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Woman Rain

WHEN SPEAKING OF THE GEORGETOWN CAR PARK, the central hub of transportation for their country, Guyanese use the word “chaotic,” which they pronounce with a hard “ch,” like “charge.” *Da place chaotick! Watch for the teefman, he’ll pick ya pocket quick, and gone!* my friends warned me. In the car park, rats scurried between mountains of trash, music blasted from thirty different minibuses, and every so often a madman stormed the market screaming about Queen Elizabeth. Still, I went there often; I could not stay away. It was the most vital place, the filthiest place I had ever been.

Once I stayed past nightfall and lost my bearings in the dark. Bodies thronging in the thick evening air, mosquitoes biting through my sunburn, and the rising smell of sweat, sewage, and trash overwhelmed me. I was in tears when a young woman saw me. *Gyal, what ‘appened to you?!* she asked as she took my elbow and pushed me onto a bus. I thanked her, but I could not explain. What had happened to me?

I had come to Guyana three months earlier to work as a teacher for teenage girls at the May Rodrigues Vocational Training Center of the YWCA. There was no headmistress at the school and no one to help me define my job, ostensibly to set up some kind of “Youth Development” project. After an initial burst of energy, during which I attempted to catalogue the entire library of donated books, my idealism was waning. When school let out I spent the rest of my days wandering through the city and here, at the car park, watching.

White gyal! White meat! Nevah eat a white meat yet! the men would yell at me. I had learned to signal to them, to give a half-complicit wave to their calls and then forget that I had been noticed at all. This allowed me to watch without feeling that I was being watched, to imagine that I somehow blended into the scenery, though I was likely the only white here among thousands. It was a camouflage of ignorance; and though I couldn’t admit it then, I was camouflaged only to myself.

The day I met Eulis, I was standing on the outskirts of the melee in front of a branch of Guyana’s local fast food restaurant. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a short figure approaching me in a black and white

checked housedress. We made eye contact, but I looked away quickly, pretending I had not seen her. She took a long time to reach me, listing side to side as she walked, while schoolchildren wove around her as they ran by. Eventually I had no choice but to acknowledge the four-and-one-half-foot woman inches away in the dust of the street. I stood on a little concrete plateau of cracked sidewalk and braced myself for the lilting demand of the Georgetown beggars: *Sistab, ya 'ave a little piece for me, sistab?*

"Hello, good aftah noon, Miss!" she said, laughing. "Ya must watch ya don't get buhn up in this sun! Sun hot, hot!" Another giggle.

"I'm alright," I said, shading my eyes to see her better. Smiling, she revealed a mouth full of gapped and broken teeth. Though she must have been at least seventy, her high rounded cheekbones made the skin of her face look smooth. She gripped a faded umbrella in her left hand, and a glass Coke bottle poked out of the wrinkled, black plastic bag in her right.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to pre-empt her. "I don't have many dollars, but I can give you this." I offered her a few small bills. She frowned when she saw them, her dark skin puckering into deep wrinkles.

"Ya 'ave a husband? Y'all could use a cleaning lady for wash de wares an' so! I used to clean 'ouse for a nice white lady, and she was very pleased with my work," she said puffing up her chest.

"No, I don't have a husband. I have a roommate, and we're really not looking—"

"But y'all must need someone for dust, an' sweep up, an' scrub walls, an' beat rug?" The woman cocked her head to the side skeptically. "Ya must be busy, ya 'ave job with the Embassy or so? I could come when y'all are at work, just one day a week, do every, every ting."

I hesitated. Though I had only lived here briefly, the demands of cleaning in Guyana had been impressed on me early. The jungle exists in vast tracts throughout ninety-five percent of the country, and life on the coastland is always imperiled, plant and animal perpetually on the verge of reclaiming that lost five percent. Ants and cockroaches swarm at any crumb that reaches the floor. I took my showers with salamanders and frogs. Tarantulas and centipedes skulked in my cupboards. In rainy season, waves of black and gray mold grow over any moist surface, and during the dry season, dust from the unpaved roads billows in through the windows. I had seen small clouds puff up when people sat down on our sofa.

