

NARRATIVE

Georgetown, Guyana

SPRING 1997

MY STUDENTS at the May Rodrigues Vocational Training Center are called “early-school-leavers,” a Guyanese euphemism for high school dropouts. Every morning eighty teenage girls giggle and saunter up the dirt road to school, bright blue ribbons woven through their braids. From Tiger Bay, La Penitence, Albouystown, they come from wooden shacks crowded with ten or twelve brothers and sisters. Without fail, their uniforms are washed and pressed: four pleats in the just-below-the-knee blue polyester skirt. They iron designs onto the backs of their simple white cotton blouses, elaborate geometries expanding out to the sleeves. Breakfast was black tea.

The one-room school has only two full-time staff: a headmistress and a reading teacher. Twice a week a hunchbacked grandma with thick glasses comes to instruct shorthand; a young woman arrives two hours late every Wednesday to teach food and nutrition. Other girls squint in the half-darkened room—electricity is expensive—to complete a crochet chain stitch or thread a thick needle for a straw-craft mat. I fill in where I can, calling out vowel sounds in my American accent and chalking the alphabet on a piece of plywood painted black.

Our girls are the ones no one else can manage: slow and sickly or fast and troublemaking. Some have been expelled for having had “story,” incidents, with teachers or other students in their old schools. Some have been kept home for years to take care of younger siblings. Most can barely read and must learn a trade to get by. But a few of them are just too smart for the overcrowded city classrooms and are thrown in with the dropouts because there is nowhere else for them to go. One or two are brilliant. The most brilliant one I met was Onica Belle.

“Miss, Miss!” Onica calls to me as I ascend the wooden steps to

the main schoolhouse. She is always out of breath. “Miss, for the swimming this week . . .” Big inhale, big exhale. “Miss, I have to buy swimming costume and, Miss, Finella told me some at Bourda market, a lady selling used ones, Miss, but I didn’t see them, Miss, ya seen them? Ya know where to shop them, Miss?”

“Well, I know that the market stalls by the post office . . .” I start, but she is off again.

“And, Miss, for the concert, Miss, I want to do a dance, but the other girls sayin’ there’s too many dances, Miss, maybe I’ll read a poem, Miss? What do ya think, ya know any poems, Miss?”

Again I begin to respond, and again she cuts me off, questions filling her mouth. My brain, already pickled by the searing midday heat, gives up quickly. I lean against the railing, sweating and dizzy.

“Miss, the book, Miss, ya promised me, to understand accounting, Miss, can ya get me the book, Miss? Promise I’ll treat it nice, Miss, thanks, Miss. And Miss, I like ya skirt, Miss, the color nice, when ya gone back to New Yark, ya must leave it for me, okay, Miss, okay?”

She is sixteen, bursting with IQ. My other students have boils from malnutrition, yellow eyes from jaundice, welts and scars from physical labor and beatings. Onica has words and energy. Her features are crammed together on her face but wildly animate when she speaks, and her hair is banded hastily at the nape of her neck. But her eyes steady as she copies notes from the board, dropping her litany of gossip. The dim room seems to close in on her body, tensed with curiosity, poised to learn. In class she calls, “Miss! Miss!” and shoots her hand up with the right answers every time.

In another country, another time, Onica would be promoted through the grades and deemed “gifted and talented.” In Guyana, her extra brainpower is like a bird caught in a room with no window from which to escape.

“Belle! Belle!” we hear the headmistress yell, and Onica skulks into the small corner office. Her surname is a legacy of the brief French colonial rule in Guyana, after the Dutch, before the British. I wonder who else realizes that the headmistress is calling for beauty, again and again.

Onica is talking to other girls' boyfriends behind their backs or tormenting the woman who sells food in the canteen. She seems contrite, but she'll be in the office the next afternoon for another offense. A few times her mother is called in, a short, rough-looking woman who pulls a tiny girl by the hand. She looks as overwhelmed by her daughter as we are. No one knows what to do with Onica Belle.

In late spring the headmistress sends Onica with me to pick up theater tickets, probably just to get her out of the school for the afternoon. We ride the minibus, and she rattles on over the blasting music. When we arrive at a wooden house across from St. Joseph's Hospital, a woman comes to the door dressed only in a dirty slip. Two small children and an older girl join her, huddling in the shadows beyond the door frame.

The woman's eyes are wide and protruding, the bones of her body expressed through her skin. "Thinning disease," the Guyanese call it. I catch myself staring and speak up. "Good afternoon, we have come to find out about tickets for the show," I say. The woman says nothing, and for a horrible moment I think we have disturbed a dying person for no reason.

"I'll send my daughter for them," she says slowly. The older girl recedes into the darkness while Onica and I stand outside, sun beating down on our faces. She is peering into the squalid house, and the small children are staring up at me, wide-eyed in their ragged clothes. The girl returns and hands me the tickets silently across the threshold.

It is a perfect tropical day, but I am chilled. I am twenty-two and a foreigner, unaccustomed to meeting death in a doorway. "Onica," I say in a low voice, "I think that woman has AIDS."

She looks at me and laughs. "Miss, like ya frightened!" she says, then imitates me in a false whisper. "I think she has AIDS. . . ." She laughs again. "Nuff, nuff people got AIDS!" She shakes her head as if to say, dis white lady.

I have come to Guyana to try to help, but I do not have the medicine to heal this woman. I cannot find the books that will take this girl to college.

Onica is talking about the astronomy book she has been reading. "Miss, ya know how many stars in the sky, Miss? And

planets, Miss? Ya evah hear of galaxies, Miss? And the moon? Ya know anyone who's been to the moon, Miss?"

—*Katherine Jamieson*