

BLOOD RISING  
by Carol Mitchell

"I thought you woulda been in Church."

The bedside clock showed eight am. It was eleven in St. Kitts.

"So why did you call the house?" I responded.

"I have to call. How else you gone know ah still breathing, eh? I can't talk long, today though. I just come from Church and I have a pot on the stove."

The scent of my mother's Sunday dinner wafted into my consciousness as clearly as if I had been there yesterday; black-eyed peas bursting on the fire, a mélange of herbs--thyme, cilantro, and more--stewing in the chicken.

"I asked pastor to say a special prayer for those who fall by the wayside," she said. "Those who been captured by the devilish ways of modern society; Those who forget where they come from and who they people be."

Of course I was the primary target of these prayers. When I was growing up, my mother put me before Christ and I had followed, attending her Church and absorbing her literal interpretation of the Bible. She kept me straight with the threat of eternal damnation.

And it had almost worked.

Then I moved to Minnesota and, surrounded by the desolation of bitter cold, I was able to think clearly and to realise that the needy, often vengeful God that my mother worshiped was nothing but a character from a fairy tale.

My mother prayed for my salvation every Sunday, but that morning, for the first time ever, I put down the phone in the middle of her barrage. I stared at my hand on the receiver for a moment as if someone else controlled it, forced it to commit that treasonous act.

I turned over and, still deep in thought I caressed the straight black hair splayed across the pillow next to mine.

"Your mom?" Nikki muttered.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Everything's okay?"

"Yes."

This was our Sunday ritual.

Nikki rolled over and the motion stirred a passion in me that supplanted all thoughts of my mother.

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Next Sunday morning when I awoke the bed was empty. I checked my watch; ten am.

I walked into the kitchen. Nikki was putting something into the microwave that was mounted over our seldom used stove. I kissed her on the cheek.

"You left me," I murmured, nuzzling her neck.

"You were having nightmares. Who's Joshua?"

My body stiffened. Nikki turned towards me but said nothing. She knew when to leave things alone; she was just like me, putty encased in an impenetrable shell.

"Your mom didn't call."

I know that she thought she had changed the subject, but she hadn't, not really.

"She's angry. I hung up on her last week," I said.

"Will you call her?"

"Nah, she'll call when she's ready."

But I was worried. My mother's calls were my only link to home. When I migrated to the US I ignored the myriad of invitations from the tiny but vibrant West Indian community to join, eat, party, and worship. I kept to myself and re-engineered my accent until there was nothing but the tiniest sway in my walk to identify me as a foreigner.

But I couldn't refuse my mom. Sometimes her calls were rushed--she might be cooking, weak from a cold, or entertaining a visitor--other times she would linger on the phone, sometimes preaching, sometimes gossiping. Whichever way, fifty-two weeks a year, for ten years, at eight am, she had always called and always expressed surprise to find me home and not at Church.

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Four pm. The phone's shrill ring clashed with the smooth tones of Miles Davis' trumpet. Nikki looked up from where she lay curled in the couch; her feet hanging off so that they wouldn't dirty the pristine white upholstery.

"Your mom," she said. No one else called our land-line.

Bracing for my mother's anger, I rose from my leather recliner and headed for the bedroom.

"Hello," I said.

"Walter? Is Uncle Tones. Is so long I ain talk to you boy."

Every teenage boy should have an Uncle Tones, especially a fatherless one like me. A well-known musician, he spent his adult life playing the sax all night and sleeping most of the day. He was the uncle who would take you and your friends to lime on the beach, turn a blind eye to the things boys got up to, and ultimately guide you when the worst possible trouble happened. He was the closest thing I had to a dad.

My mother tolerated his 'sinful' ways with drink and women and when I compared myself to him she would say, "He done grown, I cyan fix him again. You I could still work with."

"Uncle Tones!" I exclaimed. "What's up?"

"Boy you sound like a real yankee, eh? Your mother's always boasting how you're a big time accountant."

"Where's Mommy?" I said.

"That's the thing right there." He spoke slowly and I could picture him running his long fingers through his beard. I wondered if his hair had finally succumbed to the grey that had peppered it when I last saw him.

"She in hospital boy. Took in right after Church today." He paused and I waited for the worst. "It not looking good."

Something shifted inside me and I had to grab the bedside table to stay upright.

"What do you mean? What's wrong with her?"

"They say is her heart. She's unconscious, Walter. Is time to come home."

Uncle Tones continued speaking but my mind was far away, reliving the last time I had seen my mother, in the visitor's gallery at the airport waving her big white hat so that I could identify her

in the visitor's lounge as I crossed the tarmac to board the airplane. She had probably been singing at the top of her voice, blessing my journey with her favourite hymn, "I Surrender All".

