seaside cove and gi’ me a bath honoring Eshu, de Yoruba god of crossroads, and—”

Caymer cut in, “I know a little about this Eshu God. He’s the one that controls the nature of being, the path of a person’s life. Right?”

“True, dat. So den you also know dat in Yoruba beliefs, same Eshu is a sly trickster, a sexual trouble-maker, a general nuisance—”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” said Caymer. “How come you know so much about this?”

Barata cocked his head and studied Caymer with an ambiguous eye. Then from the pile at their feet, he selected a Julie, and began peeling it with his teeth, musingly.

Caymer watched thick yellow juice burst from the mango and, like a tear, trickle over Barata’s fingers and wrist. He swallowed a gush of saliva, stooped, and selected a mango Starch. Before biting in, he brought it to his nose and savored its Tonka bean flavor.

They consumed their fruits in silence.

Done with picking mango hairs from between his teeth, Barata continued his story: “Before she pass through, mih mudder use to talk ‘bout we roots. Of all dem stories dat stick in mih mind, a special one does stand out. Is sum t’ing she wanted me to do, to go find—”

Thinking of Joseph Campbell, Caymer cut in, “Like a quest, huh!”

Barata looked at him sharply, and nodded, “Yeah! A quest is like what I meaning. But hold on, I doh want to jump ahead. Leh we go back to what happen after Mammy gi’ me up to Eshu. What you should understand is dat Eshu have friendly orishas like goddesses, comrades, lovers, and so on. Lady Luck is a favorite always teaming up with him to create bacchanal. Well, as mih mammy put it, when she gi’ me up, Eshu was busy in some other commess. So he pass me over to he partner, Lady Luck. And dat was dat. Straightaway mih mammy fortunes change! Not long after, I was five, maybe six, she meet up a fella in de marketplace, Mickey Barata, a man I come to accept as dad. Dey fall in love and wasn’t long dey marry up. He was well off, and next t’ing you know, we up at he estate in Guaya living hoity-toity. All a’ dat niceness cause mih mammy to give me up again, dis time leaving Lady Luck in charge.”

“That’s how you see it? Luck getting control?” Caymer challenged.

“What else?” said Barata.

“Well,” said Caymer. “It’s obvious—”

Barata interrupted, “Hold on ‘til I tell you de whole story, nuh. Lemme go on!”

Caymer shrugged, raised his arms over his head, stretched them backwards, and said calmly, “It’s your story. I’m all ears!”

“Okay. Well, as I was saying, for me, nothing else to do in dis mansion near de sea, and far from school, I spend a lot of time in de salty with other seafarers, learning sea life by doing it. When out de water I was in Mickey’s library roaming ... alone in a room full of books ... checking out ones with pictures ... reading some bits ... fables, I like dem ... a few lines of commonsense ... dat was a good period ... time flying by swift like riptide ... ‘bout ten years without a care ... dat was outstanding ... ”

Barata stopped speaking altogether and looked at Caymer specially, his raised eyebrows enquiring.

Caymer said, “What?”

“You sure you want to hear all dis? You plan to use it officially, or sum t’ing?”

“No! No! Not at all!” said Caymer, firmly. “This conversation is between you and I. And so it will remain. Truth is, you recount an interesting history. You should write it down, like a diary.”

Barata beamed, said, “You t’ink so, eh. Write it like a novel and dey make a movie from it, eh?”

“Hey! You never know,” said Caymer, chuckling. “But first, maybe you should finish the telling, eh. What you say?”

Barata clapped his hands and cackled. “Bossman,” he said. “You’s a funny fella, a easy, niceful man.”

“So,” prompted Caymer. “You’re essentially self taught, huh.”

“Well, I don’t know ‘bout all dat. I learn a lot from watching, and listening, and doing, though I did pick up a bit from checking out books. Anyhow, a couple years later, all dat life change when Mammy and Mickey get smash up when their car stall at a train crossing ...” Barata stopped speaking, abruptly stood up and faced away, to the backyard. His shoulders straightened as he heaved in a very deep breath.

Caymer had glimpsed a glister in the fellow’s eyes as he turned away. “Aye,” said he. “You mind we continue this later. Have to make us lunch.”

“No problem,” mumbled Barata.

That afternoon, Caymer stepped across to the cells and invited Barata to walk with him as he did a patrol around the grounds.

As they started Barata said, “I suppose you want me finish telling mih tale of woes, eh,” he chuckled and continued, “but first I want to see how close you was following. You remember where I stop?”

“So now you testing me?” said Caymer.

