

[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)



"So, which one of *unnu's* coming back to Jamaica to live with me," Gavin, my chronically drunk brother says. He hugs himself as if he's cold; his cackle which is wet and graveled forces his thin body forward. He laughs because he knows the improbability of that dopey scenario.

We smile at him indulgently, allow him an audience. We are newly arrived on the island; we're still wearing the civility of strangers on a plane.

"C'mon," he drawls like an American. "Not a one of you? Nobody at-tall?"

It is the first time our family has gathered in all of the twelve years since our parents have died. We are sitting late afternoon in an outdoor beach restaurant near Negril where we have come for a holiday, my three sisters, three brothers, our spouses, their heat-stunned foreign children, who can find no magic on this island. They've already carped about the eggs fried in coconut oil, the condensed milk, the harshness of the toilet paper, the jalousie windows that don't allow for window screens. We gently remind them that we're here because of them; they'd nagged us for years to have this reunion.

"*Bwoy* in his waters, you see," Basil said of his drunken yonger brother, and winked, his broad body shaking with amusement. He's sporting the kind of flowery pastel shirts you see in Florida, where he lives; it's a shirt so dissonant to his tidy accountant personality, it is clear his wife had shopped for him. I notice that there has crept a premonition of jowls not only in his face, but also in Courtney and Michelle's faces; all three had Mummy's mouth, her fine pert nose, the graceful affectation of hands. I am able to see Daddy's face on the two brothers I most resemble.

"Anybody see my dying trial," Gavin said, Jamaican idiom for, *how do you like that?* The skin around his eyes are the end color of bruises, which distresses us all. The North Americans among us are disgusted by his strong cigarettes, which he lights with a great frequent clunk of his heavy silver lighter, and smokes in an old-fashioned way, exhaling simultaneous gusts through his nose, his mouth. He has only worked sporadically since our parents have died. He'd been deported from New York when his diplomatic visa was withdrawn, having punched his boss after a cocktail lunch. These days he finds work where he can, tinkling silvery lounge music from hotel pianos. He needs a meal ticket.

We've agreed to help him only if he gets treatment. We've brought him gifts. In the meantime, we've decided to be deaf to his panhandling.

"Sometimes it's hard to remember that this island was English, *non?*" said Donovan who's lived in Paris for thirty years. "Look how commercial the place is now, *sah*. American fast food places

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everywhere, pizza, Burger King, how do you say, KFC chicken," he said and blew air out of his cheeks in the French way of disapproval.

"Rather," agreed Courtney, her accent alternating between plummy British nuances and the short vowels of Tanzania where she lives courtesy of her latest UN mission. "But at least my children can get something they'll eat." She adjusted her pride of gold bangles, preened her seersucker hair by tugging whole tufts of it skyward.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing it, *massa*," Basil said. "You girls grew up in Kingston, but I couldn't stand it when we moved there. I liked it better when Daddy was just a country judge in Clarendon."

Michelle picked at her quasi-Jamaican tourist food, a mild curried goat, mango chutney, rice. "Every time I come back, I ask myself what I'm doing in Montreal," she said in her gentle, dawdling, banker way. "That is, until I see the prices they're asking here for the simplest thing—a bottle of aspirin, a liter of gas. How do people survive?"

"It hard, *m'love*," Gavin said, and on a long note sucked his teeth in a West Indian show of annoyance. *Cho*, I need help, man, who's going to give me something? How about you, Blackie?" he almost slurred.

I am surprised to feel my anger rasp and flare. My father's old pejorative name for me still deals me such a body blow. I am flabbergasted, sad, that his comment could wound me now, after these many years, my carefully-cultivated confidence beached. I've had successes. I've been to college, I'm robustly married, I'm a corporate speechwriter for a Fortune 500 company in New York City, people ask for my opinions. And, yet I feel so—remaindered. Still. My sharp breathing fans a quick fantasy of reaching out and slapping the drunk off my older brother.

Helene parses my mood immediately, puckers her lips and gives me a soft dry peck, clears her dry throat, strokes the groove under her nose.

I take a sip of my beer. I wait a beat. I push back my metal chair on the rough concrete floor and go join my husband who's sprawled with the other white spouses on the hot white sand. "What did I say, tell me, *why me do, me say?*" Gavin screeches to dead air behind me as I pick my way over to their tranquility.