"No, we really don't need a maid, but thank you," I said. The woman screwed her face up in a look of mixed dejection and disgust.

“All right then, but if ya change ya mind, I’m shopping ‘ere in da mawrning,” she said, reaching down to her umbrella and pushing it up over her head. “Good aftah noon,” she said and listed back in the crowd where she was quickly lost in the rush of people and animals.

All afternoon I couldn’t forget her plaintive questioning, her queer, high-pitched voice, her unnerving cackle. But my real discomfort with the woman’s offer originated in the possibility of hiring a “servant” in a country where I was supposed to be *servng*. Having a maid seemed like something an ex-pat would do, not someone with a mandate to “live at the level of the people.” I wanted to believe that I could do my own work, like a Guyanese woman. I remembered my family’s maid growing up, a very sweet Salvadoran woman named Edis who still cleaned for my parents. She had become something of a family friend, inviting my parents to her wedding, her children’s christenings, and her own naturalization ceremony. The fact remained though: she scrubbed our toilets.

I was relieved that I had not given in to the woman. It was much easier than grappling with difficult questions about service, privilege, and poverty. Better just to scrub our own shower, mop our own floors. I liked the illusion of solidarity with the Guyanese that I had been cultivating and this strange woman had disrupted it; I resolved to avoid the car park in the mornings.

A few hours later, though, on a tree-lined neighborhood street, I saw a familiar short figure approaching. By the time I thought to turn around, she was waving her umbrella and walking as fast as she could in my direction. “Miss! Miss! Like the good Lord brought us togeder again! Who could believe it, to see you ‘ere so soon aftah we fuhst meet.” She laughed and laughed. And then she was before me again, a short woman who seemed to take up my whole field of vision.

“Yes, what a strange coincidence, ” I faltered, noticing the heightened desperation in her eyes. She told me she had gone by her nephew to see if he had a “little piece” to spare, but he couldn’t give her anything this month.

I had no crowd to protect me now, no bustle and honking to distract me from her palpable need. “Ya sure ya don’ need some help with the house?” she asked, her wide brown eyes fixed on me, her face twisted into a hopeful grin.

My decision had nothing to do with a clean house. It was simply that she was old and poor, and I was young and rich. Guilt played a part, and pity also. Looking at her stocky, compact body and wrinkled face made me

think of my own grandmothers living in retirement communities in Florida and Maryland, not out begging to clean houses. Some vague economic principle occurred to me: job creation as the truest expression of development. What could be so wrong in offering work to this woman? Wasn't that better than leaving her to beg on the streets?

"Well, I'd have to ask my roommate Maureen," I began.

"Oh Miss!" she laughed, clapping me on the arm. "Ya won't be sorry, Miss! Y'all gon' like having a nice, clean house!" She pumped my hand in a strong, vigorous grip, laughing as she introduced herself: Eulis Idina Stephens, age sixty-five, resident of the St. Paul's Catholic Home on Vlis-sengen Road. With the tropical sunlight fading into the evening sky and the whistling frogs beginning their song from the trenches, I could almost believe that I had made a good decision.

"YOU HIRED US A MAID?" Maureen said when I told her the news over dinner. "Why?"

"Well, she seems like she has a lot of experience," I explained, looking down at my plate. "And it'll be helpful for us. We won't have to worry about the house getting so dirty."

"Were you worried before?" Maureen asked, raising her eyebrows. Of the two of us, she was much more likely to be found scrubbing the black mold off the windowsills. The second of five children from a working-class, Irish-Catholic family in Cleveland, she had been responsible, like all her siblings, for her own regimen of household chores. For her, having a clean house was a matter of pride and propriety, as important as applying make-up and styling her hair, which she did every day of our two sweltering years in Guyana. Maureen had already mastered the art of hand washing, bleaching, and ironing loads of laundry, including towels and sheets, every week; the challenges of cleaning in Guyana did not intimidate her.

