

OTHER SOLITUDES

CANADIAN
MULTICULTURAL
FICTIONS

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Toronto
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1990

simply to run away from it or to exchange it for something that I perceived as established, risk-free—like the culture of England, which was so far removed, so pure as it were, and something in which I was not implicated, whereas I am obviously implicated in being of Ukrainian descent, with all its controversial historical ramifications. I can see where my writing has been directly fed by my 'ethnicity', to use that as an umbrella term, by those stories my grandmother told me as a child, and by being part of a Ukrainian community. But to me, it's all so complicated, politically as well as culturally, and I can now understand why, when I was much younger, I was unable to handle it all.

Multiculturalism is a word that has all kinds of connotations attached to it, and especially a lot of political rhetoric surrounding it. Do you have a personal understanding of it, a personal vision of what you would like to see multiculturalism mean?

I would like it to have a central and not marginal impact. I define Canada as a nation of immigrants, and I do not see it as the 'two solitudes' icon Hugh MacLennan offered us. In fact, I much prefer to use the term 'multiculturalism' rather than 'ethnic'—which to me has all sorts of negative connotations. Usually it's WASPs who use it when they try to do anthropology on different groups and who see Slavs as tribal peoples, whereas if you're Anglo-Saxon you belong to Western 'civilization'. Multiculturalism is ultimately a means of preserving a variety of linguistic-cultural heritages, in contrast to the melting-pot reduction of the United States. It can develop forms of openness and tolerance, which necessitate the asking of questions, the airing of griefs, the opening up of locked histories—histories of bad relations between different racial or ethnic groups. What I don't want to see multiculturalism become is the Caravan idea that's trotted out for a week every summer, creating a phoney vision of ethnic harmony, so that a Pole can visit the Kiev or Odessa pavilion or the Tel Aviv pavilion, and everyone is all jolly and happy together. I can see there is some value in that celebration of ethnicity, though it has probably become quite touristic now. But it seems to me that if one doesn't use multiculturalism as a means of exploring the tensions between ethnic cultures and heritages, discussing the politics as well as the aesthetics of ethnicity, then one risks trivializing the whole concept and making it something that is really of no use to a writer or creative artist.

NEIL BISSOONDATH b. 1955

Dancing

I was nothing more than a maid back home in Trinidad, just a ordinary fifty-dollar-a-month maid. I didn't have no uniform but I did get off early Saturdays. I didn't work Sundays, except when they had a party. Then I'd go and wash up the dishes and the boss'd give me a few dollars extra.

My house, if you could call it a house, wasn't nothing more than a two-room shack, well, in truth, a one-room shack with a big cupboard I did use as a bedroom. With one medium-size person in there you couldn't find room to squeeze in a cockroach. The place wasn't no big thing to look at, you understand. A rusty galvanize roof that leak every time it rain, wood walls I decorate with some calendars and my palm-leaf from the Palm Sunday service. In one corner I did have a old table with a couple of chairs. In the opposite corner, under the window, my kitchen, with a small gas stove and a big bowl for washing dishes. I didn't have pipes in my house, so every morning I had to fetch water from a standpipe around the corner, one bucket for the kitchen bowl, one for the little bathroom behind the house. And, except for the latrine next to the bathroom, that was it, the whole calabash. No big thing. But the place was always clean though, and had enough space for me.

It was in a back trace, behind a big, two-storey house belonging to a Indian doctor-fella. The land was his and he always telling me in a half-joke kind of way that he going to tear down my house and put up a orchid garden. But he didn't mean it, in truth. He wasn't a too-too bad fella. He did throw a poojah from time to time and as soon as the prayers stop and the conch shell stop blowing, Kali the yardboy always bring me a plate of food from the doc.

The first of every month the doc and the yardboy did walk around with spray pumps on their back, spraying-spraying. The drains was white with poison afterward, but I never had no trouble with mosquito or fly or even silverfish. So the doc wasn't a bad neighbour, although I ain't fooling myself, I well know he was just helping himself

and I was getting the droppings. People like that in Trinidad, you know, don't let the poojah food fool you. You could be deading in his front yard in the middle of the night and doc not coming out the house. I count three people dead outside his house and their family calling-calling and the doc never even so much as show his face. We wasn't friends, the doc and me. I tell him 'Mornin' and he tell me 'Mornin' and that was that.

I worked for a Indian family for seven, eight years. Nice people. Not like the doc. Good people. And that's another thing. Down there Black people have Indian maid and Indian people have Black maid. White people does mix them up, it don't matter to them. Black people say, Black people don't know how to work. Indian people say, Indian people always thieving-thieving. Me, I did always work for Indian people. They have a way of treating you that make you feel you was part of the family. Like every Christmas, Mum — I did call the missus that, just like her children — Mum give me a cake she make with her own two hand. It did always have white icening all over it, and a lot of red cherry. They was the kind of people who never mind if I wanted to ketch some tv after I finish my work. I'd drag up a kitchen chair behind them in the living room, drinking coffee to try to keep the eyes open. And sometimes when I get too tired the boss did drive me home. Understand my meaning clear, though. They was good people, but strick. They'd fire you in two-tuos if you not careful with your work.

Nice people, as I say, but the money . . . Fifty dollars a month can't hardly buy shoe polish for a centipede. I talked to the pastor about it and he tell me ask for a raise. All they gimme is ten dollars more, so I went back to the pastor. You know what he say? 'Why don't you become a secketary, Sister James? Go to secketerial school down in Port of Spain.' Well, I start to laugh. I say, 'Pastor, you good for the soul but you ain't so hot when it come to the stomach.' Well, I never! Me, who hardly know how to read and write, you could see me as one of them prim an proper secketeries in a nice air-condition office? Please take this lettah, Miss James. Bring me that file, Miss James. Just like on tv! I learn fast-fast servant job was the only work for somebody like me.

That was life in Trinidad.