“Dat’s okay, Bossman, I only mamaguying. I did stop when Lady Luck kill off mih mammy—”

“Hold on!” said Caymer, grabbing Barata’s arm, stopping him to look into his eyes. “You can’t seriously mean that!”

Barata met his regard and shrugged. “Dat’s what happen. Lady Luck didn’t like how t’ings was going.”

“How you can say that, man? In fact things seemed to be fine. You all were a family. Small yes, but still a family. Not so?”

“Well, half and half. *Dey* was having a good time together. *Me*, dey abandon, leave me to deal on mih own, by mih self. Maybe Luck didn’t like dat, eh. Maybe.”

Forehead furrowed, expression puzzled, Caymer shot him a complicated look. “You serious?” he said.

Barata did his dismissive hand gesture, said, “So lemme go on, nah man. As Luck had it, since they had no will, Mickey brudder, Mister Vincent, take over every t’ing, move into de mansion. He and Miss Beulah shift me to a back room, and outa dey mind. So after dat it was Miss Lorna, Mickey and Mammy housekeeper, who raise me. It get so dat I was like a prowler in dey happy homey scene ... dey get educated in America ... dey accustom to driving ... Beulah, de wife, was a law clerk, or sum t’ing ... ”

Seeing him drifting off track, Caymer was about to suggest stopping the talk, when Barata took a deep breath, and as if restored, continued, “One evening nearing Christmas, Beulah come down to mih backroom bringing a pastille, still warm. I was on de bed, t’inking. She had never come to mih room. I sit up, take de saucer with de pastille, say t’anks nice-nice, expecting she to leave. Instead, she pull out mih desk chair, lean it against de door, and sit down careless. ‘Jemmy, boy,’ she say. ‘You’re a fine fella, good looking and smart. Your only problem is bad luck. What you need is the good kind!’

“She looking at me, big brown eyes so pitiful dey reddening. Den she stand up, cross de room, lean against mih shoulder, and start scratching mih head with she fingernails. Gentle-gentle, nice-nice, and all at once a warm, different scent, not sweet, not stink, but forceful, filling up de room. Yuh boy start getting uncomfortable, especially down in mih business region. ‘Cause now I frighten! I t’inking what if Mister Vincent come by. Well, in two-twos, yuh boy scramble up, move dat chair, open de door, and was free from dat sticky scene. Biggest surprise, last t’ing I hear is Beulah giggling!”

Barata stopped under a dwarf coconut tree, stared at a ripe bunch, then request in his eyes, looked at Caymer who answered, “Sure, you’ll have to go get the cutlass in the kitchen.”

“Not a problem, Bossman,” said Barata, and trotted off with youthful enthusiasm.

Refreshment consumed, they back to patrolling, Barata continued, “De t’ing is, I never see mih situation as Beulah did. Is true mih backroom wasn’t de most appealing, had no toilet, make you walk round de verandah to go pee. But den, if it dark outside, you could pee through de window. Right? As for food, Miss Lorna was a super cook who could make stale bread taste like pastry. So hunger was never a problem. Furthermore, I always was a one-man gang, hanging with mih self. Also, since Beulah and Vincent leave me alone, I could do whatever I want. Gallivant on nice days, lolling off, or checking out whatever if de weather ugly. Dat’s when I start hanging on de beach and piers by de delta ... meeting up with regular fellas ... outdoorsmen living rough ... dey looking for a meal ... never pull a stroke ... stray-way children with nothing to do—”

Caymer cleared his throat loudly, and interrupted, “Aye, you mentioned a quest. What was that about?”

Barata flipped his hand dismissively, grinned and said, “Hold on, Bossman, I coming to dat. You know dat saying how too much honey does sicken you. Well, dem days I was ‘bout fifteen and on one hand, getting weak for Beulah and she slippery briar patch, while on mih other, free-minded hand, I more and more worried ‘bout trouble coming from mih slackness. Well, one morning de anxiety take over, and after dey leave for work, no plan in mind, I raid dey bedroom looking for money, valuables, pocketing any I find. Den Luck play she hand again. You want guess how?”

Caymer regarded the young man so eagerly challenging. “Not really,” he said. “What happened this time?”

“O chuts, Bossman!” said Barata. “You not even trying! You want to upset Luck, or what?”

Caymer said dryly, “Just tell your tale, huh!”

“Okay, okay. What if I tell you Miss Lorna bust me coming out dey bedroom?”

“No way!” exclaimed Caymer.

“Yep! Dat’s exactly wha’ happen. Arms fold across she broad chest, she stand up dere smiling at me, and saying, ‘So you not taking a change a’ clothes?’”

“How you handled that?”