I had been raised in an upper-middle-class suburb of Washington, D.C., collecting piles of clean, folded clothes from the dedicated Edis. House cleaning had always been an invisible process to me, something that happened while I was at school. My sense of duty to household chores was more theoretical than practical, and meeting Eulis had provided a convenient out. "Look, it could at least save us some time," I argued, and Maureen had to agree. Just doing our personal loads of laundry was a three-hour project every weekend, and sweeping and dusting the house could easily take up a whole day. In the end, we agreed that she would at least meet

Eulis, and I offered to pay her full salary for the first few weeks until we decided if the arrangement would be permanent. "I think you're going to like her," I said optimistically. "Really."

Eulis arrived at precisely 6:55 a.m. the next Monday, jangling the rusty gate at the end of our walkway. "HELLO! HELLO!" she called as she walked toward our apartment, the "bottom house" of a two-story duplex. "GOOD MAWRNING GIRLS! Ya tired, Miss Katrin!" she cackled, "Like ya stay up late last night! I had to go on the road and catch minibus early fuh meet y'all here! I was worried I couldn't find the house, but look, I found y'all easy! Is nice house for the two y'all, nuff, nuff rooms." She went on talking, as Maureen emerged from her room, rubbing her eyes. "Hello, hello, you must be Miss Mawreen!" Eulis said, pumping her hand up and down. "Y'all is pretty white women, but ya must protect your skin!" she said, looking at Maureen's freckles. "Eh, eh, look de cyats," she said, as our three kittens scampered through the middle of the apartment. "I didn't know y'all had cyats?" she said, laughing, looking at me.

"Oh, we just got them...they're just kittens," I said, reaching down to pick up one and kiss him on the head. Eulis wrinkled her nose and made a clucking noise with her tongue.

"Oh, Miss Katrin! Animal is a dirty ting! Ya must not treat dem as children!" she scolded me, laughing again. Maureen shot me a look.

"Maybe we should take a look around the apartment," I offered.

It was a quick tour. We walked her through the three bedrooms, one empty for guests; the pipe jutting out from the wall that served as a shower; the tiny closet that housed our toilet without a lid. Then there was the dim kitchen area with its gas stove and metal sink, the small living room with a wicker sofa and low table. Finally we showed her our cleaning supplies, a small collection of worn out sponges and soaps provided by our landlord.

Eulis nodded at everything she saw, commenting on the quality of the furniture, and the lacquered wood floor. "I am very happy to work for y'all, but dere are a few tings me just not able with," she said as we finished the tour. Maureen and I sat back on the couch as she began her ground rules. Eulis did not do laundry and she did not cook and she did not clean windows. She did not do dishes and she did not do stovetops. She made it clear that she had no love for cats and planned to kick them out while she cleaned. Our traditional pointy broom, made up of the spines of palm leaves, would not be suitable; she would need a "push broom" with a handle. She needed Vim for the bathrooms, Bayclin for the floors, and Baygon

for the cockroaches. Maureen and I listened and nodded as she went on and on. Again, Eulis' sheer force of character won out, and we agreed to pay her to come once a week.

And so it began, each Monday Eulis opening the gate at 6:55 a.m., calling, "MAWRNING MISS KATRIN! MAWRNING MISS MAWREEN! MAWRNING GYALS!" Her worn, brown rubber sandals slapping the concrete, plastic bags rustling against her housedress and then three strong raps, as her calloused knuckles met the wood door with a crack. I would pull myself from bed, opening the door to: "HELLO MISS KATRIN! HOW YA DO?" and Eulis would amble in and drop her bags on the kitchen table. "Ya hear da news last night, terrible fire on the East Coast, nuff, nuff people dead and da big cricket match this week coming." Still talking, she wandered into the back room for the cleaning supplies. "All de lawless young people gon' be parytin', like I won't go on the streets for the weekend, such madness dis country come to."