Then I get a letter from my sister Annie up in Toronto. She didn't write too often but when she set her mind to it she could almost turn out a whole book. She talk on and on bout Caribana, and she

send some pictures she cut out from the newspaper. It look so strange to see Trinidadians in Carnival costumes dancing and jumping in them big, wide streets. Then she go on bout all the money she was making and how easy her life was. I don't mind saying that make me cry, but the tears dry up fast-fast. She write how Canadians racist as hell. She say they hate black people for so and she tell me bout a ad on tv showing a black girl eating a banana pudding. Why they give banana to the Black? Annie say is because they think she look like a monkey. I couldn't bring myself to understand how people so bad. Annie say they jump out of the stomach like that. I telling you, man, is a terrible thing how people born racist.

Anyways, Annie ask me to come up to Canada and live with she. She wanted to sponsor me and say she could help me find a job in two-tuos. First I think, No way. Then, later that night in bed, I take a good look at myself. I had thirty years, my little shack and sixty dollars a month. Annie was making five times that Canadian, ten times that Trinidadian. I did always believe, since I was a little girl, that I'd get pregnant one day and catch a man, like most of the women around me. But the Lord never mean for me to make baby. I don't mind saying I try good and hard but it just wasn't in the cards. I thought, No man, no child, a shack, a servant job, sixty dollars a month. What my life was going to be like when I reach sixty? I think hard all night and all next day, and for a whole week.

After the Sunday service, I told the pastor bout Annie's letter. Quick-quick he say, 'Go, Sister James, it is God's doing. He has answered your prayers.'

I didn't bother to tell him that I didn't pray to God for help. I figure he already have His hands full with people like the doc.

Then it jump into my head to go ask the doc what to do. He was always flying off to New York and Toronto. So I thought he could give me more practical advices.

I went to see him that morning self. He was in the garden just behind the high iron gate watering the anthuriums. Kali the yardboy was shovelling leftover manure back into a half-empty cocoa bag. I remember the manure did have a strong-strong smell because they did just finish spreading it on the flowers beds.

The doc was talking to himself. He say, 'A very table masterpiece of gardening.' Or something like that. That was the doc. A couple of times when I was walking home I hear him talking to his friends and it was big and fancy words, if you please. But when he talk to me or

Kali or we kind of people, he did start talking like us quick-quick. Maybe he think we going to like him more. Or maybe he think we doesn't understand good English. I always want to tell him that we not children, we grow up too. But why bother?

I knock on the gate.

The doc look up and say, 'Mornin, Miss Sheila.'

'Mornin, doctor.'

'Went to church this morning, Miss Sheila?'

'Yes, doctor.'

'Nice anthuriums, not so?'

'Very nice anthuriums, doctor. Is not everybody could grow them flowers like you.'

He shake his shoulders as if to say, That ain't no news. Then he say, 'Is hard work but they pretty for spite, you don't think so?'

I remember the day a dog dig up one of the anthuriums and the doc take a hoe to the poor animal and break his head in two. There was blood all over the place and the dog drop down stone dead. The owner start to kick up a fuss and the doc call the police to cart the man off to jail. But that was just life in Trinidad and I didn't say nothing. But ever since then those pink, heart-shape flowers remind me of that dog, as if the plants pick up some of the blood and the shape of the heart. It was after that the doc put up the brick fence with broken bottles all along the top and a heavy iron gate.

I say, 'Doctor, I want to ask you for some advices.'

He say, 'I not working now, Miss Sheila, come back tomorrow during office hours.'

'I not sick, doctor, is about another business.' But still he turn away from me, all the time spraying-spraying with the hose.

Kali stop shovelling and say something to the doc.

The doc say, 'What is this I hearing? Miss Sheila? You thinking bout leaving Trinidad?'

Kali start to laugh. I see the doc wanted to laugh too. He turn off the hose and drop it on the ground. He walk over to the gate. He say, 'Is true, Miss Sheila?'

'Yes, doctor.' And I get a strange feeling, as if somebody ketch me thieving something.

'Canada?'

'Yes, doctor.'

'Toronto?'

'Yes, doctor.'

'So what you want to know, Miss Sheila?'

'I can't make up my mind, doctor. I don't know if to go or if to stay.'

'And you want my advice?'

'I grateful for any help you could give me, doctor.'

He start rubbing the dirt from his hands and he stand there, thinking-thinking. Then he lean against the gate and say, 'Miss Sheila, I going to tell you something I don't say very often because people don't like to hear the truth. They does get vex. But you know, Miss Sheila, people on this island too damn uppity for their own good. They lazy and they good-for-nothing. They don't like to work. And they so damn uppity they think they go to Canada or the States and life easy. Well, it not easy. It very, very hard and you have to work your ass off to get anywhere. Miss Sheila, what you could do? Eh? Tell me. I admire you for wanting to improve your life but what you think you going to do in Canada? You let some damn stupid uppity people put a damn stupid idea in your head and you ready to run off and lose everything you have. Your house, your job, everything. And why? Because of uppitiness. Don't think you going to be able to buy house up in Canada, you know. So, I advise you not to go, Miss Sheila. The grass never greener on the other side.' He stop talking and take a cigarette from his shirt pocket and light it.

I didn't know what to say. I was confuse. I say, 'Thanks doctor. Good day, doctor,' and start walking to my house. Before I even take two steps, I hear Kali say, 'Them nigs think the world is for them and them alone.'

And he and the doc start to laugh.

There I was, hands hurting like hell from suitcase and boxes and bags and I couldn't find the door handle. My head was still full of cotton wool from the plane and my stomach was bawling its head off for food. I just wanted to turn right round and say, 'Take me back. The doc was right. I ain't going to be able to live in a place where doors ain't have no handle.' But then a man in a uniform motion me to keep walking, as if he want me to bounce straight into the door. Well, if it have one thing I fraid is policeman, so I start to walk and, Lord, like the Red Sea parting for Moses, the door open by itself.

This make me feel good. I feel as if I get back at the customs man who did ask me all kind of nasty questions like, 'You have any rum? Whisky? Plants? Food?' as if I look like one of them smugglers that

does fly between Trinidad and Venezuela. I thought, I bet the doors don't open like that for him!