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Minnesota to New York, New York to St. Kitts, I traveled alone. White-skinned, slight-bodied, and quiet, Nikki was the antithesis of most of the women who had influenced me growing up. Her presence would highlight just how much distance I had placed between myself and home. I had no excuses to offer for having ignored my mother's pleas for her only living child to come home. Of course in the first few years there was no money, but that had changed once I got my CPA. I couldn't produce evidence of commitments that would have kept me away; no photographs of a wife and children and who would accept that my accounts were so precious that I couldn't entrust them to anyone else, not even for a week?

I closed my eyes and saw my mother floating on her back in the ocean, her eyes closed, her arms spread wide and her legs crossed at the ankles like Jesus on the cross. Her body, brown and water-saturated resembled a prune. But it was her face that was most disturbing, pale, as if bleached by the brilliant sun that soaked it. Her skin hung on her cheek bones as if it would slide off at the slightest touch. I waded towards her body and when I was just close enough to touch her, her eyes opened.

I must have screamed. The lady in the seat next to me jerked her arm away from our shared arm rest as if she was afraid to catch my madness. I knew what the dream meant. Although I saw my mother's face, the person in the water, pale, tied, and drowned was Joshua and it was time to face it.

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My mother raised two well-behaved, God-fearing boys but in my last year in high school I rebelled. My best friends were Gary and Jeffrey, two 'D' students who didn't seem to care. With them I became another guy--pushy, daring, even ruthless. My mother grew grey. Only Uncle Tones understood that I needed to stretch my wings out from under my mother's thumb.

"Better to do stupidity when you young," he would say as he drove us down to Old Road Bay to hang out on the pier.

Then one day my mother made us take Joshua with us.

"Why we got to hang with your baby brother?" Gary groaned.

"Half-brother," I corrected. Joshua's dad had claimed him and Joshua had spent his eleven years shuttling between us and his dad.

We sat shirtless at the very edge of the pier, our legs dangling over the water. Gary opened the first beer. He passed it to me and I took a swig. Joshua's eyes opened wide. Gary grinned.

"If you want to hang with us you have to pledge. Like in them American colleges," he said. An avid watcher of the few US channels we got on cable TV, Gary was the expert on American culture. He looked around for a suitable challenge.

"Jump off the pier. Yeah, jump off or you can't hang with us."

Joshua looked into the water.

"You mus be mad," he said. "Down there full of rocks."

"You frighten?" Gary said. He laughed.

"Leave him alone," Jeffrey interceded. "He's just a baby."

I opened a second beer. I didn't usually drink more than one, I couldn't risk showing up at my mother's house drunk, but with Joshua around I had something to prove.

"I'm not scared," Joshua said. "But I'm not stupid."

"Baby," Gary taunted. "Go sit in the car and suck you finger or something."

"Mommy said you have to let me stay with you." He directed this at me. I stood.

"When we're out here you do what I say," I said, stepping closer to him.

Joshua wrinkled his nose and waved one hand in front of his face.

"I goin tell Mommy you been drinking," he said.

I took another step toward him.

Jeffery said, "Leave him, let him run to Mommy."

"He need to jump," Gary taunted. "Show us he's man enough to hang."

There was no fear in Joshua's eyes. They were focused on something behind me. I glanced back and saw that Uncle Tones was standing by the car, one hand forming a cap's peak over his forehead, blocking the sun from his eyes so he could see. It annoyed me that Joshua felt that Uncle Tones' presence would protect him.

I stepped closer to Joshua. I wasn't much taller than he was--he had inherited his father's height--but I blocked his view of our uncle. I nudged his left shoulder with my right one. He stumbled and fell. He didn't even have time to scream. The only sound we heard was a splash.

The blood rose first.

Uncle Tones was halfway down the pier before the body floated. Gary and Jeffery fled in the other direction, choosing to make the long trek home on foot.

Once Joshua's forehead was above water his whole head popped up and his body quickly followed. He looked as if he was floating on his back as we often did in the ocean. Only the blood marred the scene, the blood and the body's absolute stillness even as it rocked in the water. There was no saving my brother. Whatever he had encountered under the water had ended his life.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Uncle Tones was next to me.

"I pushed him," I screamed.

"You didn't push him, he fell," Uncle Tones said.

"I pushed him," I repeated. "I pushed him and he's dead."

Uncle Tones gripped my shoulders and looked me in the eyes.