“Truth, I make a guilty fart, quiet, though no rosy bouquet. It had she laughing as she take over, talking while emptying out dey fancy gunny sack,

talking while taking it to mih room and putting clothes, toothbrush, and t'ings like dat it in. All dis time she telling how she was expecting dis situation since she notice Beulah coming to mih room. And, how she figure dat, with a young fella like me, only mayhem would come from dem visits. And how, in she opinion, leaving is de best solution since mih mammy did settle good Luck on mih shoulder. Truth, de first time I realize I was running away was when Miss Lorna put in a tisane and say, 'Take a sip off and on for yuh health while you traveling.' So with all dat encouragement, yuh boy split dey home scene!"

They stopped now back at the track's fork to cell or kitchen. Caymer said, "So I guess your next chapter is about the quest, huh!"

"I wouldn't bet on dat! But we go see if we talk again. Okay!"

"What's this *if*? You mean *when*, don't you?"

"As yuh boy say," Barata said coyly. "We go see."

They headed to their separate doors.

For the next couple days, east winds unusual in strength and season, brought torrents of cold hard rain. Clad in Mackintosh and tall top rubbers on his visits, Caymer was businesslike, though cordial, with his guest. He did not linger to chat.

On his part, after asking for, and receiving a ballpoint pen and a notebook, Barata remained occupied in his cell.

The weather changed on Friday afternoon. With golden rays in washed-out skies, the sun set at six, making way for a pleasant, starry night. As celebratory dinner, Caymer slaughtered a pullet and made a curry pelau, with cucumber, lime slices, and zaboca on the side.

He put his head out the door and yelled for Barata. And, as if awaiting the summons, his guest was in the kitchen like a flash.

"Bossman," he declared as he pulled out a chair at the table. "Dat food smelling like de winner in a taste test! It had me t'inking up a special drink for dessert. How you feeling 'bout a fruity from blending mango and sweet orange, eh? You could do it with coconut water, although dat might make you swallow yuh palate."

"Whatever you say," said Caymer, digesting the flattery. "I think you might be trying to express how you miss my cooking. No?"

They sneered false grins at each other, served themselves platefuls, and settled down pacifying impatient appetites.

Soothed to sleep by a whispery patter of raindrops against the windowpanes, Caymer awoke startled by winds shrieking through his home's cracks and crevices, and fierce rain rattling on the galvanized roof. Then, as he swung his feet to the cool floor, from outside came a rhythmic splashing on waterlogged grass.

It took him a moment to place the sound as footsteps, running footsteps. Wondering 'What!' he went to the window and looked out. Found no answer in a grey, stormy morning, though he had figured out the sounds' source. No doubt it was Barata. A sudden smile widened his face as he recalled, as a youth, playing wind-ball cricket in similar downpours. Right on cue, bare but for black boxer shorts, Barata came into view. Sopping wet from rain and sweat, he was there; arms low and loose, pumping easy, his bare, muscled legs pushing a fast jog. Then he was gone!

Caymer turned from the window. On starting to the bathroom, he absently put both hands on his soft belly and squeezed.

All that wet day he functioned with professional reserve; fed his guest, worked on ledgers and journal, read episodes of *Pickwick Papers*, and kept his mind from drifting to thoughts of Roxie.

Midday Saturday the Prison's jeep brought supplies and three letters, one official. Caymer read the letters after the jeep was gone, and melancholy lifted, decided to visit his guest. The cell door was wide open as usual, Barata lying on his cot staring at the ceiling.

"How's it going?" said Caymer.

"Poke-a-poke!" said Barata, smiling. "Dey bring any t'ing new?"

"Not really. Just the usual supplies, newspapers, and a Sunday school pamphlet or two." Caymer grinned as he added, "I think those might be aimed at saving a certain sinner!"

Barata laughed, said, "Dat's a no ball. One run for me."

Caymer sat at the end of the cot. "So," he said. "Remember where you left off with your quest story?"

Barata swung his feet to the concrete floor, sat at his end of the cot, said, "Sure, Bossman. Who go forget dey own story?"

“Well,” said Caymer, suggestively.

“Okay,” countered Barata. “What you say we get some mango first?”

“I could work with that,” agreed Caymer.

“So with Lady Luck looking out for dis runaway boy in de City,” said Barata. “I scrunted on docks and piers, volunteered at toting and loading, tying up boats, doing any li’l job at all. After a couple weeks, Mister Benjamin, a Grenadian boatman with grey dreads, captain of a cuddy-boat name *Mystic*, call me over. I did tasks for him before, and well satisfied, he hook me up as assistant. Den by time we first trip over and done, he was treating me like a favorite son.