As I walk through the door I start feeling dizzy-dizzy. Everything look cloudy-cloudy, as if the building was just going to fade away or melt. I was so frighten I start to think I dreaming, like it wasn't me walking there at all but somebody else. It was almost like looking at a film in a cinema.

Then I hear a voice talking to me inside my head. It say, Sheila James, maid, of Mikey Trace, Trinidad, here you is, a big woman, walking in Toronto airport and you frighten. Why?

I force myself to look around. I see faces, faces, faces. All round me, faces. Some looking at me, some looking past me, and some even looking through me. I start feeling like a flowers vase on a table.

Then all of a sudden the cloudiness disappear and I see all the faces plain-plain. They was mostly white. My chest tighten up and I couldn't hardly breathe. I was surrounded by tourists. And not one of them was wearing a straw hat.

I hear another voice calling me, 'Sheila! Sheila!' I look around but didn't see nobody, only all these strange faces. I start feeling small-small, like a douen. Suddenly it jump into my head to run headlong through the crowd but it was as if somebody did nail my foot to the floor: I couldn't move. Again like in a dream. A bad dream.

And then, bam!, like magic, I see all these black faces running toward me, pushing the tourists out of the way, almost fighting with one another to get to me first. I recognize Annie. She shout, 'Sheila!' Then I see my brother Sylvester, and others I didn't know. Annie grab on to me and hug me tight-tight. Sylvester take my bags and give them to somebody else, then he start hugging me too. Somebody pat me on the back. I felt safe again. It was almost like being back in Trinidad.

Sylvester and the others drop Annie and me off at her flat in Vaughan Road. Annie was a little vex with Syl because he didn't want to stay and talk but I tell her I was tired and she let him go off to his party.

Annie boil up some water for tea and we sit down in the tiny living room to talk. I notice how old Annie was looking. Her face was heavy, it full-out in two years. And the skin under her eyes was dark-dark as if all her tiredness settle there. Like dust. Maybe it was the light. It always dark in Annie's apartment, even in the day. The windows small-small, and she does keep on only one light at a time. To save on the hydro bill, she say.

She ask me about friends and the neighbours and the pastor. It didn't have much family left in Trinidad to talk about. She ask about the doc. I tell she about his advices. She choops loud-loud and say, 'Indian people bad for so, eh, child.'

She ask about Georgie, our father's outside-child. I say, 'Georgie run into some trouble with the police, girl. He get drunk one evening and beat up a fella and almost kill him.'

She say, 'That boy bad since he small. So, what they do with him?'

'Nothing. The police charge him and they was going to take him to court. But you know how things does work in Trinidad. Georgie give a police friend some money. Every time they call him up for trial, the sergeant tell the judge, We can't find the file on this case, Me Lud, and finally the judge get fed up and throw the charge out. You know, he even bawl out the poor sergeant.'

Annie laugh and shake her head. She say, 'Good old Georgie. What he doing now?'

'The usual. Nothing at all. He looking after his papers for coming up here. Next year, probably.'

Annie yawn and ask me if I hungry.

I say no, I did aready eat on the plane: my stomach was tight-tight.

'You don't want some cake? I make it just for you.'

I say no again, and she remember I did never eat much, even as a baby.

'Anyways,' she say quietly, 'I really glad you here now, girl. At last. Is about time.'

What to say? I shake my head and close my eyes. I try to smile. 'I really don't know, Annie girl. I still ain't too sure I doing the right thing. Everything so strange.'

Annie listen to me and her face become serious-serious, like the pastor during sermon. But then she smile and say, 'It have a lot of things for you to learn, and it ain't going to be easy, but you doing the best thing by coming here, believe me.'

But it was too soon. With every minute passing, I was believing the doc was righter.

Annie take my hand in hers. I notice how much bigger hers was, and how much rings she was wearing. Just like our mother, a big woman with hands that make you feel like a little child again when she touch you.

She say, 'Listen, Sheila,' and I hear our mother talking. Sad-sad. From far away. And I think, Is because all of us leave her, she dead long time but now everybody gone, nobody in Trinidad, and who

going to clean her grave and light her candles on All Saints? I close my eyes again, so Annie wouldn't see the tears.

She squeeze my hand and say, 'Sheila? You awright? You want some more tea?'

She let go my hand, pick up my cup, and went into the kitchen. She say, 'But, eh, eh, the tea cold already. Nothing does stay hot for long in this place.' She run the water and put the kettle on the stove. When she come back in the living room I did already dry my eyes. She hand me a piece of cake on a saucer, sponge cake, I think, and sit down next to me.

She take a bite from her piece. 'You know, chile,' she say chewing wide-wide, 'Toronto is a strange place. It have people here from all over the world—Italian, Greek, Chineese, Japaneese, and some people you and me never even hear bout before. You does see a lot of old Italian women, and some not so old, running round in black dress looking like beetle. And Indians walking round with turban on their head. All of them doing as if they still in Rome or Calcutta.' She stop and take another bite of the cake. 'Well, girl, us West Indians just like them. Everybody here to make money, them and us.' She watch me straight in the eye. 'Tell me, you ketch what I saying?'

I say, 'Yes, Annie,' but in truth I was thinking bout the grave and the grass and the candles left over from last year and how lonely our mother was feeling.

'Is true most of them here to stay,' she continue, 'but don't forget they doesn't have a tropical island to go back to.' And she laugh, but in a false way, as if is a thing she say many times before. She look at my cake still lying on the saucer, and then at me, but she didn't say nothing. 'Anyways,' she say, finishing off her piece, 'you see how I still talking after two years. After two years, girl, you understanding what I saying?'

'So I mustn't forget how to talk. Then what? You want me to go dance shango and sing calypso in the street?'

'I don't think you ketch what I saying,' Annie say. She put the saucer down on the floor, lean forwards and rub her eyes, thinking hard-hard. 'What I mean is . . . you mustn't think you can become Canajun. You have to become West Indian.'

'What you mean, become West Indian?'

'I mean, remain West Indian.'

I think, Our mother born, live, dead, and bury in Trinidad. And again I see her grave. I choops, but soft-soft.

Annie says, 'But eh, eh, why you choopsing for, girl?'

