

She put a hand against his shoulder. He turned around and faced her. 'You're not angry with me, eh?' she asked, her voice almost a pleading whisper.

He thought of Tony too at that moment.

Suddenly he wanted her; her body seemed like food to him. He felt a deep, deep yearning, with the intensity of pain. Slowly he put out a hand, deliberately, like a feeler, touching her.

She half-giggled, then muttered, 'I'm not used to this . . . since my husband died . . . that was almost three years ago.' She suddenly wiped her eyes; another tear dropped down her nose.

He was touched. 'How did he die?'

'In a fire,' she said rather quickly, 'caused by his own cigarette . . . he was a drunk . . . a no-good anyway! His company was all that I wanted.' She sniffed, wiping the tear from her nose, and then apologising.

A flood of sympathy went through him. He impulsively leaned forward and kissed her. Immediately she pulled his head close down to her face, and he could feel her fingers begin to dig into the back of his neck and ears. He didn't mind; he kissed her fiercely, more fiercely as she kept pulling him into her almost. His fingers fumbled with her blouse. He was surprised with the ease with which it came off; then he fingered her bra – but he was having difficulty now. She guided him, and he could feel a tremor go through her veins, coursing through her entire body as his passion rose to meet hers.



Mammita was saying, 'You fellas . . . you don't know what it is I'm waiting for! Why eh?'

Slick laughed. 'Don't worry Mammita . . . you will be with us a long time here.'

He was ungallant, Max thought; he buried his head deep in his book, smelling it, touching it almost with his nose. Then he looked up – Mammita was still leaning against the counter looking at him, at them. His eye caught hers after a while; she smiled; he was about to smile too.



She was ready to go. Max watched her as she put on her things, somewhat hurriedly now; he watched her smooth the ruffled collar of her blouse; her actions appeared quick, almost unnatural. 'You could stay on,' she murmured, 'as long as you want.' Her head lowered a little; then, 'When d'you want me to come again?'

He didn't answer; he wasn't even listening to her. In a way he was

preoccupied; he wasn't sure if she was offended or not. He moved a little from the room, watching her going down the stairs, watching her walking down next. Once she stopped and looked back at him – looking now as if she was a different person altogether.

'Maybe you'd find a job soon, eh?' she said.

'Maybe,' he muttered, not sure if she heard him or not.

ZOILA ELLIS



White Christmas an' Pink Jungle

'Eh, Julia, stop gaze, car will knock you down.'

'What?'

'I say stop gaze. What do you? You got worries or what?'

'Cho! Me? Dat is one thing me don't have pet.'

Julia, walking down New Road, opened her umbrella to shield her face from the glaring midday sun. As she walked, her thoughts were bitter. 'Darn fas'; she well and want find out my business.'

She walked down Douglas Jones Street and then hit Freetown Road. She walked down until she reached the Farmer's Market. Sweat was running down her back and under her armpits, making her clothes stick to her skin. Her head ached as it always did if she stayed in the sun too long especially now that she was just recovering from the flu. A slight breeze fluffed up the dust on the street blowing it into her face and she sneezed twice, feeling her whole body double with the motion. When it was over, she felt slightly dizzy. She crossed the street and entered the market compound, looking for a place to rest. On a weekday like this, there were few shoppers. The stall owners were mostly in the back of their stalls arranging whatever produce they had for the day. Julia spied a fat Spanish man leaning over the counter in his vegetable stall near the entrance of the compound. She did not want to stop but her head was beginning to swing and her legs were feeling as if at any minute she would collapse.

'Mista, I could sit down under ya?' She pointed to a bench set against his stall. 'I don't feel good at all.'

'What happen Miss?' he asked, leaning over to watch her closely as she slumped on the bench, her head propped against the wall of the stall. 'Nottn', nottn' sah.' Her voice was a whisper. 'Jus' please mek me sit down a little bit.'

Julia's head slid down lower and lower as the weakness overtook her body and she fainted. The stall owner watched, amazed as her body slipped in a heap to the ground. Then, jumping up, he rushed out of his stall and banged on the counter of the neighbouring stall. Presently, a stout East Indian woman emerged plaiting her hair. She did not wait to be told anything. Hurriedly she followed his beckoning finger to the spot where Julia lay in a heap on the ground.