Eulis liked to talk most of the time she was cleaning, whether we were fully awake, or even in the room with her. Despite the running monologue, though, she was a hard worker, trundling through our small apartment with her bottles of brightly colored cleaning products. She soon earned a reputation among our Guyanese neighbors, who were also treated to her morning serenades. "Small woman got a big mouth!" one of them laughed to me, "How y'all take it?" Other American volunteers who stumbled out of the guest room on Monday mornings got the full Eulis treatment: an interrogation about their lives in the States, a passionate analysis of the Guyanese political situation, and a strong encouragement to marry young. In her weekly lectures, she would drop aphorisms for us to digest, about hard work and "how people stay," about the challenges of grappling with the limitations of human nature. Most of her thoughts were prefaced with "Ole people say," a local version of "Confucius says," that connected her opinions to a lineage of wise and weathered Guyanese.

Unexpectedly, Eulis's hire ended up making me feel better about my life in Guyana. My job was still vague, and I was starting to doubt that it would ever change. Eulis's arrival each Monday was something that I had set into motion, a routine I could count on. I was so hungry for a sense of accomplishment that I began to think that hiring a maid somehow counted in the equation of my service to Guyana. This blind appreciation led me to be oblivious to her actual work, which, similar to Edis's efforts throughout my childhood, I simply took for granted.

As the months passed, we came to realize that as strong as Eulis's opinions were about what she would not clean, she had even stronger convictions about what was absolutely necessary to clean. She insisted on dusting under our beds every week. "Ole people say," she would begin, followed by a discourse about regular under-bed cleaning, usually involving premature disease and death. Before she could slide under the wooden frame into my bed's nether regions, she had to remove duffel bags, rusted umbrellas, cracked sandals, broken flashlights, and my standard-issue medical kit. She worked herself into the corners on her stomach, only her stubby legs and the hem of her floral housedress sticking out and rocking up and down with the movement of her torso. When she finally emerged, she wiped the sweat from her forehead, dusted off her housedress and re-stored everything to its place. The whole process took about twenty minutes.

Eulis's second, non-negotiable Herculean task was to clean the shower curtain top to bottom, on both sides. Any question about the significance of this task would put a wrinkle in her brow. "Miss Katrin, ya must realize dat mold is growing! Ya cyan't see it yet, but it is dangerous mold, and soon it black up da ting!" Unable to reach the curtain, Eulis had to drag a chair into the little shower area, and remove it ring by ring from the stall. Then she would lay it flat on the kitchen floor, sprinkle it with soap powder and water, and scrub it with a hard brush. She writhed, her arm and leg muscles torturing the thin plastic into the rough cement floor. Ten or fifteen minutes later she would rise again, damp, soapy, and dripping with sweat, to rinse the curtain and hang it back up.

Eulis's personality would have seemed to predict a flashy, big-picture cleaner: a waxer of floors, a scrubber of tiles, everything sparkling at the end of the day. But in truth her aesthetic of clean was concerned with nascent filth in obscure places and little else. And there was no arguing that she didn't work hard. By her general dishevelment and the strong smells off her body after a few hours of working in the tropical heat, it was clear that she had purged our apartment of all sorts of imperceptible scum.

The problem was, the house didn't *look* all that different after she had cleaned it. Eulis had a disdain for the dirt you could actually see, as if it were simply too obvious to be worth her time. After a combined hour of arduous toil under our beds and the guest bed (regardless of it if had been slept in), she would leave crumbs on the table or a thick layer of dust on the bookshelf. This drove Maureen crazy. "Did she clean the shower curtain again?" she would ask when she got home from work. "These tiles are dis-

gusting!” She started to take on some of the tasks that Eulis refused, which made her even angrier. When we raised our suggestions to Eulis, she would puff up her chest defensively. “I been cleaning houses for twenty years, and de ladies ‘ave always been very happy with my work!” Maureen’s dissatisfaction, Eulis’s stubbornness, and my apathy made her salary more and more contentious as the weeks wore on.

As tensions rose, Eulis became representative of a larger societal scorn for North Americans. Though respected for our education, we were generally considered doltish when it came to household management. We stained our clothes, hung them so they took twice as long to dry, left the house with noticeable wrinkles in our slacks. We didn’t even know you needed to wash your curtains and walls at Christmas to remove cockroach eggs, or beat your rugs outside every few months so they wouldn’t stink with mold. We swept around furniture, rather than moving it, our roti did not bubble and flake, and souse and black pudding were entirely out of our league. Yes, we might be able to read or do calculations, but any Guyanese woman could outperform us when it came to the things that mattered, the things that meant clean or dirty, rich or poor, and, in some cases, life or death. We knew that our neighbors laughed behind our backs at our unconventional cleaning and laundering techniques. By refusing even our most basic suggestions, Eulis was laughing in our faces.