'How I going to change, eh?' I almost shout. 'I's a Trinidadian. I born there and my passport say I from there. So how the hell I going to forget?' I was good and vex.

She shake her head slow-slow and say, 'You still ain't ketch on. Look, Canajuns like to go to the islands for two weeks every year to enjoy the sun and the beach and the calypso. But is a different thing if we try to bring the calypso here. Then they doesn't want to hear it. So they always down on we for one reason or another. Us West Indians have to stick together, Sheila. Is the onliest way.' Again her face remind me of the pastor in the middle of a hot sermon. You does feel his eyes heavy on you even though he looking at fifty-sixty people.

My head start to hurt. I say, 'But it sound like if all-you afraid for so, like if all-you hiding from the other people here.'

I think that make she want to give up. I could be stubborn when I want. Her voice sound tired-tired when she say, 'Girl, you have so much to learn. Remember the ad I tell you bout in my letter, the one with the little girl eating the banana pudding?'

'Yes. On the plane I tell a fella what you say and he start laughing. He say is the most ridiculous thing he ever hear.'

Annie lean back and groan loud-loud. 'Oh Gawd, how it still have fools like that fella walking around?'

'The fella was coloured, like us.'

'Even worsen. One of we own people. And the word is black, not coloured.'

It almost look to me like if Annie was enjoying what she was saying. And I meet a lot of people like that in my time, people who like to moan and groan and make others feel sorry for them. But I didn't say nothing.

All the time shaking her head, Annie say, 'Anyways, look eh, girl, you going to learn in time. But lemme tell you one thing, and listen to me good. You must stick with your own, don't think that any honky ever going to accept you as one of them. If you want friends, they going to have to be West Indian. Syl tell me so when I first come up to Toronto and is true. I doesn't even try to talk to white people now. I ain't have the time or use for racialists.'

I was really tired out by that point so I just say, 'Okay, Annie, whatever you say. You and Syl must know what you talking bout.'

'Yeah, but you going to see for yourself,' she say, yawning wide-

wide. 'But anyways, enough for tonight.' She get up, then suddenly she clap her hands and smile. 'Oh Gawd, girl, I so happy you here. At last.' She laugh. And I laugh, in a way. She pluck off her wig and say, 'Come, let we go to bed, you must be tired out.'

Before stretching out on the sofa, I finish off my cake. To make Annie happy.

Next morning Annie take me downtown in the subway. It wasn't a nice day. The snow was grey and the sky was grey. The wind cut right through the coat Annie give me and freeze out the last little bit of Trinidad heat I had left in me.

I don't mind saying I was frighten like hell the first time in the subway. Annie, really playing it up like tourist guide, say, 'They does call it the chube in Englan but here we does say subway.' I was amaze at the speed, and I kept looking at the wall flying past on both sides and wondering how I ever going to learn to use this thing. I kept comparing it to the twenty-cent taxi ride to Port of Spain, with the driver blowing horn and passing cars zoom-zoom. The wind use to be so strong you couldn't even spit out the window. But the subway though! The speed! But I couldn't tell Annie that. When she ask me what I think of it, I just shake my head and pretend it was no big thing. To tell the truth woulda make me look like a real chupidy. Annie wasn't too happy bout that. A little vex, she say, 'You have to learn to use it, you can't take taxi here.'

I doesn't remember a lot from my first time in Yonge Street. Just buildings, cars, white faces, grey snow. Everything was confuse. It was too much. The morning before I was still in my little shack in Mikey Trace, having a last tea with the neighbours — not the doc, of course, but he send Kali over with twenty Canadian dollars as a present — and this morning I was walking bold-bold in Toronto.

Too much.

We walk around a lot that day. We look at stores, we look at shops. She show me massage parlours and strip bars with pictures of naked women outside. In one corner I see something that give me a shock. White men bending their back over fork and pickaxe, digging a hole in the street. They was sweating and dirty and tired. Is hard to admit now, but I feel shame for them and I think, But they crazy or what? In Trinidad you never see white people doing that kinda work and it never jump into my head before that white people did do that kinda work. Is only when I see that Annie didn't pay no attention to them that I see my shame. I turn away from them fast-fast.

By the end of the day my foot was hurting real terrible and my right shoe was pinching me like a crab. Finally we got on the subway again and I was glad to be able to rest my bones, even with all kinda iron-face people around me. We stop at a new station and Syl was waiting for us in his car.

It was a fast drive. Syl did always have a heavy foot on the gas pedal. I remember trees without leaf, big buildings, a long bridge, the longest I ever see, longer than the Caroni bridge or any other bridge in Trinidad. By the way, that was one of the first things I notice, how big and long everything was. And when somebody tell me that you could put Trinidad into Lake Untarryo over eight times, my head start to spin. It have something very frightening in that.

Finally we got to Syl place, a high grey, washout apartment building. The paint was peeling and the balconies was rusty for so. I say, 'Is the ghetto?' I was showing off. I wanted to use one of the words I pick up from a Trinidad neighbour with a sister in New York. But Syl and Annie just laugh and shake their heads.

Annie point to a low building across the street. 'They does call that the Untarryo Science Centre.'

'What they does keep in there?' I ask.

Annie say, 'I hear they does keep all kinda scientific things, but I really don't know for sure.'

'You never go see for yourself?' I ask.

Syl cut in with 'And waste good money to see nonsense?' He laugh short-short and tell Annie to stop showing me chupidness.

We went in the building and Syl call the elevator. That was my first time in a elevator but I used to seeing the prim an proper seketaries going into one on tv, pushing a button, nothing moving and they come out somewhere else. Is a funny thing, but you ever notice that elevators doesn't move on tv? Is as if the rest of the building does do the moving up and down.

I look at Syl and I say, 'Eh, eh, boy Syl, it look like you grow a little. You ain't find so, Annie? He not looking taller?' Annie didn't reply but Syl blush and close his eyes, just like when he was a little boy. He did always like to hear people say he grow a little because he don't like being shorter than his sisters. He like to say he grow up short because we did jump over his head when he small, but I doesn't believe that. 'And I see you still like your fancy clothes.' He was wearing a red shirt which hold him tight-tight at the waist and green pants as tight as a skin on a coocumber. I notice his shoes did have four-inch heels and I realize that was why he was looking taller, but

I didn't mention it. Syl have a short temper when it come to his shortness and his fanciness. I didn't talk about his beard neither. Annie tell me he was growing it for three months and it still look as if he didn't shave yesterday.