“What happened on dat trip was dis. Under de fastest track across to Grenada, a seabed volcano does erupt at regular intervals. Locals call dat area De Devil’s Cauldron ‘cause of hot water bubbling to de surface.

“Well, we was passing over de Cauldron when it belch a giant hot bubble dat capsize de boat, t’rowing we overboard. No problem for yuh boy, I grow up swimming. I rest a hand on de smooth boat bottom, and kick paddling to keep head above water, take a look around; see mih gunny-sack floating close and grab it. Next t’ing, realizing I not seeing Mister Benjamin, I call out he name.

“Right den a hand grab mih waist, and he face, big-eye with fright, rise up before me, coughing and spluttering. ‘*I cyar swim,*’ he manage, clutching me ‘round mih neck like octopus.

“I dunk mih gunnysack under de water, den shove it up between both a’ we, same time backpedaling mih self free from he grasp. Mister Benjamin, realizing it was a float, hug up de sack like a lover, and I could see commonsense return to he eyes. First words he say, ‘So you could swim, eh! I never did learn.’

“I spit out a mouthful a’ warm waves and nod, relieved dat he was t’inking again.

“He say, “We could rock it over if we time it right and the waves help. That cabin holding more air than a party balloon.” And from the confident smile, I know we’d be okay!

“It take sweaty effort, yeah, and serious patience in a rocking sea, plus a boost from a Cauldron belch, before we right dat cuddy-boat. Den we bail until it was floating right, den crank-start de outboard. And dat was dat! No mo’ problems, we went in port and tie up.

“After dat, ‘til around Christmas, I live on, and was learning from we Caribbean Sea.”

Caymer said, “Aye, that’s very interesting. But I’m still waiting to hear about your quest.” He met Barata’s eyes, shrugged, and said matter-of-factly, “I’m just saying.”

“Bossman, I doh know if anybody ever tell you dat you impatient like a spoil child?”

“No they didn’t. So why not get on with the story, eh?”

“Dat’s what yuh boy been trying to do if somebody only stop interrupting,” murmured Barata as if to himself, while looking at the ceiling, stroking his hairless, boyish face.

“Okay, okay,” Caymer yielded. “Please go on.”

“T’anks,” said Barata, and continued. “De next chapter was when Mister Benjamin son, Ronald, of age to help, join we crew. Stroke a’ Luck again; a Cantius cruiser-yacht tie up next to we cuddy boat. Time later, I watching wavelets dance, when dis woman come walking down de ramp, and a gust blow she broad-rim sun-hat in de salty. She scream like it was she baby. Well yuh boy jump in, swim two, t’ree strokes and grab she hat, den haul mih self up onto de pier, and as she step from de ramp, I was dere to hand she de barely wet prize.

“Talk ‘bout appreciation! Grey-blue eyes shining, blushing pink head to shoulders, she shake de hat off, put it on and reach to she purse, intentions clear. I raise mih hand and shake it ‘No!’ mih head doing likewise.

‘It’s the least I can do,’ she says, insisting. ‘You were so brave!’

“I say, ‘No problem, lady. Is my pleasure,’ and turn away. And for me dat was dat, end of story.

“But no! Dis lady was determined. Back from wherever later same afternoon, she walk over to de *Mystic* and call out.

“Ronnie push he head out de cabin.

“She says, ‘Can I speak to your brother?’

“Teasing, Ronnie say, ‘Dat go be hard. Jason home in Grenada.’

“The lady smile and says, ‘I agree, that will be difficult. So—’

“She didn’t get to say more ‘cause I step out from de cabin and save she by saying, ‘Hi!’

“‘Ahh! There you are,’ she says. ‘Can I have a word with you?’

“‘Sure,’ I agree, and step up on the pier. Slim with honey blond hair, she close to mih height, I say, ‘Wha’s up?’

“‘Hear me out,’ she touch mih wrist and start. ‘It’s not my intention to intrude. But what you did earlier impressed me tremendously. Now, I’m not taking advantage of your sweet gesture, but as it happens, we, my husband and I, need help on the yacht. I don’t know your situation here, but I’ll tell you mine. O, I’m Iris, Iris Gordon. We’re from Florida, retired and touring your amazing islands. We brought along our housekeeper, and though she’s wonderful, she has limits. Truth said, it’s sort of her vacation as well. So to the crux! Eric, my husband, agrees to offer you a steady job as a crewman for as long as you want it, months, even a year, or so. I’m sure we can pay you better than stand—”

“I stop Iris by saying, ‘Wait here a minute. Lemme talk with mih captain.’ and went to Mister Benjamin in de cuddy, who musta heard every word. Eyes square with mine, he nodded as I come through de door. ‘You hear dat?’ I ask. He nod again, and say, ‘Listen, son. Go with her. That rich man pleasure boat is a better opportunity than you could ever get here. Ronnie cyar replace you, but he trying hard. Yes, boy. When Lady Luck reach out, take she hand.’