'Who dat?' she asked, worriedly.

'Me don't know. She jus' come here to ask me to sit down a little bit like how she nevah feel good and the nex' ting me know is she faint.'

'Cho! How you know she faint? Maybe she dead.'

'She no dead man, she di move she han.'

'Move let me examine her. Give me some cold watah Mista Max. Yu got alcohol in yu stall?'

'No, but maybe my wife got. Let me mek haste an' go for it.'

He ran off, breathing fast, his fat belly jumping up and down in front of him. Miss Marta, for that was the East Indian woman's name, knelt down by the still form of the girl lying on the ground and put her ear against her chest to hear her heartbeat. Then she took the girl's cold hands between her own warm ones and rubbed them briskly, murmuring gently as she worked.

'Alright pet, let me put some cold watah on yu forehead. Lawd, yu han' dem cold, cold, cold. I wonder what do you? Oh, thank Gawd, Mista Max di come wid the alcohol.'

Mista Max hurried up, puffing and blowing, sweat running down his fat face. He shoved the bottle of alcohol into Miss Marta's waiting hand. She opened it quickly and doused it liberally over the girl's head and face.

'Eh, Miss Marta! Stop pour the alcohol in she head,' he protested, 'she di get up.'

They both peered anxiously into Julia's face as her eyelids fluttered open. She stared uncomprehendingly at the strangers bending over her. For a minute no one spoke. Then a tear slowly trickled out of the corner of Julia's eye and slid down her cheek. Miss Marta moved quickly and put her two fat arms around her consolingly.

'Ah man. Don't bawl dahlin'. Is nothing to bawl for. Hush! Hush dahlin'.'

But Julia couldn't seem to stop the tears from falling. Even when she was squeezed into the taxi between Miss Marta and Mista Max, the tears kept falling as she wept silently. It was not until she was seated inside the outpatient clinic at the Belize City Hospital that she stopped. It was Miss Marta who made the nurse hurry up and attend to her, dramatically explaining how she was so sick that she had fainted out on the street. The whole crowd in the outpatient clinic was silent as Miss Marta told the story to the nurse as loudly as she possibly could. Then when she was finished the crowd looked at Julia from head to foot, clearly speculating as to what had made her pass out.

'Belly,' muttered one woman to another.

'Soun' like heart,' was one old lady's opinion.

'No man,' contradicted a third. 'Dat is definitely pressure.'

'Well,' added a fourth doubtfully, 'could be sugar. Same ting happen to me last year. Drop down in church.'

With all that they made her pass them and she saw the doctor just as soon as the person he was attending to had left.

The doctor stood at the door of the office, looked at the card in his hand and then called out her name. 'Miss Julia Taylor?'

She entered and sat in his office. Her gaze fixed on the floor.

'Well, Miss, what is your problem?' She was silent.

He looked at the card again.

'Ah. Fainting.'

He asked her other questions and this time she answered in monosyllables. Then he examined her. Finally he asked:

'When did you see your last period, Miss?'

She was shocked out of her half-dead state. She stared straight at him and fear flashed like lightning across her face.

'I no memba.'

'You don't remember?'

'No dacta, I no memba...'

She did not even remember the details after that. She felt better after he gave her a tablet to swallow but her mind was in a turmoil. When she got home she thought about the test she would have to take the following week and she knew she could be in big trouble. Still, life couldn't stop.

There was still work and she still had to go.

'Miss, yu sell black colouring?'

'I no memba.'

'Whe yu mean, yu no memba?'

'Oh. Sorry Miss,' Julia apologised. 'I was thinking 'bout something.'

'Well you betta study yu job. Yu got black colouring?'

'Yes ma'am. Anyting else?'

'Yes, gimme one bottle black colouring. You got eggs?'

'No ma'am. Eggs finish.'

'Finish! An' da jus' 15th? You all mus' be putting them tings up for special people. Don't tell me nottn' 'bout finish. Every year me buy my eggs dem right here fi my black cake and every year me buy my black colouring an' everyting else here. You all di sleep up dis year. What di go on? I is good customah you know. Ask Mista Jones. Every Crismus me buy here.'

'Sorry Miss. Di mennonites truck no coming back till Monday.'