We get off at the eight storey and walk down a long-long corridor. Same door after same door after same door. Annie say, 'I could never live in a highrise. It remind me of a funeral home, with coffin pile on coffin.' We turn a corner and I hear the music, a calypso from two or three carnivals back.

Syl didn't have a big apartment, only one bedroom. All the furniture was push to one side, so the floor was free for dancing. The stereo was on the couch, with a pile of records on the floor next to it. There was a table in one corner with glasses and ice and drinks on it.

Somebody shout from the kitchen, drowning out the calypso, 'Syl, is you, man? Where the hell you keeping the rum?'

Syl say, 'You finish the first bottle already?'

The voice say, 'Long time, man. You know I doesn't wait around.'

Syl say, 'Leave it for now, man, come meet my sister Sheila.'

Annie, vex, say, 'Fitzie hand go break if he don't have a drink in it always.'

A big black man wearing a pink shirt-jac come out from the kitchen. Syl say, 'This is Fitzie. He with the tourist office up here.'

A pile of people follow Fitzie from the kitchen and more came out of the bedroom. Syl wasn't finish introducing me when the buzzer buzz and more people arrive. The record finish and somebody put on another one. People start to dance. A man smelling of rum grab on to my waist and start to move. It was a old song, stale. I didn't feel like dancing. I push the man away and went to get some Coke. The Coke didn't taste right, it was different from the one in Trinidad, sweeter and with more bubbles. It make me burp. Fitzie pat me on the back.

The front door open, a crowd of people rush in dancing and singing with the record before they even get inside properly. I couldn't believe so much people was going to fit in such a small room. Somebody turn up the music even louder. Syl give up trying to tell me people's names. It didn't matter. The music was pushing my brain around inside my head, I couldn't think straight, couldn't hardly even stand up straight. Fitzie say to me, 'Is just like being back home in Trinidad, not so?'

I ask Annie where the bathroom was and I went in there and start to cry even before I close the door.

I don't know how long I stay in the bathroom. I kept looking in the mirror and asking myself what the hell I was doing in this country. I was missing my little shack. I wanted to jump on a plane back home right away, before the doc could break down the shack and put up his orchid garden. It was probably too late, the doc wasn't a man to wait around, but all I wanted was that shack and my little bedroom. I kept seeing the pastor saying goodbye, and the neighbours toting away the bed and dishes, the palm-leaf on the floor, the calendars in the rubbish.

Somebody pound on the door and I hear Annie saying, 'Sheila, you awright? Sheila, girl, talk to me.'

I hear Fitzie say, 'Maybe she sick. You know, the change of water does affect a lot of people.'

I wipe my eyes and unlock the door. A man push in, looking desperate, and Annie pull me out fast-fast. She say, 'What happen? You feeling sick?'

I shake my head and say, 'No, is awright. Is only that it have too much people in here. But don't worry, I awright now.'

'You want to go home?'

Fitzie say, 'I'll drive you.'

'No, really, I awright now.'

We went back to the living room. It was dark. People was dancing.

West Indians always ready for a party to start but never ready for it to end. It didn't take long before the air in the apartment was use up. Everybody was breathing everybody else stale air, the place stinking like a rubbish dump. Curry, rum, whisky, smoke, ganja and cigarette both. And the record player still blasting out old Sparrow calypso.

I start to sweat like cheese on a hot day. Somehow people find enough room to form a line and they manage to move together, just like Carnival day in Frederick Street, stamping and shuffling, stamping and shuffling, and shouting their head off. Syl, in the middle of the line, grab on to my arm and pull me in. I feel as if I didn't have no strength left, I just moving with the line, Syl pulling me back and pushing me forwards.

Finally the song end and the line break up, everybody heaving for air, some people just falling to the floor with tiredness. I couldn't breathe. It was like trying to pull in warm soup through my nose. I push through the crowd to a open window. A group of people was standing in front of it, drinking and smoking.

Fitzie was talking. 'These people can't even prononks names right. They does say *Young* Street when everybody who know what is what know is plain an obvious is really *Yon-zbe*. Like in French. But that is what does happen when you ain't got a culcheer to call your own, you does lose your language, you does forget how to talk.'

A young man with hair frizzy and puff-out like a half-use scouring pad say, 'At least we have calypso and steelband.'

'And limbo.'

'And reggae.'

'And callaloo.'

Fitzie spot me listening. 'Eh, eh, Sheila man,' he say, 'but you making yourself scarce tonight. All-you know Sheila, Syl sister?'

Everybody say hello.

Fitzie ask me how it going and I say it very hot in here.

The young man with the scouring pad hair laugh and say, 'Just like Trinidad.'

Everybody laugh.

Fitzie say, 'Yeah, man, just like home.'

The young man say, 'Is the warmth I does miss, and I not talking only about the sun but people too. Man, I remember Trinidad people always leave their doors open day and night, and you could walk in at any time without calling first. Canajuns not like that. Doors shut up tight, eyes cold and hands in pocket. They's not a welcoming people.'

I was going to tell them bout the doc, with the big house and the fence and broken bottles. I wanted to say even me did always keep my shack shut up because if you have nothing worth thieving, people will still thief it, just for spite. But I didn't want to talk, I just wanted to breathe. Besides, Syl done tell me he don't like people talking at his fetes. He only like to see people dancing and eating and drinking. Seeing people sitting around and talking does make him vex. He say is not a Trinidadian thing to do.

I manage to get to the windowsill and I look out at the city. The lights! I never see so much lights before, yellow and white and red, line after line of lights, stretching far-far away in the distance, as if they have no end. That was what Port of Spain did look like from the Lady Young lookout at night, only it was smaller and it come to an end at the sea, where you could see the ships sitting in the docks. But after looking at this, I don't think I could admire Port of Spain

again. This does make you dizzy, it does fill your eye till you can't take any more.