“I tell him t’anks for all he do for me, gather up mih belongings into mih gunnysack, and went back up to Iris Gordon, still waiting where I leave she. At dat moment, how she look standing patient, I kinda ketch on to what Mister Benjamin say ‘bout Luck reaching out.

“I join dem same afternoon, shake hands with Captain Eric, a heavy-set, middle-age fella, and Miss Maggie, de housekeeper, a mature Antiguan lady. Den dat night we sail off in moonlight, pleasure touring; first stop Tobago. Life funny, eh!”

Barata paused, selected, and began peeling, a mango Julie.

Caymer stood up, said, “Time’s flying, and I’ve to make our dinner. So let’s continue in the kitchen, huh.”

“Sure,” said Barata, and they went.

Caymer chose his cast iron pot to make a vegan pelau using soaked saltfish, wild rice, and soaked channa. He flavored it with curry, coconut milk, Chadon Beni, and an unbroken Scotch Bonnet pepper; for something solid, he put two chunks of blue-food to boil in a small pan. He then fixed his usual salad of cucumber slices treated with black pepper, a pinch of sea salt, and a squeeze of

limejuice; to this mix he added a handful of Black Cherry tomatoes from a tub that came in the last supplies.

With sudden night ending a nice day, flying bellies began visiting through the unscreened windows over the sink. Caymer lit a citronella mosquito coil, put it to burn on an overturned pan under the windows. For management of earlier arrivals, he released his pet gecko from its day home to greet them.

When everything was ready and done, Barata and he sat at the table and silently enjoyed a tasty, healthy dinner.

Dishes in the washer, Barata peeling yet another mango, Caymer poured himself a finger of Angostura Single Barrel rum, leaned against the counter and sipped a toast to Contentment. His thoughts trying to drift towards Roxie, he forced them to Barata and his unfinished story.

Caymer studied his guest now alert in his chair at the table, absorbed, mouth slightly agape; gazing spellbound at the gecko poised on a ledge near the ceiling.

The lizard, too, had its mouth slightly open, its red tongue slowly slipping in and out.

Caymer sipped of his Single Barrel.

Perhaps peripheral vision catching the movement, Barata closed his mouth, turned, and beamed at Caymer. "See dat?" he said, brightly.

"What?"

"How it does move so, so slow, den lightning swift, de tongue strike and mosquito lose he state of grace. Now dat is Life!"

Having watched the gecko snag food many times before, and not sharing his wonderment, Caymer went commonplace scientific, said, "It's natural inbuilt behavior. You know, survival of the fittest. Eat or be eaten."

From Barata's miffed expression, Caymer knew he had disappointed, fallen short of expectations. He was about to give a more satisfactory response when, face spoiled by a sneer, Barata turned to him, and said, "Bossman, it look as if with you is either God or Science in charge of all matters regarding life. To me dat's a comfort blanket system for old timers, a blanket dat doh cover life's *living* side of de picture! So it cyar recognize dat de contest between gecko and mosquito is really between Life and Luck!"

Barata stopped speaking, regarded Caymer for a long moment before addressing him in a reasoning tone. "Bossman" he said. "Look at life here on yuh

own li'l piece a' de planet. Nice morning come is earthworm and chicken fowl out there. Nice evening is time for mosquito and gecko. All dem creatures out dere living blameless! Den BRA-DANG, just so mosquito and earthworm gone, dead and consumed! Now I ask, you comfortable with dat? You see dat as God's will explained with Science?"

Caymer's blank stare seemed to provoke Barata. He stood, stamped his foot, and asked with passion, "Bossman! You easy with yuh God or yuh Science killing innocence like dat? Well, I'll tell you sum t'ing. If it was mih Lady Luck in charge, I'd be okay with it. I'll tell you why, too. Is because Luck not like yuh God, talking forgiveness and charity while wiping out de blameless! She not like yuh Science, looking on neutral and making notes. My Lady Luck not hypocrite! She doh play mix message. Who ever and however you is in yuh soul is yuh own business. Deal with it! Lady Luck only care *'bout She own personal feelings for you*. You on She good side, you protected, safe. If you on She bad side, yeah! You gotta go! Dat's how She does operate. Dat's why I stay on Lady Luck team. Look Bossman, you wouldn't understand. But dese trails yuh boy does travel, he needs lotsa super paranormal assistance!"