"You didn't push him," he said. "You hear me. Your mother just lose one son, she can't lose another in jail. He fell."

Ten years later I could still feel the pressure of Uncle Tones' hands on my shoulders.

I absorbed Uncle Tones' version of the story. I hadn't pushed Joshua. Now that I had finally allowed myself to relive the scene, I knew what I had to do, confess and accept punishment for my terrible deed. I closed my eyes again and despite the discomfort of the plane seat I slept more soundly than I had in ten years.

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I didn't give Uncle Tones when I was coming because I knew that West Indian hospitality would dictate that he come to meet me at the airport despite my protests, and I wanted to rediscover St. Kitts without the burden of conversation. I took a taxi straight to the hospital. Uncle Tones had said that Mommy was still there, unresponsive but breathing; alive.

I relished the wave of heat that rolled over me as we drove out of the airport. I breathed in the scent of ocean and of sugar cane. I was amazed at how much had changed. The road from the

airport was twice as wide as it had been when I left and dotted with huge well-manicured roundabouts. A Rastafarian had set up shop on one of the roundabouts. He lounged on a folding chair sheltered from the sun by a pink umbrella. He had one arm outstretched offering slices of sugar cane for sale.

I entered the hospital. I had never been there before. No one paid me too much attention as I strode inside to the medical ward. It felt dismal, dingy and I decided that I would fly my mother out as soon as I could, get her some real help.

I found her room and walked in. There were three beds in the sparsely furnished room, two were empty, my mother lay in the third. She was connected to a few monitors, all beeping at a regular pace. A woman was bent over her. I cleared my throat and she turned to look at me with the softest brown eyes I had ever seen in an adult. She was beautiful with high cheek bones and a wide friendly mouth. Her hair was natural, loosely pulled back into a bun that made her look youthful.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm her doctor. Who are you?" she challenged.

"I'm her son."

"Walter?" she cried. "Oh my God, Walter. You don't remember me? It's Tasha."

I remembered Tasha from school, we had been friends in the days before my rebellion. She hugged me and I let myself be pulled into her genuine, welcoming hug. My body relaxed although I hadn't realised that I was tense. I hugged her back. When we finally broke the embrace, Tasha stepped away blushing.

"You're a doctor?" I asked. I was immediately embarrassed by the incredulity that I heard in my voice.

"Yes." She blushed again.

"I want to take her to the US."

Tasha's manner changed. It was as if she put on a mask of professionalism. I realised that I must have offended her, first by my surprise that she was a doctor and then by implying my dissatisfaction with her care.

"You certainly can, she's stable, all her vitals are good. I think the problem is with her psyche. Taking her out of her comfort zone might do more harm than good. Things are not as backward here as you think. Think about it. Pray about it."

Instead of comforting me, Tasha's words confirmed my desire to move my mother. It sounded like she was suggesting some sort of black magic, all this talk about my mother's psyche and prayer.

"Thanks, I'll think about it," I replied. Tasha left the room.

My mother lay on her back with her eyes closed. She looked so peaceful, as if she was just enjoying a lovely nap. I took her hand.

Mommy?" I said. There was no response. "Mommy?" I said a little louder.

I gave her shoulder a shake. No response.

I sat in the chair at her bedside. I figured I should talk to her, but I had nothing to say. I looked around and saw the King James Bible on the bedside table. I picked it up. I knew the words would comfort her. A page was bookmarked. I opened and began to read a paragraph that was highlighted.

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

"Forgiveness," I breathed.

"I'm in heaven?"

I looked up to see my mother's eyes open and staring at me.

"No, Mommy. You're still in St. Kitts, still alive."

"You? In St. Kitts? Reading the Bible?"

Her eyes filled with tears. I couldn't help myself, I started to bawl and it was like the flood gates had been released. I cried for Joshua, I cried for all the years I had isolated myself from everything that was important to me.

"I pushed him. I pushed him," I said when I was finally able to speak.

My mother ran her fingers through my hair and massaged my scalp, just as she did when I was a boy.

"I know darling," she said.

"You know?" My tears dried up immediately as I looked into her eyes.



"Yes, I saw it in your eyes when you came home. You told me in the nightmares you had after Joshua died. I saw it in your face when you said goodbye. I heard it in your voice as you turned away from God. Plus," she gave a slight smile. "I asked Uncle Tones. He told me. It was an accident."

"It wasn't, I pushed him."

She put her arms around me as well as she could with all of the tubes that were connected to her.

"It was an accident," she said. "God done forgive you long time. You just have to forgive yourself."

Lying in her arms I thought, 'And maybe, just maybe I could.'