Fitzie the Tourist Board man say, 'You looking at the lights?'

'Yes.'

'They nice. But can't compare with the Lady Young though.'

I didn't say nothing. I felt ashamed, but I couldn't say why.

He ask me to dance. Reggae music was playing. I not too partial to reggae. It does sound like the same thing over and over again if they playing 'Rasta Man' or 'White Christmas'. So I say no, next song. He grab my arm rough-rough and pull me. I say, 'Okay, okay, I give up.' Then he hold me tight-tight against him, so that I smell his cologne and his sweat and his rum and his cigarettes and he start moving, pushing his thigh up between my legs. I try to pull away but he was holding on too tight, doing all the moving for the two of us.

About halfway through the song somebody start shouting for Syl. The front door was open and a white man was standing just outside in the corridor. My heart start to beat hard-hard. The voice call for Syl again. Fitzie stop moving and loosen his grip on me. Everybody else stop dancing. They was just standing there, some still holding on, staring through the door. All the talking stop. The music was pounding through the room. A cold draft of air from the window hit my back and make Fitzie hands feel hot-hot on me.

I take a long, hard look at the white man. His face was a greyish whiteish colour, like a wax candle, and all crease up. He was pudgy like a baby. He was standing hands on hips trying to look relaxed but only looking not-too-comfortable. I think his hair was brown.

Fitzie say, 'I bet I know what that son-of-a-bitch want.'

Annie come up to me, put her arm around my shoulder.

The man take a step closer to the door, as if he want to come in. I feel Fitzie tense up, but it seem to me the man was only trying to get a better look inside.

Fitzie say, 'Like he looking in a zoo, or what?'

Then Syl appear at the door, shorter than the man but wider, tougher looking. Syl say loud-loud, 'What you want here?'

I couldn't hear what the man was saying but I see his lips moving.

Syl lean on the door frame, shaking his head. Then he choops loud-loud.

The man take a step backward, waving his hands around in the air.

The song came to an end, the turntable click off. I could hear myself breathing.

Syl choops again and say, 'You call the cops and I go take you and them to the Untarryo Human Right Commission. Is trouble you want, is trouble you go get.'

The man put his hands in his pants pockets and open his mouth but before he could talk somebody else push himself between Syl and the man. It was a short, fat Indian fella by the name of Ram. He did arrive at the party drunk. A white girl was with him, drunk too. Annie tell me she wasn't his wife, she was his girlfriend. His wife was home pregnant and vomiting half the time.

Ram say, 'What going on here, Syl boy?'

Syl say, 'This son-of-a-bitch say the music too loud. He complain-ing. He say he going to call the police.'

Ram say, 'The music too loud?'

The man say, 'I just want it turned down. I don't want to have to call the police.'

Ram laugh loud-loud, put his arm around Syl shoulder and say, 'Syl, boy, the music too loud. It disturbing the neighbours. So what we going to do bout this?'

'Ram, boy, it have only one thing to do, yes.'

'Yes, boy Syl, only one thing.'

Ram put his hand to his nose, blow twice, rub the cold between his fingers and then wipe his fingers clean on the white man's sweater.

The white man pull back and push Ram away. Then he turn grey-grey and rush off, leaving Syl and Ram in the door.

I start to feel sick.

Ram and Syl, laughing hard-hard, hug on to each other.

The young man with the scouring pad hair run to the door and shout down the corridor, 'Blasted racist honky!'

Fitzie run up to Syl and Ram shouting, 'Well done, man, well done. All-you really show that son-of-a-bitch.'

The young man say, 'Nice going, man, you really know how to handle them.'

Annie say, 'Good, good.'

Suddenly everybody was laughing. A few people start to clap.

Syl take a rum bottle and drink long and hard. He fill his mouth till a little bit run down his chin. Ram shout, 'Leave some for me, man,' grab the bottle and take a mouthful, too.

Syl spot me and call me over. I was finding it hard to smile but I try anyways. He put his hand on my shoulder and Annie put her arm around my waist. Syl eyes was red like blood and he couldn't talk right. After some mumbling and stumbling, he manage to say, 'Sheila, girl, you see what just happen there? Remember it, remember it good. Is the first time you run into something like that but it ain't going to be the last. You see how I handle him? You think you could do that? Eh? You think you could do that?'

I didn't know what to say. I was feeling I didn't want to treat nobody like that and I didn't know if I could. Finally I just say, 'Yes, Syl,' without knowing myself what I mean.

Ram say, 'Screw all of them.'

I say, 'Maybe we should go back home?'

Annie say, 'But it early still, girl.'

I say, 'No, I mean Trinidad.' Our mother's grave, and the grass and the candles was in my head again.

Syl dig his fingers into my shoulder. 'Never let me hear you saying that again. Don't think it! We have every right to be here. They owe us. And we going to collect, you hear me?'

I say, 'Syl, I ain't come here to fight.' I start crying.

Annie say rough-rough, 'Don't do that,' and it wasn't my Annie, it wasn't Annie like our mother, it was a different Annie.

Then Syl grab me and shout, 'Somebody put on the music. Turn it up loud-loud. For everybody to hear! This whole damn building! Come, girl, dance. Dance like you never dance before.'

And I dance.

I dance an dance an dance.

I dance like I never dance before.



NEIL BISSOONDATH, born in Trinidad in 1955, is of East Indian origin. He lived in Trinidad until the age of eighteen, when he came to Canada to study French at York University. He received his B.A. there in 1977, and studied advanced writing at the Banff School of Fine Arts. He taught English and French as a second language from 1977 to 1985 in Toronto, and has been a full-time writer since 1985. He was awarded the McClelland and Stewart Award for fiction in 1986 for the story 'Dancing', which has been anthologized and adapted

for radio. Bissoondath divides his time between Toronto and Montreal, and is just finishing a second collection of short stories. His published works are *Digging Up the Mountains* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985); and *A Casual Brutality* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1988).