The three lay on beach chairs in the ridiculous sun, their winter skin already coral. When I greet them, my husband looks up from his *Science* magazine and turns his green gaze on me, his eyes warm always, even when he awakens from the depths of sleep.

"Joining us?" he asks, and reaches up for my hand, which he worries. He examines my face for change, for pain, for boredom. He'd lobbied hard for this January vacation, and feels obligation. "It could be fun, sweetie, you think?" he suggested when the idea of a reunion was floated. "It's your decision. But I could do some sun, a little beach time. Your family," he'd teased, though he likes them, my sisters in particular, pleased to find in them my sense of play. He also knows that when I'm with them, I can still feel alienated, ugly, minor. I had groped for the right word while he watched my mouth. "I know it's stupid," I'd said to his slow series of puzzled nods.

Further, he knows that when the thick night falls on the verdigris mountains, darkened, deadened both sea and sky, it unsettles me as though a tightly-pegged tent had been pitched over me. The parochial darkness pained me. It was easy for me to miss Manhattan's promiscuous offer of fun, its lights. I missed the snap of the kindled firelight while he and I read the fat Sunday *Times* on the down sofa, the music eclectic.

The variegated aqua water sighed on the sand. We watched the tourists. Two virile white women cruised the young Jamaican men they might not have dated at home. While their acrylic shirts flapped free over their firm stomach muscles, the men instructed the blonde women how to fit the mouth of the young green coconut to their own young mouths, how to scoop the spermy flesh from the belly of the nut with a wedge of its husk. The seduction of women on the beach is their only job. The women tucked again and again their glinted hair behind their ears, reached back to adjust the brief triangle of their bright-bottomed bikinis, flirted.

I gathered my gloom, exhaled long.

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"Tired?"

"Exhausted," I said, pretending, recognizing how miserable I could make us both. I picked up the tube of sun block, lacquered the hot skin on his shoulders, adjusted his baseball cap, which he, smiling, instantly readjusted. He patted the seat next to his.

"Like I need a suntan," I tell him, which makes my drowsy sisters-in-law smile, makes my beloved get up and skew shade for me from the balking umbrella.

"New York, how do you like it?" asked Cécile, whom we've met only once before when we honeymooned in the south of France.

I tell her it's good. "Electric, sometimes." When she doesn't understand, I said, "Exciting, you know?" I said that, not knowing at the time that in five years we would be held up at gunpoint outside our Brooklyn co-op, would've had enough of the hostility and crowds and lawlessness and media cannibalization of the city's indigenous crime, would plan to leave it even when the September sun lamped the fall-ripened leaves.

Cécile shielded her shaded eyes and reminded us in her fractured English how she'd been sick while they'd visited Manhattan, she'd gone to a doctor with Donovan, the doctor had asked her why you, mmm, sleep with that man. You can do better. My brother is an award-winning architect, the founding partner of a firm in the business district of La Defense, Paris. "We don't go to America again, ah, *non*, never." Anger creased her pretty face.

My husband squirms, brushes non-existent sand from the pages of his magazine. He's embarrassed by this talk of his hometown, although this kind of racism is not new to him. His marriage to a black woman had been a cram course. He hadn't a clue that many black women had their hair straightened, didn't know that afros were simply unprocessed hair. Only when I'd pointed out that his black male friends had kinky hair that he'd gotten it. And, he didn't get the business with skin color: "Let's see, now. You can't be too white, but you can't be black either. Dark is not a good thing," he said laughing. "I guess I don't get why it's such a big deal." In the lamplight his open, guileless face had been unfocused. Over time, I'd nudged him into awareness, pointing out the very light brown skin of the wives of prominent black men, of black women executives in the news. Eventually we'd both taken to cheering the rare dark-skinned reporters who appeared on the evening news.

And he gets angry. "So, did you tell them to go fuck themselves," he'd ask, at my dinner-table mention of everyday racism, which I sometimes wouldn't be aware of while it was happening. Two older women in Bloomingdale's asking each other in Yiddish how that *Schvartze* got an American Express *goldene* card. A man asking me at the elevator to a friend's apartment whether I'd finished delivering the mail; I was dressed in my best power suit at the time, carrying a briefcase. Our apartment building's Irish doormen addressing me by my given name while they fell all over themselves calling my husband, Sir.