'Lawd! Dah what me will do! Man, me stop buy here if is so you all will treat me. You wait till I see Jonesy.'

The woman grabbed her market bag off the counter and marched out of the shop. Julia hardly noticed. She was trying to think.

'I no memba.'

She did not even hear Dorothy come up behind her until a voice said teasingly:

'Me no memba neither. Julia my child, how you always saying, "I no memba," mind yu di talk to yusef. Dat is the first sign.'

Julia did not smile. Instead she said:

'Dorothy, you would work for me next week Monday? Then I work for you Sattiday.'

Dorothy thought for a moment.

'But if you work for me Saturday den I will no get overtime.'

Julia brushed that aside.

'I will give you the money I mek fi ovahtime.'

Dorothy looked surprised.

'Well is what you have to do so!'

'Don't worry 'bout dat. You will work for me?'

'Alright. But jus' don't mess aroun' wid my money,' Dorothy warned as she moved away to serve two women who had just come in.

'Miss, you got fruits?' one asked. 'I want two pounds raisin, plus some mix fruits. How much fi yu mix fruits? Let me see it. Oh! You have dem bag off already. \$5.00 a pound!' The woman gasped, then continued:

'My gawd! These local or imported? Cherrymae, what you doing 'cross there? Look here. Look how much the thiefing Jonesy di sell his mix fruits for, no gyal?'

'Well Lois, is yu worries now. I tell you to buy it when we went to Chetumal las' week.'

'Cherrymae! You tell me that Customs would take it away at the border.'

'Me tell you dat? How me would tell you something like dat and I buy mine there? Memba you get confuse with de peso you had. Then you disappear in the market with Maudie. Is mus' Maudie tell yu dat. Well, how much poun' a cake you want mek?'

'Two poun'.'

'Well then, jus' buy half poun' of mix fruits an' half poun' of cherries.'

Cherrymae beckoned Julia.

'Miss, you have cherries? How much for it?'

'Seven dollars a poun'.'

The one called Lois exclaimed.

'What!'

'Lois, no use yu bawl. Dat is di price nowadays. Dat is the cheapes' you will get it,' said Cherrymae. 'Buy half poun'.'

'But Cherrymae! I have to buy the ham an' turkey yet! My money will done!'

'Don't worry Lois, you got enough money. When we done from here we could walk over by Baymen Avenue. Them got some small ham and turkey reasonable.'

'But Lawd Cherrymae, that far!' Cherrymae turned and looked straight at her.

'Lois, you want Crismus or not?' She then turned back to the counter where Dorothy stood waiting impatiently.

'Miss, give me half poun' of cherry and half poun' of mix fruit. Is for this lady here,' she said pointing to her companion called Lois.

As it was being wrapped, Lois sighed.

'Ay, Cherrymae, I tell you, only because them children di expec' this black cake an' ham an' turkey, or else I would forget the whole thing.'

Cherrymae laughed.

'Don't mind you, I wonder what Hubert would say 'bout that when he bring them boys home Crismus mawnin!'

'Say? What he could say?' Lois sucked her teeth. 'He lucky I don't ship he to his woman house Crismus mawnin' mek him eat turkey there.' She picked up her parcel.

'How much Miss?'

'Six dollars,' Dorothy answered and waited for the money.

The money was paid and then the two left carrying between them a hefty straw bag loaded with groceries. Julia and Dorothy watched them leave and then they burst out laughing.

'Them two is kicks,' Julia remarked as she put back the bucket with the mixed fruits.

'You know them?' Dorothy asked, surprised.

'Of course. The breggin' one she live right 'round here by the areas. An' in this Pink Jungle Area me know everybody but not everybody know me. Some of them could only take up themself. That Cherrymae, her son jus' send she a TV from States for Crismus and she make sure everybody hear 'bout it. You see her, she can't afford current in she house. I don't know what she will do with the TV. She mus' will sell it. Three months aback them cut out the light. Couldn't pay. Then she son send TV for she instead of send money to mek them fix up the dog-siddown that his ma live in. Las' Crismus he send a refridge. As to that, that mus' get rusty by now because me see she send buy ice every Sunday.'

Dorothy laughed. 'The other one what name Lois, she look like she got plenty money though.'

Julia sniffed.