ARUNA SRIVASTAVA teaches in the English department at the University of British Columbia. She was born in Canada of Indian and Scottish parents. Her areas of teaching and research interest include post-colonial literature and theory and feminist theory.

Have you experienced racial prejudice, either as a person or a writer?

Definitely not as a writer. As a person, there is an incident that I used and expanded on in the novel *A Casual Brutality*, when the young man knocks at the door and asks, 'Where's ya nigger?' I'm told I've been extremely lucky, but I can't believe that for over sixteen years I've been simply so lucky. My feeling is that there are times that racial problems are exaggerated.

Do you think it's true that Canada is not a particularly racist country?

I think every country is racist, unless it is a country that has only one race living in it. But Canada is less racist than most countries I can think of. I think we're far less racist than the States.

What about Bharati Mukherjee's feelings about racism in Canada?

Bharati and I have had our disagreements over that; I don't know what she's talking about quite frankly. She says that she prefers the United States because there everything is up front. An American doesn't like you because of the colour of your skin, you will know it, whereas in Canada people will smile and be polite and not let you know it. And therefore Canada is a more racist country. I would much rather have a racist behave in the Canadian way: smile and be polite. They don't have to like me or do anything nice for me, but I know they are not going to hit me over the head. Canadians, even when they are racist, realize that it's not a nice thing to be.

But is it then logical to say that Canada is a country in which we don't have to worry about racism any more?

No, we always have to worry about racism, as we do with any social problem, but I don't think it's one that's out of hand. One thing we have to keep in perspective is that when a new group arrives, historically they have always had problems which, as they've settled in and become part of the landscape, have disappeared. In the mid-seventies in Toronto there was a bit of a problem with people of East Indian background, but that was soon taken care of. What always impressed me about Toronto was that people—police, civic authorities—always jumped in to solve a problem before it got out of hand. I'm fearful of people over-reacting: screaming racism simply because the two people involved happen to be of different races or different colours. Whenever there's a problem in Toronto between the police and a black man, it's always claimed to be racism. I'm afraid of people overusing the word. I got tired of the screams of racism. I'm very wary of that because there are truly racial incidents—but if you cry wolf often enough, people will not pay attention anymore, and racism is such a powerful charge, it's got to be reserved for when it clearly is needed.

What do you think of the concept of multiculturalism? Is there a real difference between Canada and the United States in their approach to multiculturalism?

I think there is something—and here, strangely enough, Bharati and I agree. The US approach seems to be much more relaxed; their relaxation is a form of absorption, whereas what we end up doing is creating division between groups, so that we end up—all through high-mindedness—with a kind of gentle cultural, ethnic, Canadian apartheid. What I'd like to see is a mingling of the two: not quite absorption, but not quite division either. I would be more comfortable knowing that I was a Canadian, and not an ethnic, not a Trinidadian Canadian or a West Indian Canadian; I don't know what those things mean anyway. To be called a Trinidadian Canadian to me conjures a picture of someone who, in March or April, whenever they have the carnival in Toronto, dresses up in a costume to jump and dance in the streets, while drinking illegally. That has nothing to do with me.

And you don't think there's any value to the assertion of ethnic identity?

I'm really wary of it.

Are you saying that people really should be absorbed?

No, I'm saying that on a certain level one should do everything one can to fit in with the society at large. It doesn't mean that at home you should change your habits or change your way of living, your religious and cultural beliefs, the foods you enjoy eating — that's fine. Those are yours; there's no reason to get rid of them. But I don't think we should expect the greater society to adjust to our ways; I think that's calling for a kind of anarchy because there are simply so many groups. There has to be an across-the-board standard of what it is to be Canadian. And that's where immigrants have to make a certain adjustment, just as society has to make an adjustment too. But sometimes I think we ask the society to go too far.

My argument would be that perhaps the assertion of ethnic or group identity does help the larger Canadian society change.

How?

Visibility, I suppose, although the underside of that is ghettoization.

Precisely.

People can lock themselves in their ethnic communities, but I'm not sure that that entirely has to be the case.

I think we're talking about the same thing here: people looking for a kind of medium ground. I've seen the ghettoization occur: people who arrive and find themselves living in their little ethnic community, never engaging with society. That's what I think has to be avoided, because a person ends up in a way caged by their cultural baggage. I know too many people from the Caribbean who insist on living here as if they were still back there, and then resenting being told that there are certain ways of doing things here.

How do you feel about any of the changes in immigration and

refugee policy? Do you feel that Canada has to protect itself against an influx of immigrants or refugees through these laws?

No. I think we could be doing a lot more than we are. My feeling is that we need more immigrants. But part of the problem is that the immigration law is a mess. Immigration should be opened up, but it has to be cleaned up first. I have a hard time with the entire question, because while I think we should be doing more, it's obvious that there are hundreds of millions of refugees out there, and we cannot accept everyone, so criteria have to be established. The first category, the one of political persecution, is rather strangely applied. There were Trinidadians arriving by the thousands a few months ago, and claiming refugee status. Now they're not people in political danger; they're not from South America or Central America, with the mass killing, the torture that's going on there. And so under the UN definition of a refugee, they didn't qualify. That's fine, I understand that, yet at the same time I also know what's happening in Trinidad; people are not looking at viable futures. There are people who are having a hard time finding food to feed their children, and I have to ask myself, aren't lives in danger here? They're not political, but they're economic, and isn't their claim to a future as strong as the political one? The political one may be more direct, and maybe it takes one bullet to kill you, whereas you starve to death over a period of months, but in the end, they're heading towards the same thing. I have a hard time with that, because most of the refugees at this point, I suppose, are economic refugees. What do we do? It's a moral decision. I don't think there's any one answer.

What do you think about projects such as this book?

From what I understand of the concept of this book, it sounds like a useful one. It's a question of ideas and visions — where we are, where we're going, where we've come from, and that's what's missing in multiculturalism: ideas. The multicultural projects that I object to are the so-called cultural ones, the dancing and singing. They're Disneyland. Yet that's what multiculturalism means to most people, that's where it's most valuable to the politicians.

One of the dangers in identifying writers by their ethnic identity, in a project such as this, is the criteria for selection. Are there other constituencies being ignored?