And he watched while I defused the furious stares of black men with fleeting, smiling eye contact, tried to embarrass flagrant gawking with a small nod of acknowledgment, "Hi, howyadoin'?" Said it like I'd been taught to do by a woman whose parents were from Barbados. "Nothing against you," she'd said, when I'd complained that black students had hissed "white girl" at me in the cafeteria. "But some of you Jamaicans act like you're better than everybody else. At least say howyadoin' when you pass other black folks."

Maria, my Italian sister-in-law sits up from her lounge chair, eager to top our stories, an urge she can scarcely suppress. She pulls down her sunglasses the better for us to see the gloat in her enormous hazel eyes and tells us that she'd kept the secret of her interracial marriage from her extended Sicilian family. Her dad, a pressman in Brooklyn, had died not knowing that she'd been married to my brother, she hadn't dare take our family name, or speak of him overtly. Her mom had begged her not to, afraid that her dad would have another stroke. So there, her trumping smile says – I win.

Across from us an older woman got up heavily from the shade of a sea grape tree. She brushed the back of her dress as she approached us. She clutched at her chest. She excused herself. Wasn't I one of the Phillips girls? The unnatural pink palette of her top dentures flashed at us as she nodded. "Yes, I knew it. You're the dead stamp of your father," she said. She could tell it was the family sitting over there at the table by how we laughed all the time. What a nice bunch of people we turned out to be, so hearty and fat, which her moon grin reminds me is a compliment. She beckoned over her shy grandchildren, presented them as if for benediction. I shook their confused little hands formally before

they raced each other back to their seats in the shade.

"That was weird," my husband said.

"Better get used to it," Maria told him. "Their parents were, like, God here. Have any of you been able to pay for anything since you got here? Nobody will let you. They wave off your money, it's always, '*no problem, mon*.'" Her Jamaican accent is decent.

"Oh, you are so wrong," I say. I'm embarrassed, really. I've realized it's true.

"We don't pay for this villa. Nothing," Cécile says.

"This, I could get used to," my man says. Although he doesn't. He found himself uncomfortable with the driver, the security people at the gate to the compound, the household staff who tripped over themselves trying to cook him special vegetarian meals, he not understanding a word they said, they not understanding how anyone could survive on vegetables. They twitter at him when he clears his own plate to the sink, when he asks if he could help with the garbage. And we both need help getting used to my family's clutch of pre-verbal children who cry to show desire, disappointment, protest.

The slightly older children try to make connections, we are such strangers to them: "You are my mommy's sister, right? You look different." We answer their frank kid questions: "Are you going to have any children?" "Nooo," we croon together. My husband touches their nosy little noses, tells him that he already has kids—the thirty he has in his science classroom; they believe him. I smile, is all I do. They are not old enough for me to tell them that I'm too afraid of the criticism that will come from my own children, too afraid that they'll be Americans in their values, their trip-hop clothes, too afraid of street arrest for a son.

The teen-agers are insatiable. They are desperate to catch up on their family lineage which none of us knows. We've never met our grandparents; we aren't even sure of their names. Compounding everything, early in their marriage, Mummy had feuded with Daddy's family; we'd only met his brothers, his sisters, when they stood in their country clothes over his raw grave.

"I wish I knew my grandpa and grandma," Courtney's daughter said leaning her head, wistful. She's nine, idealistic, as boldly beautiful as her mother used to be. Sleep had welted a tender seam on her sweet cheek.

"Your grandpa would've loved you," answered Maria, expert on all things.

"But you wouldn't have loved *him*," Gavin said. He used his shaky baby finger to pick a speck of tobacco from his tongue, failed. "He was an evil, unlovable, jackass. Beat the crap out of us to show how big and powerful he was." He made spitting noises to try to rid himself of the tobacco bit, fumed.

"He liked to yell," one of the kids who knew him said, "Right, mum?"

"But he was pretty nice sometimes," said another of the teenagers.

"Oof, he got nicer as he got older," Donovan said. "You should have seen him when Cécile and I brought the baby to meet him." The memory lit him up.

"*Cu ya*," Courtney said, translating immediately. "Look here, though, you can imagine a houseful of seven kids. The noise alone. Why the hell they had so many is still a mystery to me."

