

## ALL THESE YEARS

By

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‘Violet, is that you?’

The question came from behind her.

Gently she put down her cup of steaming tea and turned, a little afraid of what she might find.

In her mind’s eye she knew who she was expecting but when she turned and looked at him, all she saw was a stranger.

He had a startling head of white hair and his back was slightly rounded.

He wore a suit that must have fit him once but now it hung from his angular shoulders.

He had a clean shaven face and a hat in his hands, in that courteous way that men seemed to have forgotten these days.

She took her time and looked carefully at his mouth, his nose, his ears but they were all unfamiliar.

And then, after bracing herself for a moment, when she felt brave enough, she looked into his eyes. She realised that she was staring at him blankly, without saying a word.

‘Reginald?’ she asked, in a questioning whisper.

His face creased as he smiled at her and then she saw him.

Her Reggie, twenty five, mischievous, never to be taken too seriously.

‘You look wonderful,’ he said, haven’t changed a bit.’ He smiled at her through teeth that must be false she thought because they were too white.

She laughed away the compliment knowing it was ridiculous but secretly enjoying the flattery. She didn’t come across that too often now, free flattery. A girl had to take it when she could.

Her hair once straightened, combed and styled was now easier to maintain cropped short and natural. She stopped colouring it years ago and the specked grey was slowly eradicating the tufts of black.

She pulled her thick sweater tightly around her, knowing full well that it hid her waist, so much slimmer when she had been a young girl. But the toll of three children and sixty five years showed.

‘I’m glad you came,’ he said and sidled into the seat opposite her. ‘I didn’t think you would’.

She remembered the night that he had come to her mother’s house in Kingston, to announce to the family that he was bound for England and that if her Daddy would allow it, he would send for her later.

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She could hear the row that followed, Daddy convinced that Reggie was beneath them, that his family were vagabonds, not to be respected. She had cried, Momma had tried to comfort her, Daddy had almost thrown Reggie out.

Of course, by the time he had written to her, almost eight years later, she had moved on – was married – was happy.

‘Why?’ she asked, ‘it’s not as though I’ve thought ill of you all these years.’ She offered.

‘All these years,’ he echoed, ‘there have been a lot of them, haven’t there?’

He seemed so much less self-assured than she remembered.

Mind you, she thought, the years do that to you, teach you to look before you leap. Perhaps teach you not to leap at all.

He had been such a hot head. Such a know-it-all. So unpredictable.

She had loved that, the excitement of it. Not how she had been brought up at all. Momma had taught her to live by the bible with humility and tradition.

But Reggie had never been to church and had a freedom that she had envied at the time.

‘I saw Rosa,’ he said.

‘You went home?’ she asked, surprised.

‘Every year I go back,’ he said quietly, ‘I have to. Reminds me of who I am’.

Going back she thought. What a strange way to look at home.

She could almost feel the Jamaican sun on her face. She thought that going back home would have been stepping back to who she once was, not who she was now. For a second she longed to be back there more than anything.

But the feeling passed, it always did.

‘You been home?’ Reggie asked.

‘No. We almost went back in ’72 but money was tight. The girls were at school, seemed too hard, d’you know what I mean?’

He nodded. ‘You had three I heard? Girls’

‘Yes, you?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘No’.

Violet smiled at him, ‘you look well’.

‘Liar,’ he quipped and smiled that old, heart breaking smile.

‘Rosa told me that your husband passed on’.

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‘Yes,’ said Violet, ‘almost eight years ago now’.

Violet picked up her cup and blew into it.

The steam rose up and blurred her glasses and for a moment everything before her disappeared.

She remembered, her husband Derek, kind, warm, meticulous.

Derek who was patient enough to wait while her broken heart had mended and then early one morning, when the sun had been bright, had popped the question quietly and given her time to decide.

She had said yes, of course, and they had weathered some terrible times together, but they always seemed to surface even when the sea threatened to submerge them both. And they bobbed along together, a little battered but mostly glad that the other was beside them on that same journey.

As the steam cleared from her glasses she could see Reggie looking at her, smiling, just behind the eyes. She hadn’t been home for almost 50 years, she realised, a lifetime. The sun, green, the colours brighter than any she’d ever seen in England.

Climbing Dunne River Falls with Reggie, swimming in the sea with Derek, going to market with mommy. She took a deep breath and smelled the sea.

‘You never married then?’ she asked absentmindedly.

‘No’, he replied, ‘I kept delaying the decision and then I found myself here. Too old for any one to want now. Too used and tired.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Experience makes you feel tired but you can’t manufacture that knowledge. There’s a lot to be said for having been there.’

He smiled at her, thankful for her kindness.

She remembered him with an armful of oranges, fresh from the tree.

He used to visit his family in St Mary, in the country, and once he brought back the sweetest oranges she had ever tasted, pure sunshine. He had sliced them open for her and watched her eat them, as if he could taste them himself.

She slid her hand over the table and took hold of his.

They looked at each other over the table. The same but so different. It was as if the film in their minds had to readjust to cater for this new, older image.

‘So’ ..... he offered.

‘So’ ..... she replied.

Neither of them knew what was needed. Neither had the words to express what they really felt. Faced with the past and the present all at once.

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‘So.... You never married,’ Violet whispered almost to herself.

‘No’, he replied, ‘missed that one’.

‘Never say never,’ she replied without thinking.

Reginald looked at her, beautiful Violet, with a smile of the sun, sitting wrapped up against the cold in a café in East London.

‘You never went home?’ he asked again.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I didn’t.’

‘Seems we have a lot of things to do still, doesn’t it?’

He clasped her hand in his and she smiled as her heart jumped a little as it always used to.....

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