Well, that's part of the entire problem with multiculturalism. It doesn't need to be celebrated, it needs to be examined as broadly, as widely as possible. The questioning has to be done from every possible angle.

With your views on multiculturalism, how do you feel about biculturalism?

I'm all for it; I'm for bilingualism.

And you don't think there's a contradiction there?

No I don't, because — and this is not to ignore the native question — but we have to look at the political reality of the two founding cultures, French and English. That is the basic identity of this country. And until we've settled that, we're tilting at windmills trying to build anything else. Part of it too is that multiculturalism has created a resistance to the acceptance of French in Canada. A lot of work has to be done with francophones, getting them to accept English Canada. A lot also has to be done with English Canada, getting them to accept what's going on in Quebec. But Ontario will eventually declare itself bilingual; there are services already, which is a nice change. With the new sign law here [in Quebec] — it's a ridiculous issue, but it got a lot of people upset — there's some wonderful political manipulation going on: forget about unemployment folks; let's talk about signs. And then the news media in English Canada reporting on the demonstrations and all the rest of it — exaggerated. Quebec has got its demands and a lot of them are legitimate. I'm uncomfortable with many of them at the same time, because I think there are basic questions of human rights there. Yet at the same time I understand their concerns, which will be answered only when English Canada fully accepts the French fact, and until that happens Quebec is going to come dangerously close to overriding human rights. They have to, because they see a lot of English Canada as being opposed to their own existence.

I'd like to turn to your writing now. One of the criticisms made of A Casual Brutality is that it has little sense of history. Do you think there is too much attention paid to the ills of colonialism and imperialism in post-colonial writing? Do you think it's something we have to get away from?

It's not that too much attention is paid to it, but attention has to be paid to other things too at this point. I'm tired of people blaming all of their problems on what the British did, the French did, the Spanish did. That ignores the fact that we've had a generation or two when they weren't there. You've had these very educated classes from your own country stealing. *They're* the ones who have created the torture, the refugees, and so we have to move beyond that. It's simply not enough to blame colonialism for everything. That's my irritation.

Edward Said calls this the 'politics of blame'. Do you have any thoughts about what's possible, in order to get beyond blame?

The problem with blaming colonialism for everything is that it allows you to reject all responsibility for yourself. What is needed is extremely urgent self-examination, a look at who you are today. Forget why you are this way: it may not even be important, because it's too late in the day. You've got to say, 'This is the way we are. This is why things aren't working. If we want to make things work, then this how we've got to change.' That's a very simplistic way of looking at it, but I think that's the kind of attitude that has to start appearing. I know some people in the Caribbean who have attempted to do that, and have found themselves stalled: economists, sociologists, who have started to question, in order to serve the future. But that is not appreciated, because it is a betrayal. I have been accused of this occasionally — that there is no screaming and tearing of hair because of what the British did. It's suddenly 'who are we, and why are we doing this to ourselves?' That's a no-no. There are people who seem to be so comfortable feeling themselves to be victims of others, and it's probably hard to give that up, because it's so comfortable. But it has to be done.

The story called 'Dancing' has drawn the charge of inverse racism. How do you respond to that?

This is a story that says: not only whites are racist. The fact is that non-whites can also be racist. And that's what the story is about. A story can't contain everything; it's not meant to satisfy every ideology or every political point of view.

Perhaps it makes many white readers feel uncomfortable to see themselves portrayed in such a way.

Maybe one day I'll write a story with nice white people. There are people who view characters as representative of the larger community and that is absolute nonsense. If they want to believe that characters represent their race or culture, then don't come to me. I write about individuals.

A feminist reader, however, might look at one of your female characters and say, 'Where is the understanding of the woman's situation?'

In 'Dancing', Sheila is a very sympathetic person. But that's the problem of reading literature politically. That to me is a mistake. Literature is literature; it's not politics. There's always political content in good writing, but if you bring a political vision to a novel and you begin reading it looking for political brownie points, you're being unfair to the writer and yourself, and you're not fully open to the role of fiction. Fiction is not, and it must not be, propaganda.

What's your next project?

I'm very close to finishing a new collection of stories. There are fewer Caribbean stories, and some of the stories explore people and experiences totally alien to mine: there's a story in the new collection that deals with an old Jewish man. But, generally, the themes of displacement and immigration are there still.

YESHIM TERNAR b. 1956

Ajax Là-Bas

Saliha Samson sits on one of the empty washing machines in the basement and lights a cigarette. There are three loads of wash in the machines. The wash cycle takes 35 minutes; the drying cycle another 25. The French couple who employ her are very nice people. They leave for work early in the morning, as soon as she arrives at 8:30. They trust her with everything. They know she is a conscientious worker, that she doesn't slack off like some of the other cleaning women.

Madame Rivest tells Saliha to eat whatever she wants from the refrigerator. She always leaves some change in the ceramic vase on the telephone table just in case Saliha needs to get extra detergent, cigarettes, or whatever. Madame Rivest knows she likes to snack on strawberry and blueberry yoghurt, so she always makes sure there is some in the refrigerator for her. This morning she has told her she hasn't done her weekly shopping yet, so she is leaving some money for Saliha especially to buy fruit yoghurt.

Now that's a nice gesture! I wish everyone were like that, thinks Saliha as she takes a deep puff from her cigarette. The Rivests live a long ways off from where she lives. She has to take the 80 bus from Park Extension, then the metro at Place des Arts to Berri, and then change metros at Berri to go to Longueuil; afterwards she has to take yet another bus to come here. But the trip is worth it because some of the people she works for close to home treat her so badly that she'd rather lose an hour on the way and work for Madame and Monsieur Rivest. That's a lot easier than working for the two old spinsters on upper Querbes.

Saliha notices the unbalanced load signal flash on one of the washers, and gets off the machine she is sitting on to straighten things out. As she untangles the heavy blue cotton velour bedspread from the black rotor blades of the washing machine, she thinks it was lucky she decided to take this cigarette break in the basement because if she had gone straight upstairs to continue her vacuuming, she would have lost an extra 25 minutes by having to wait for this