By this time Eulis had been working for us for seven months, and both Maureen and I had established ourselves at our jobs and become friends with young, hip Guyanese who mocked us for putting up with such a difficult maid. The initial charm was outweighed by our annoyance with being woken up every Monday morning by a woman who refused to do the work we were paying her to do. The cross-cultural luster had worn off our times with Eulis, and we were losing patience.

As relations deteriorated we became less careful, less kind. I forgot to buy more cleaning solution when Eulis ran out, causing her to grumble for an entire morning that “ting worth doing is only worth doing right.” We let the cats run freely in the house while she cleaned, so that every five minutes we heard her shoo them away, even if they were across the room. Over the Easter holiday, we forgot to tell her we would both be leaving for the week. After pounding on our door for ten minutes and getting no response, she assumed we had died, though the neighbors assured her we were just on vacation. “YOU ‘AVE DONE ME A GREAT INJUSTICE! YOU ‘AVE DONE ME A GREAT INJUSTICE!” she sang the next Monday morn-

ing, waving her pocketbook over her head as she stormed up our walkway. Only after a long explanation, profuse apologies, and a round-trip bus fare refund were we able to quiet her.

A few weeks later we moved to a smaller apartment in a more upscale, safer area of town. We decided this was a good opportunity to try to talk to Eulis about our ideas for cleaning the new space. The next Monday she arrived on schedule. "Good mawrning, Miss Katrin!" she said, stepping into the apartment. "Like ya get nice sunlight in da place! Ya shouldn't keep the back door open, too much of dust flyin' in." She paused, noticing Maureen sitting on the couch already dressed for work.

"Eulis, we just wanted to talk to you for a minute about some things," I said. She hesitated at the front door, her face tense, and then came to perch on the edge of the red velvet couch looking at us both warily.

"We wanted to discuss how this space might have some different cleaning needs than our old apartment," I said, trying to be gentle.

Her face tightened as she looked first at me, then Maureen. "Y'all aren't happy with how I been cleaning?" she asked.

"No, no, you've been doing a great job," I said. "We just thought that now that we're in a new apartment it might be time to think about other things that might need cleaning, too." She glared at me. I looked down at the rug.

Maureen spoke up. "These are things we've talked about before, but now that we've moved we thought you might be more...flexible." Eulis' eyes were narrowing, her lips thinning in a look of suppressed outrage. Maureen went on. "You know about the shower tiles, well we just want you to scrub them a little, so the soap scum doesn't build up. And the stovetop could always use..." she continued listing the most common battlegrounds in our cleaning standoff.

"But don't I always mek da sink shine?" Eulis burst out, sputtering with anger. "Like y'all too busy tinkering of stovetop to see anything else!" she yelled.

"Of course, of course," Maureen said backing down a little. "The bathroom sink looks great. Now maybe you could just do the same with the kitchen sink?"

It dawned on me that our disagreement with Eulis would never be resolved in a pleasant conversation on the couch. She would always believe she knew better than we did how to clean our home: this was her country and her career. Of course she didn't want to compromise the only part of

her life that gave her any feeling of power to two American girls young enough to be her granddaughters. As far as we were concerned, so much of our lives in Guyana was about accepting limited options that we couldn't bear to relinquish our last bastion of control: our own home.

"Like y'all believe since ya move here ya gon' up!" Eulis said under her breath.

"No, that's not it, Eulis, we don't mean to offend you," I added. But it was too late.

She shook her head, for once silenced by the magnitude of her anger. "Y'all get me too vexed for work!" she said. I protested but she was already picking up her umbrella and pocketbook and walking out. "Goodbye Miss Katrin and Miss Mawreen," she said in a low voice, then pulled the door hard behind her.