Caymer nodded absently, drained his glass, and grimaced as if at the taste. He had not listened close after the 'old timers' crack. Although appreciating Barata's philosophy of a gecko at work, he deemed the age bias labeling over the edge, perhaps rude. Chuts! This fella, probably half his age, was trying to preach Life's philosophy at him. What's up with that!

It occurred to Caymer that if he wished to keep their situation cordial, it was time to kill the lime! So he faked a wide yawn, said, "Whatever! Look, I'm calling it a night. Pull your cell door shut to keep out crapaud seeking warm concrete."

Barata got up, said, "Sure. T'anks for dat nice meal." He stopped with a foot out the door, and pursed his mouth thoughtfully before saying, "Bossman, you realize dis could be why yuh girlfriend does leave. You prob'ly cooking sweeter dan she!"

He chuckled lightly, skipped down the three stairs, and went directly to his cell.

Baffled and exasperated, admiring yet disapproving, utterly uncertain of his feelings, Caymer shook his perplexed head.

Sounds of steady footsteps and panting going around the house woke Caymer from a dream of Roxie chasing golden butterflies in the backyard, swinging her net, pouting each time she missed her target. He rolled off the bed in a sour mood, showered, dressed, and went into the yard.

Barata had picked green coconuts, left for him a pair cut clean and ready but for a replaced cap. Caymer opened and drank one; felt refreshed and cheered. A water-coconut first thing in the morning will do that.

He crouched as he entered the fowl-house. As usual ducks had settled on one side, chickens and hens on the other. Two hens loitered on fresh-laid eggs in the laying nests. A sleepy, setting Rhode Island Red warmed her clutch. Caymer collected four chicken and two duck eggs, returned to the kitchen.

Barata was at the paths' fork, wearing knee-length trunks, doing dance steps while brushing his teeth. He paused celebrating to greet, "Morning, Bossman. Make sure you have a happy Sunday, okay."

Caymer smiled at his energy, said, "Right back at you, young fella! Roast bake and mixed eggs for breakfast at eight sharp."

Barata mocked a salute at him, closed his eyes to the sweet rhythms in his head, returned to hygiene, and whatever.

Blazing sun from cloudless skies, by midafternoon outside was close to 100 F. In Barata's cell it was pleasant, the concrete walls cool. Caymer dropped in, remarked jokingly, "This is the most comfortable room in our complex. Mind if I spend a minute, or ten?"

"You quite welcome, Bossman. I say spend de whole day!"

"Maybe I will," said Caymer as he sat at the cot's far end and leaned his back on the concrete wall. "So where were we in that story of yours?"

Barata squatted near the cell's door, smiled, and obliged, "Going Tobago on de yacht."

"So ... " prompted Caymer.

"So we didn't go Tobago! We end up in Little Tobago, de tiny sister on Atlantic side. Captain Eric had a friend who settled dere. Dey use to be drinking buddies until de fren wife pass, and de fella move to de Caribbean to drown he sorrow in sweet rum and sun—"

"Really!" exclaimed Caymer. "That old saw of a solution?"

Barata shot him a dubious glance, and continued, “Captain call him Danny-ol’-boy. He last name is Daniels. He had a li’l cottage in a cove, high tide leaving sea froth yards from de front door. Dey decided to spend a few dere. Me and Miss Maggie stay on de yacht, me sleeping on a mattress in de cabin. One afternoon Iris take de skiff and come aboard. She pick up a few t’ings from de master cabin, and as she leaving, say she going to do some exploring, and if I want to join she. Well, dat plan sound better dan lazing on de yacht shady side. So I went back with she. While I tying up we transport, she went in de cottage. She come back out wearing a white V-neck t-shirt, black skirt-shorts dat showing off she long sun-tanned legs, and black high-top sneakers. All together, she looking like a movie-star explorer in a good mood.

“She ask me to choose which way along de beach, left or right side of de cottage. No difference to me, we went left. After a while we leave de beach and turn into grassy brushland with shrubs, small trees, some spindly mangrove here and dere. We come to a little stream, and Iris decide she thirsty, ask if she should drink from it. I say sure. So she kneel down and lean forward reaching she mouth to de water, like a camel. Next t’ing you know she overbalance and falling face first in de stream. Den she’s creeping and scrambling to get up. It so funny, I laughing while jumping in, grabbing she round the waist, and pulling she to stand up. Clothes soaking wet, forehead muddy, Iris laughing too, hugging me tight as we stagger to dry land. Den we separate to look at de damage. What I see had me blinking. I mean she naked under the t-shirt, and she eyeing me fixed, breathing hard through she mouth, not dropping she gaze. A mud streak on she shoulder, I reach mih hand to move it, and dat was dat. Next t’ing I know we on de grassy ground grappling, getting into rudeness.”