'No mus' got! Her gentleman sell weed right 'round here. She an' all.'

'Cho!' Dorothy gasped. 'An' hear how she cry hard time.'

'Is so she always do so people don't talk. But people still talk so me don't know who she think she di fool.'

Dorothy laughed as she went to serve a woman who entered the shop.

'Miss,' the woman asked, 'you sell toys?'

'No ma'am,' she answered.

'Thank you then,' said the woman as she left.

Dorothy turned to Julia saying:

'She mus' come from Hattieville or one of them small village where one shop got everything.'

Julia laughed saying:

'She betta go to them big shop on Albert Street for dat.'

'Cho! You see how she look broke. She just will smell those high price an' she will run. All like she so can't go deh. We poor people go 'cross the border for cheap toys for we pikni. My son tell me this mawnin' that he want one Walkman for Crismus. An' he only four you know.'

'So you tell him 'bout Santa den?' Julia asked.

'Me no tell that little boy nottn'. He sit down front the TV whole day an' when me get home he could tell me 'bout all what he see. He only smart gyal! From yesterday he start tell me 'bout Santa. He tell me he sees one pretty, pretty Santa front of the White House in Washington where the President live. All of that yu know! He done know what is President! Then he tell me how Santa will bring he anything he want if

he behave good. So whole week the boy is behave gyal, because he want dis Walkman so bad. My big daughter she want a roller skates and my second son he want a boxing gloves. Me will have to find all those things you know! I pray that my aunty sen' me money from New York. Pikni is expensive gyal! You lucky you only got one baby. How old is he again? Five months?'

'Yes, 24th of this month will mek five months,' Julia answered slowly, then quickly added:

'Look, is four o'clock, time to shut up.'

They quickly shut and bolted the store, then left going their separate ways home.

For the rest of the week business was fast. Julia got home late every day because she had to walk far, all the way to Lake Independence to pick up the baby from her granny's house. She took her time every day because she did not want to have another fainting spell. But somehow, although she felt weak, she never for that week felt as bad as she had done that day when she fainted. She went back to the Farmer's Market to thank Miss Marta for her help. Miss Marta had given her some Billy Webb bark to drink and other bush medicine to strengthen her blood. According to Miss Marta, Julia was 'poor a blood'. Every day, she drank some of the medicine after she put the baby to sleep. She and the baby were alone in the room they rented in the long barracks. It used to be she, the baby and Charles. But now, Charles had gone for good.

Saturday, payday, Julia walked home into the long barracks carrying the baby. It was night, but the heat was on. Everyone else living in the long barracks was out cooling off. The yard had the strong scent of marijuana being smoked. It was brightly lit with light from the nearby street lamp and each room had a naked bulb suspended from the ceiling. Pa Charles sat on a stool in front of his room smoking a cigarette. He called Julia.

'Night Miss Julie. What a heat gyal! You alright?'

'Sure Pa Charles,' she answered. She usually gave him two dollars out of her pay. He only had one leg and could not work because he had asthma. Besides he was over fifty. He was grateful for the help and had made himself her guardian. She was especially grateful for his protection now that Charles was gone. She continued on her way passing the table in the middle of the yard where the boys were banging dominoes.

'Night sweet thing,' one of them called out. She didn't answer. She heard Pa Charles shout out something to the young man but she was not listening. She went inside her room and locked the door.

After the baby was asleep she took her purse and emptied the money on the bed. She counted it twice. It was all there. Three hundred dollays. Her pay and the money from the syndicate that she had joined in order to have the extra money for Christmas. She knew exactly what she would buy with it. A new piece of linoleum and a tablecloth for Granny; some apples, grapes and a ham and turkey for herself; and a toy for the baby. Folding it carefully she tucked the wad of notes into a hole under the flooring.

Sunday, she took the baby to Granny and spent the day. She did not tell Granny about the syndicate money. She wanted to surprise her with the linoleum.

'Granny, what you want Santa bring for you?' she asked jokingly as she washed up the dirty plates in a pan outside the door.

'Child,' Granny did not smile, 'I jus' want one wish. I wish dat you and this baby would have heath' and strength to face the evils of this world.'

'Lawd Granny, don't get so serious. Is Crismus yu know,' Julia protested. 'Me and Junior quite alright. I mean you wouldn't want some pretty piece of linoleum for di parlour and some new curtains for the window then?'