"Me nah able," she said, shaking her head, when she visited me at school the next day. My students looked on curiously as I tried to reason with her.

"Eulis, we still want you to work for us. In fact we want your job to be easier," I said. She was already shaking her head.

"Miss Katrin," she said, her voice wavering with anger. "Twenty years I work cleaning houses and no ladies ever sit me down for 'talk' like yesterday." She spit the word "talk" out like it was a bitter root. "No, me nah able with y'all." Though she had no other work and only a meager pension from the Government, Eulis quit her job as our maid.

Maureen was unapologetic. "She left, Katherine. If she wants to work she'll come back, but we don't need to go after her." But I couldn't forget the look of betrayal on Eulis's face the day she visited me at the school. When I went home to the States that summer, our failed relationship was still on my mind. I ended up telling Grammy, my eighty-year-old grandmother, about Eulis, omitting any mention of our recent falling out. "Oh, Katherine," she said, her watery blue eyes growing even more watery. "How hard it must be to live alone down there!" She shook her head, "No children or grandchildren either."

As she did every year, Grammy sent me a care package that Christmas. Buried among parcels of flashing fairy lights, plastic trees, and tinsel, was a bag with little red-nosed reindeers on it. In her spidery, arthritic handwriting, she had printed, "For Eulis, with love from Grammy (Katherine's grandmother)." Her letter read: "I remembered how you had told me about your dear maid, Eulis. Please pass on this little gift to her from me."

It had been almost half a year since our rift with Eulis, and the idea of seeing her again brought up mixed feelings. I put off giving her the gift, taking as my excuse the fact that she had no phone. For months, the bag sat behind a low table in my now dusty room. Occasionally, though, I would see the green ribbon curls poking up and feel a pang of guilt for withholding from Eulis what was rightfully hers.

Finally, one day after work I got up the nerve to seek her out at the Catholic home for the elderly. I found her in a sitting room looking out the window, fanning herself with a magazine. She was wearing one of her familiar housedresses, her hair pinned back in little white twists on her head. "Miss Katrin!" she said, raising her eyebrows and widening her eyes. "Me ehn't tink I'd see you again dis lifetime!"

"I brought you a present, from my grandmother," I began, raising the bag in the air.

"No, Miss Katrin!" her face darkened and she waved ominously toward the two elderly women smiling and peeking around the doorframe. I followed her into her bedroom where she took the bag from me. "Dese ole people here is terrible," she said, glancing furtively toward the door. "If dey see you give me tings, dey goin' come after me all de time." She looked at the wrapping paper and the note. "Long time since Christmas pass," she mumbled. But the contents pleased her; my grandmother had sent a rain poncho, a box of candy canes, and an angel figurine with wings of gold.

I told her news of the house, the cats, and the other volunteers she had met. She mentioned our last conversation in hushed tones. "When y'all wanted to 'ave long talk, I knew dere was problem ahead." She offered a few theories as to why our working relationship had failed: "Like y'all had to do tings you own way," and, "It must have been dat other girl. I believe she never did tek to me." Her anger seemed to have been mollified by the peace offering from my grandmother, though, and when I left she walked me to the gate and waved goodbye.

A few weeks later, Eulis visited me again at the school and asked for my grandmother's address. In her thank you note she listed each trinket that Grammy had sent, underlining it in red and explaining in detail how she would use it. Touched by her appreciation, Grammy decided to continue sending packages through me, necessitating more trips to the Catholic Home. As it turned out, Grammy's inclination toward sentimental, religious, and mass-produced gifts was a perfect match for Eulis. She wrote back about every token as if it were the most beautiful, useful item she had ever received.

Our working relationship ended, Eulis and I were able to relax with each other, and gradually she began to open up to me. Over sodas and water biscuits she would tell me stories about her life in Guyana, which had been a series of “great injustices.” She had been born into a large family, one of a set of twins, but the boy had died at childbirth. “I was de blackest one,” she told me. “Maybe he would have been as black as me, but I was alone with my color. My other brothers and sisters were different, more fair.”