Michelle made her mouth small and budded. "Self-aggrandizement – a hold over from slavery when children were chattel. Why else? Blouse and skirt," she said as a euphemism for the curseword, *bloodclat*." She wants to laugh. She ran her hand over the rash of moles that peppered her slender neck while we favored her with our slight laughter. "Either that or because Mummy loved babies. Just had another one when the last one got independent and fresh."

"*Ai, sah*," Basil said. There was a thin whistle in his deep nasal sigh. "Try being the oldest child. It was hell, hell, hell. And now that I have my own kid, it's even harder for me to understand why the old man was so bloody cross all the time."

His teen-aged daughter narrowed her eyes at him. Nobody said what we'd often discussed by

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telephone. That he'd become as moody and angry as Daddy had ever been.

"You guys ever stop to consider what made him so upset?" Maria asked. "I mean, what was up with that?"

Maybe he fathered like his own father fathered, we said, maybe it was because Mummy had pushed him hard to run for high political office, we said, maybe he was plain unhappy, we said. We don't know. At this point it's just easier to hold on to the anger we understand.

Out of the brilliant blue a burst of rain slanted down, the fractured silver drops beading the buffed terrazzo tiles of the verandah where we sat. "Devil fighting his wife over mackerel bone," said somebody inside the house about the simultaneous sun and rain together, said for the benefit of the non-Jamaicans. We heard Cécile ask, *pardon, pardon?* The frail heads of butter-lemon allamanda flowers moped; a scorched aroma steamed from the hot earth.

Gavin fidgeted on his chair as though his pain was gas he had to contain in polite company. And, smoking ferociously, he began to roll out his catalog of grievances. I realized that I hadn't heard many of these stories before; we'd only lived together in shifts, really. We'd all gone to different boarding schools to try to dilute sibling rivalry. By the time I'd graduated from high school, the older children had either married, or moved abroad. And, truly, when we were last together, Daddy had only just died. Which one of us dared speak ill of the fresh dead?

Looking out at the cheap rain, Gavin told us in a gush how Daddy had beat him and Basil for being too soft, woke them up early as punishment, sent them through high, dew-sopped grass to milk cows, loudly belittled them for doing it wrong, for being *fool-fool*. "True or *nuh* true, *sah?*" he asked his older brother.

"True," Basil said. His voice was phlegmed with unshed tears, but he plowed ahead, talking till the fogginess cleared. He told us how scary their childhood had been, how often he'd felt sorry to be born.

Even the little kids fell quiet. I rubbed the mosquito bites on my legs to avoid looking up. My husband's presence mortified me; he must find this all so barbaric.

Gavin's stories opened us all up, heaped for us a mound of stones, and we proceeded to take turns stoning the dead.

Michelle sat up in her chair, her eyes hard, she told about not being able to ask for the littlest thing, a balloon, a *fee-fee* whistle, anything, except if we were out in public, how Daddy had said we were too spoiled, we hadn't done anything to deserve the *thruppence* to buy a fudgesicle, how jealous she'd been when other kids bought something from the box of dry ice perched on the ice cream seller's bicycle carrier. "We couldn't have been poor?" she asked nobody in particular.

Courtney, talking over Michelle's sentences, wanted to know why, on God's green earth, Daddy hated it so when we twirled our skirts, a vain man accusing his daughters of vanity. "Why?" She chipped hard at her cerise nail polish; she couldn't seem to stop herself. She reminded us how he used to tell us we had sense but it wasn't common, how damn lazy we were, the patois word *wuckliss*, for "worthless" adding abrasion, how even the way we held our pencils seem to offend him.

When she's spent, I tell the story of my beating. My body still bears its history.

"Where did all these comics come from?" Daddy had asked that Saturday evening, his brows murderously furrowed.

"Me *nuh* know," Courtney had said, shrugging her shoulders high in a gesture she might only just have learned. If I'd been eight at the time, she'd still be young enough not to understand cause and effect and consequence. But I remember she'd hopped, held her pee with her hand tight against her crotch, scared of Daddy's thunder.

The visiting neighbor kids' eyes had been wild. They looked only at each other, their eyes metronomes.

"Tch." Daddy said, not unlike the click of a trigger. His anger rasped his breathing, made him fidget just like Courtney, his angry hands flirting with his torso as if he needed something to squeeze tight.