Barata stopped, looked sheepishly at Caymer, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” said Caymer. “Both of you in that situation, I’d say it was destined, inevitable, I mean, bound to happen. So how did it work out?”

“Well, good and not so good. Good ‘cause for de balance of de stay we went exploring every day, sometimes morning and afternoon, making lotsa discoveries. We spend nearly a month on missions. Den we leave Danny-ol’-boy, and head west into de Caribbean Sea, and den north to berth in St. Georges. Dat’s where t’ings went ‘not so good.’ ‘Cause dere on yacht, I seeing Iris everyday, and find mih self missing she nectar, and yuh boy cyar do nothing ‘bout it. Talk ‘bout horrors!”

“Den one day, Captain and Iris gone touring, I in de galley making a sandwich when Miss Maggie come in looking at me special, and beckon me. I take de three steps closer, and say, ‘What?’

“Grinning sly, head down and glancing up at me, not meeting mih eyes, she start moving from counter to sink to fridge while talking in she proper Antiguan accent. I listening close, and hear, ‘Young man like you should be more than bull strong. You is a Trini, so must know about La Diabliesse, know that she could take any form, steal any man soul. Boy, listen well and understand—’ she stop still and watch me in mih face. I could smell passion on she breath as she say ‘—hear me, boy. Luck is like any lady. She might favor you a lot, but that don’t mean she can’t jealous. No, no, don’t think so! Boy, when you busy going on with who ever, you ever thinking you might be disrespecting Luck, pushing She patience? You ever think? Hmmn! How I see it, you should stop seeking sweetness for your small head, and start thinking straight with the big—”

Caymer cut in, “This makes another instance of you being favored with a mature woman’s wisdom. Maybe that’s your real Luck!”

Barata shrugged, said, “Bossman, you might be right. Though I didn’t hundred percent believe she, de lecture frighten me. Straightaway mih belly say, ‘Jemani, boy, you must abandon dis pleasure boat!’

“I ask she why only now she telling all dis. She say ‘*come close*,’ as if it had others dere. I went anyhow, and she whisper in mih ear, ‘*Boy, Iris pregnant.*’ Den she went on to say how dis was always de true intention and purpose of hiring me after I save de hat. She and Captain did rent me like a breeding bull!

“Well, dat rock me like a seaquake. Is why I decide to split de sooner de better.”

Caymer glanced at the youngster, wondered if he should request more story. He said, “Guess we’ll now get to the trip to here from Grenada, right? Maybe?”

Barata looked at him blank-faced, noncommittal.

“Well, okay,” said Caymer, and stood up. “Guess we’ll catch up at dinner then.”

Barata shrugged.

Caymer walked out the cell.

Come dinnertime, no one in the mood for story telling, they ate, then parted, wishing each other a pleasant night.

Beginning Sunday night, violent weather reigned until dusk on Monday. In the morning when Caymer woke to the hard rattling on the roof, he wondered how, with all the thunder and lightning last night, he had managed to fall asleep. He stood at the window staring out at raindrops enlivening puddles with bubbles and water craters, and sighed. Rain like this roused his melancholy, sometimes slid his mind to Roxie. To thoughts like where she was, and what she might be doing. And though it always hovered, he hardly ever submitted to the dreadful *with who* trap. No succor was ever to be found there.

The ceaseless, raging storm discouraging, Caymer went outside only to leave food in Barata's cell. Later, after the day's routines, he yelled goodnight to him, and went to bed.

Tuesday morning Caymer woke up to birdcalls and for a moment wondered what was missing. He looked to the window, and smiled broad appreciation on seeing cloudless blue and beams of sunshine. It was a beautiful morning; it'd be a beautiful day! He went jauntily to the bathroom.

Small creatures were everywhere as he patrolled the grounds; fowls underfoot gorging on fallen, migrating termites, wild birds dropping in, and probably for diet variety, pecking up mango nutrients. Squads of bachac and bigheaded black ants were cutting through busted-open, ripe breadfruit fallen during the storm. Satisfied with the scenes, Caymer headed to the fowl coop.

For breakfast he hard-boiled four hens' eggs, sliced them thick, and used them as a first layer in two oversized homemade loaves. Second layers of sliced Australian cheddar were followed by slices of steak tomatoes picked from his garden, during yesterday's rain. A pot of grated chocolate in cow's milk simmered on the stove. Two tall glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice gleamed bright yellow from a plucky sunbeam.