“I was smart, ya know,” she said. “Smart! I used to write nice papers and do all ah my assignments. I passed my exams, but da man was wicked.” The Headmaster of her school had reported that Eulis had failed Maths, which kept her from graduating from secondary school. As a young woman, she had been sent to live with her aunt and uncle in the country to keep house for them. “He trouble me,” she said in a whisper, leaning forward. When she told her aunt about his advances the woman asked her to leave.

Later she had found work as a nurse in the hospital. On hearing this, I finally understood Eulis’s fixation on the shower curtain and under-bed region, and her vitriol for our cats. She had been trying to rout pestilence from our house, not just dirt. Again, this career path had led to frustration. The other nurses had turned out to be “wicked baderation,” and gossiped about her incessantly. She quit and went back to cleaning other people’s houses.

Of all of Eulis’s regrets, the greatest was not getting married. When she worked for us she assumed that every male volunteer she met was a boyfriend. “Miss Katrin, like you and de dark-hair one, Mistah Gabe, would make a fine couple!” she would tease. “Y’all must marry, don’t hesitate!” she told us again and again. Growing up she had listened to other women’s stories of difficult relationships. “*Husband worries is the worst worries*, they told me. *Husband worries is the worst worries*—so I never bother with men.” Now she regretted her decision, because she had no one to take care of her in her old age, no children, no “grands,” and no husband.

Having had my own complex dealings with Eulis, I could imagine how she may have played a part in some of the injustices heaped upon her for the past sixty years. But hers was also a familiar story of a dark-skinned girl growing up in a post-colonial society. Then Eulis had made the most counter-cultural choice she possibly could. Married or not, women her age commonly had ten or twelve babies. Though she regretted her decision, she had clearly escaped some of the ravages of extreme poverty. She was uncommonly healthy, highly intelligent, and more vibrant than many Guya-

nese women half her age. Although she would never see it this way, Eulis had the marks of a truly independent woman.

Toward the end of our two years in Guyana, Eulis initiated a final act of peace making, offering Maureen and me a parting gift: a serenade for future happiness. We planned it weeks in advance and Eulis insisted on having the performance taped for posterity. On a day in our last month in Guyana, she again knocked on our door at 7:00 a.m. and tottered into the house. “HELLO! HELLO! Good mawrning! Good mawrning!” As we lounged half-awake in our pajamas, Eulis stood in the middle of our living room, her chest lifted, hands straight at her side. She explained that her song, “Where’er You Walk,” would ensure us good fortune, including marriage to respectable Christian men. I assumed it was a hymn, but later learned it is an aria from Handel’s *Semele*.

*Where’er you walk
cool gales shall fan the glade
trees where you sit
shall crowd into a shade
Where’er you walk*

Though not exactly melodic, Eulis’s voice was booming and clear. As she sang, her face became concentrated and serious, and she lifted her head and closed her eyes when the highest notes coursed through her rigid body:

*Where’er you tread
the blushing flower shall rise
and all things flourish
and all things flourish
Where’er you turn your eyes*

It was a benediction, the best way Eulis knew to express her hope for us in the face of a world gone wrong. In her operatic voice, she offered us a song of faith and protection, the only gift she had to give.

IN A STRANGE TURN OF EVENTS, I continued to hear from Eulis through my grandmother for several years after I returned from Guyana. Though they had very limited understanding of each other’s lives—Grammy had never traveled beyond Europe, and Eulis had barely left Georgetown—the two

women had an epistolary chemistry. Unable to compete with my grandmother's material generosity, Eulis compensated by writing letters twice as long. She offered a vivid picture of the politics, weather and challenges of life in Guyana.

Granny Jamieson, whenever I write you these long letters, I do not write all on the same day, I usually start to write days before, and every day, I write a piece, and when I am finished, then I write the date of the letter.

I am person who loves to write.

At Eulis's request, I received her letters second hand. They are written in beautiful, even script, a remnant of her education under the British colonial system. Her grammar and spelling are Standard English, and show no trace of Creolese dialect, the only language I ever knew her to speak. On the page, you can imagine a more moderate tone, though she indicates volume and passion by underlining her main points in red ink. Multiple pages are attached with a tiny bronze safety pin, enclosed with thick packets of clippings from *Stabroek News* or the *Guyana Chronicle*. Her meticulous nature is just as evident in her writing, as it was in her cleaning.