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We are not allowed comic books in this house. But, right now, Daddy is not mad that we're reading contraband. Right now he knows that someone has opened Mummy's bureau drawer, that someone has rustled a pound note from the slick manila envelope she keeps under her silk slippers. I, too, must have been shaky on the concept of action and consequence. For even though the brass handles had chattered, squealed on me, I'd slid open that fragrant drawer, and I'd been the one who'd taken out money as I'd seen Mummy do a hundred times. I'd used that crisp pound note to buy nineteen comic books at the Chinese grocery shop. It had been the shopkeeper's entire stock, which he'd plucked like ripe fruit from metal pincers on a wire line above the counter. A shilling a piece, he'd given me Paradise Plum sweeties because he'd been short one.

"Go get the strap," Daddy bellowed, his ugly finger pointed at me. He marched me back through the house to his dark back office to get the length of leather, coiled thick as a snake. It should have been time enough for any reasonable parent to lose his anger; I was already whimpering as he frog-marched me back to the front playroom. He beat me hard. He beat my legs, my dress flying up, he beat my defensive forearm, my hand, he beat my back, my bottom, my shoulders, my thighs, his breath coming out like race horses while I squealed like swine. I remember checking the welts for a week, tracing the shape of their long tongues, how they ridged themselves, hurt like burns. I remember the humiliation. I felt helpless and scared and small, felt how easily my father might have killed me, how nobody, not even Mummy, had come to my rescue, felt the black cold absence of love.

When I come out of the memory and look up, nobody has words. My husband used his index fingers to stretch away the tears from his eyes; his nose is flared and red.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

I put down my stones. I tell them how I believed I got lost in the shuffle, how invisible I'd felt my whole life.

Their faces register surprise. Michelle looks at me, uncomprehending. She scratches her head hard. "You have to be joking," she said. She told me then that Daddy had always been so very proud of me, that he'd always tell people how responsible I'd been, always, even as a toddler, bragged that my first sentence had been, "Draw the cloth, draw the cloth," meaning close the curtains, one afternoon during a thunderstorm. How I'd become one of his "*star-girls*," how he pined that I never came home, not even for Christmas. The vein in her forehead throbs with the fullness of her information.

I don't know what to say.

"I sure didn't get that impression," I finally said. "We had a dickens of a time, just chatting about rubbish, for chrissakes."

I tell them about the time Aunt Hyacinth had bullied me into coming to visit Daddy because he'd been so sick. He'd had his familiar vacancy, a distance, although we both knew we were having one of our final, stilted conversations.

It had been September. Steamy. He'd said it was hot as nine days' love between two fools, Mummy's standard phrase. His eyes had grown too large for his shrunken head. He'd had that fixed, death stare, the clenched jawbones that I'd come to know from men in my Greenwich Village neighborhood, men sucked dry by AIDS.

"Glad to see you, *pickney gal*," he'd said, his bass voice incongruous in his desiccated cheeks.

I'd nodded, fumbled as usual for something to say to him, terse conversations our pattern. "Hard to get away sometimes," I said. I'd handed him a cup of soup, fish tea, the Jamaican magic elixir.

"How's the work?" he'd asked, as if he expected tragic news.

"Good."

"Still like it?"

"Not so much." I tell him how guilty I felt working for a tobacco company.

Daddy had reached out and taken my hand. I'd almost yelped. I'd been startled by the coarse weft of

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his palm.

“Fancy that,” he said. And on shortened breath he told me that they’d dashed away all that money they’d spent sending me to college. He blamed himself. If he’d known, he wouldn’t have given me ha’penny. He should’ve made me study medicine. Maybe Michelle and I could’ve helped find a cure for this blasted thing, his prostate cancer.

I hadn’t been sure whether he’d been joking, his remarks having been delivered in patois which he seldom used with us. I fanned a fly from his swollen ankles. Our conversation had spent itself. I knew the ball had been volleyed back to me, and I’d been caught looking. I let the reticence between us fall to the floor.

“But you did well, *missis*, considering,” he said after a while.

I yielded to my impulse to kiss the top of his sweaty, sour head.

Daddy, in turn, had reached up and rubbed the rough new growth of hair at the back of my neck, the unprocessed hair that provides the true indicator of hair texture. “Brush this *kitchen* sometimes, Blackie,” he said as a final criticism, the hand of intimacy folded.

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