Everything ready and tabled, frustrated houseflies hovering, Caymer covered the food with a thin, cotton towel and left the kitchen. He crossed the damp path to the cell, and as he approached called, "Breakfast is tabled, sir."

No answer, he looked in, and not seeing Barata, guessed he probably was in the backyard busy at whatever.

No worries, Caymer returned to the kitchen, poured a steaming cupful from the pot, then sat and ate a hearty, healthy breakfast.

It was going on eleven when Caymer, out of his office and done with routine entries, started for the backyard to stretch his legs, breathe in the pleasant day. Passing through the kitchen, he noticed the towel still covering the food left for Barata, and sucked his teeth, thinking, *'Cold food is never as tasty,'* and went out.

At the path's fork, he glanced towards the cell, continued on to the fowl coop for a few steps, then stopped, and turned back. Walking slowly, uncertain of why or what, something felt amiss. Just then a rooster crowed, and all at once Caymer realized the problem: *no Barata sounds!*

A sudden urge to hurry, Caymer did a cursory check of the cell, then started for the backyard supposing, almost hoping, Barata would be there climbing, moping, napping, doing whatever unexpected.

It was not so!

Heart thumping, he hurried around the house to the front, to the gate, and felt a bit silly on seeing its lock and chain secure as usual. Then reflexly, he looked up at the barbed wire coils atop the fence, and thought, *'No one would tangle his body in those barbs!'*

Now Caymer considered that somehow he might have missed running into Barata; maybe they were on opposite side of the house, or the back and front yard. He returned to the kitchen steps, stood on the topmost and shouted, "**Barata! Barata!**" He then repeated twice.

As he listened to the silence, and wondered if his shouts had quieted the birds, it slowly came to him that *his guest was gone! Barata was not present and accounted for!*

Returned to the kitchen, his mind unsettled, Caymer lit the stove and put the pot of chocolate to warm, then sat at the table and brooded.

Some time after drinking his chocolate, he went outside and again made a circuit of the grounds. He walked slowly, looking carefully for clues indicative of anything untoward. A gap cut into the fence, a burrow under it, a makeshift ladder; anything suggestive, or supportive, of escape.

He went around twice before returning to the kitchen none the wiser.

It seemed Jemani Barata had flown the coop. Actually flew, since *up* seemed the only way *out*.

Back at the table, he poured the cold remnants of chocolate, and sipped, contemplating on what he'd enter in the official journal.

Later that afternoon Caymer checked the cell thoroughly; found last evening's dinnerware cleaned and dried, everything spic and span. He also realized Barata's gunnysack was not under the cot. Standing pensive beside the narrow bed, he absently punched its pillow. A corner of notepaper edged out, and he picked it up. It was a message printed in atrocious, capitalized spellings:

BORSMARN DOH BLAYM YU SELF 4 ME. BREDFRUTE YUSFUL
MOR DAN 4 FOOD. I MUS DO MI TING. LOCK RYD IN ON A RAIN STOM
+ TAKE OWT SHE BOY. SO GUD BY. YU IS A GRAYT HOST.

Caymer folded the notepaper, tucked in it his shirt pocket, its glaring contradictions forefront in his mind. He heaved in a long breath and sighed it out, musing, *"This note was not written by a reader!"*

He sucked in his bottom lip and worried it as if it held ramifications of that stunning fact. The links too threatening, he shook his head free; let his thoughts drift ... *Drew, you took to that youngster ... seems he took you ... what's his true story? ... where could he be headed? ... what's his quest? ... why the breadfruit reference? ... huh, why?*

Distracted, he entered the kitchen, made, and ate a forgettable dinner.

Darkness quick falling, at his office desk preparing to update the official journal, he fretted about what he should write. How to record the incident without seeming incompetent, or worse? He pulled open the desk drawer, took out the grey, cloth-covered journal, his eyes catching Roxie's sky blue envelopes on the drawer's right side corner; exactly where he'd put them, for exactly this reason.

All at once, sparking a pleasant thrill, it hit him that *Barata wouldn't be there this weekend when Roxie came home! Her word!* Then swift on the heels of this thought came a solution to the entry situation. *What if he spilled chocolate on the journal then simply tore out all pages having to do with cheeky rascal?*

A satisfied smile celebrating his instantly brightened life, Caymer picked up the stack of blue letters and leaned back in his chair. About to bring them to his lips for an affectionate smooch, the enigmatic young man stole into his mind, smugly whispering, *"Wha' you t'ink 'bout Lady Luck now!"*