My dear Granny Jamieson,

I received a notice which is also called a parcel slip, from a post-girl on 28th of November, and she informed me to go with it at Customs of the General Post Office (GPO) to uplift a parcel. On the 29th of November, I uplift the box. Thanks for sending me the yellow raincoat, with hood attached to it, but I am very sorry I cannot wear it, because it is very large for me. I think medium size would fit me, therefore I gave it away.

Other contents of the box are 1 red face towel, 1 cream hand towel with red flowers, 1 black and gold cloth, 1 calendar, 1 Christmas card with the two angels praying by Jesus' bed, 1 Gospel of John book, 1 card with basket of flowers, 1 thank you card with a little boy and girl on it and 1 blue (please turn over) card marked Gibson Island at the back of the card. I also received a U.S. \$20 note in one of the cards in the envelope, and 4 Daily Word books. I also received the little holy manger figures which are 2 angels, 6 different kinds of animals,

baby Jesus, the holy Virgin Mary, all of them are very beautiful. Saint Joseph was absent from the figures. Many thanks for all your beautiful gifts. Jesus will continue to bless you abundantly for your kindness to me.

Her letters always included some strong wishes for my welfare:

I am sorry that I cannot send a Mother's Day card to Katherine, because she is not a Mother. One of these days when she marries to the very good husband that Jesus will send, and after marriage gets a baby, then I will send her a Mother's Day card.

And some powerful complaints about the continuing great injustices of her life:

Water is not coming in the house, and I have to fetch many buckets of water for myself and the old lady. I fetch the water from the next yard. I also have to raise my hands high using 3 1/2 buckets of water to flush one large bowel movement for the old lady, because for years the flush system of the toilet is not working properly. The Committee knows about this problem for all these very long years, and is not paying a plumber to repair it. This is also a very hard job. Sometimes she gets 2 bowel movements a day or 3. The faeces are normal stool. Therefore a lot of my time is taken up, and I am also very tired. I do not want the Committee to know that I am giving out this information about the home. This is neither a paid job, nor I never volunteered to do this job, which is looking after the old lady.

She remembered our first meeting, though somewhat romanticized from what I recalled:

I used to be Katherine's maid cleaning the house, and I have found Katherine to be kind-hearted, loving, friendly, she showed concern for me who is an old person, because when I first met her in "quick serve restaurant" standing in the queue to order things from the cashier, I approached her and asked for work, and immediately I observed that she was willing to employ me, in order to help me out financially.

In another letter, she reflected on our disagreements about her cleaning:

Katherine also showed concern for me in another way, because when I was cleaning the plastic curtain of the bathroom she told me not to fatigue myself too much in cleaning in it, but I told her that because I like to do work very clean, I do not mind if I fatigue myself. This also showed that she had a tender feeling for me, because I am old.

And Eulis had a poetic sensibility that came through in unexpected moments:

In Guyana the intermittent showers are also called the "Woman rain." This is because when some women quarrel, they quarrel and stop and quickly begin to quarrel again about the same thing, and then stop again, just like the intermittent showers.

Finally, Eulis told my grandmother about my departure:

The day before she flew out of Guyana, she visited me at my home, she gave me a "Thank you card," a U.S. \$20, and I think she also got a friend to take a photo with herself and me, she threw her hand around my neck, and I also threw my hand around her neck. She flew out of Guyana the next day. When the visit was over and she was leaving the yard, I stood up at the gate, and watched her until she was out of sight. I miss her very much.

MY GRANDMOTHER HAS SINCE DIED and Eulis has stopped writing. I have her letters though, tens of pages of her script on tiny, frayed notebook pages chronicling her life and the life of the country I lived in for two years. I can still hear her voice when I read them now: her operatic cadence, punctuating laughter, her strong opinions on a world that she believed had forsaken her, but to which she absolutely refused to surrender.