

## **Remembering Aunt Marie**

*Grace Nichols*

Aunt Marie wasn't our real aunt but like all the big people who visited us had to be prefaced with Aunt, Uncle or Cousin.

To call any grown-up 'full-mouth' – that was by their first name – was asking for trouble since it showed a lack of respect. As children we didn't mind in the least. The more aunts and uncles we had the merrier.

Like the trade winds that blew and the hot sun outside, Aunt Marie was a natural part of our lives. She had grown up with my mother and visited us nearly every day.

You could always hear her voice floating ahead of her as soon as she entered our yard.

'O God, Edna, a cup-of-tea, a cup-of-tea, the wind, the wind,' she would wail.

She kept up this tea-wailing all the way up our back steps, rubbing her stomach and depositing herself on the sofa with a modest belch.

This was the signal for my mother Edna to make her a cup of tea, and who could blame me for thinking that Aunt Marie's stomach was one great big knot of wind that could be assuaged only by endless cups of tea?

Another source of worry to Aunt Marie, not unmixed with pride, were her bunions which protruded like two small onions just below the insides of her big toes.

These had meteorological powers since they could predict the weather.

Whenever it was going to rain, Aunt Marie's bunions would act up, leaving her prostrate on one of our beds, crying out from time to time: 'O God, the bunions, my name ain't Marie if it don't rain.'

More often than not she was proved right and so caught between the 'wind' and the 'bunions' as she was, Aunt Marie far outshone the other cousins and aunts who visited our home.

Aunt Marie had grown up in a convent, for she was only ten years old when her mother died, and her father, a Portuguese businessman, thought it was best.

Since I always kept my ears cocked as a child to adult stories and 'big people talk', I discovered that among the things Aunt Marie did at the convent were: climbing up to peep at the nuns when they were bathing; carving little statues of them from soap; hiding pieces of meat and meaty bones in her skirt pockets whenever they had soup for lunch.

Soup, apparently, was a regular part of the girls' diet but the nuns never allowed them to eat the meat or suck the bones. They had to leave them at the sides of their plates for the piggy barrel, though I suppose this was more to restrain the girls from making pigs of themselves, rather than for the benefit of the pigs.

Nevertheless, Aunt Marie grew up to be a staunch Catholic, attending all the different masses and church meetings and saying all her Hail Marys.

One of her favourite saints was Saint Anthony, the patron saint for finding things.

Since she was a bit absent-minded and was always losing things, you could see why she liked him. Most of the times we visited her she was bound to misplace something or other, especially her spectacles which she left in the oddest of places. She would go around saying her little prayer which went something like this: 'Saint Anthony, perfect imitator of Jesus, Restorer of lost things, grant that I may find my.....'

It never failed to work as after a short while she would exclaim triumphantly, 'Saint Anthony is good, Saint Anthony is really, really good.' I couldn't help wondering what her reaction would be if Saint Anthony turned a deaf ear on her just once in a while.

## P.2

I got the chance one day when she was visiting and left her handbag lying half-opened in a corner of our living room floor.

Peeping out at the top were the blue glassy beads of her rosary. I pulled it out and waited impatiently for her to discover the loss.

First I asked if she had a pencil to lend me, then a pen. She said 'no' to both and didn't even bother to look in her handbag.

Then a friend of mine came across to play and I soon forgot all about Aunt Marie and her rosary.

It was only when she was ready to leave that Aunt Marie discovered the loss. Her shrieking made me rush upstairs.

'Girl, you know anything about your Aunt Marie's rosary?' my mother asked, searching my face suspiciously. I denied knowing.

Aunt Marie's face was flushed and angry. Instead of going around muttering her usual prayer to Saint Anthony as I was hoping, she was getting more and more worked up about it, especially when my mother suggested she might have left it at home.

At this point, Aunt Marie was clutching her bag, so I couldn't slip the rosary back in.

As soon as my mother left the room I got the rosary and quickly threw it through the half open doorway where Aunt Marie, short, plumpish and breathing heavily, was standing.

It landed at her feet with a small clatter on the wooden floor.

Aunt Marie snatched it up then fell dramatically on her knees, clutching the necklace of blue beads and vowing vehemently, 'To God, Edna, I am not coming back to your house. I am not coming back. Let the Virgin Mary be my witness.'

It was the longest time that Aunt Marie ever stayed away from our house – a whole week.

But it was with some relief that I heard her voice floating up the stairs that morning, 'O God, Edna, a cup-of-tea, a cup-of-tea, the wind, the wind.'