'Well true you know,' Granny said thoughtfully looking around the parlour and examining it as if seeing it for the first time. 'True. If I win a good lottery I would varnish the settee and the rocking chair, paint up di wall little bit and maybe buy a piece of linoleum.'

'What colour you would buy?' questioned Julia eagerly.

'A nice skyblue,' Granny answered without hesitation. 'You know blue is my fav'rite colour.' She burst into song. 'I'll have a blue Crismus without you, I'll be so blue thinking about you. How did the song go again? That used to be yu Grandpa song. Oh yes! That an' "I'm dreamin' of a white Crismus jus' like the ones I used to know". Five years this Crismus since you Grandpa gawn to res' child. You mus' come with me to service Crismus Eve mek us pray for him soul. Reveren' ask for you las' Sunday. I was shame to tell how you stop go to church.' She looked at Julia disapprovingly. Julia avoided her gaze and changed the subject saying:

'Well, Granny, yu never know what life will bring, you know. Maybe you still win the lott'ry after all.'

'Cho! My luck finish for this year pet. Let's hope things get better nex' year.'

'Things will definitely get better, man.' Julia said confidently. 'Since the wutless Charles gone, at leas' now I don't have to hide to give you

money when payday. After the Crismus I will look for a better job with more pay so I could save an' try go to States. Las' time Goddy write, she say that if I get there she could definitely find me a job.'

Granny was silent for a moment. Then she said:

'Well, dat soun' good. I hope it works out, jus' don't res' your heart 'pon the States thing. Sometimes them pipples is lone big offer.'

'Not all, though. Las' year Goddy send me plenty pear and grape and apple until I never know what to do with them. Memba you did get?'

'True, I memba. You Goddy is a good woman for true. An' to think she used to empty people night pail for a living.'

Julia laughed:

'I wish I could pay somebody to empty mine for me. Every morning I go to Barracks and I have to leave Junior alone home. I don't like it. Well, by nex' Crismus at leas' I have to move out the long barracks. If I mek enough money I could rent a house with sewerage and bath.'

'Well, maybe you find a nice young man to settle down with and tek care of you!' Granny said as she sat down in the rocking chair and fanned herself. Julia picked up the baby and put him to her breast to suck, sitting down in the settee opposite, before answering.

'That woudn't bad, but that hard to find. Meantime, every mouth mus' be fed.'

Granny rocked silently for a moment. Then she said:

'Well, child, you soun' like the world done harden you. Don't mek that happen. You young yet, so you mus' think 'bout yu future. But, my dear, I jus' hope you don't have to do nrotn' that will cause you to hang yu head in shame.'

Julia said nothing, she just looked down at the baby nursing at her breast. She let it nurse for a little while and then tucked her breast inside her dress, getting up from the settee in one swift motion.

'Let me go before it get late, hear,' she said, bustling about as she packed her bag. Granny watched her, sensing that her mood had changed and wondering what was the cause of it. Julia knew that her Granny was curious but she did not want to enter into any discussion, afraid that she would reveal the incident when she fainted. Granny suffered from high blood pressure. She would worry too much. After all, it was nothing, she was just a little 'poor a blood'. That was all.

Tuesday morning she decided to stop worrying. Somehow she would have to work this thing out. It was still early and there was no one in the shop but herself and Dorothy. The radio was blaring out. Julia sang along.

'Santa, when will you come to the ghetto.'

Dorothy looked up from what she was doing.

'Well, you bright this morning. Yesterday I mi think say the Crismus spirit lef' yu.'

Julia laughed.

'Me only like the song/gyal.'

'Well, mind you call rain. This cold front we have now jus' nice. We don't want rain 'long with it. Especially Crismus Eve night pet. Me and Robert going to dance at CBA with Rhaburn. You will come? You could bring lovah-bway.'

Julia looked up, surprised.

'Who dat?'

'Charles of course.'

'Me and he finish.'

'Bruck up and you all was sweetah than loving Josie and Betsy syrup! How long?'

'Two months.'

Dorothy looked long and searchingly at Julia.

'Oh! So that's why you want me work in yu place. You want to see doctor.'

Julia was astonished.

'How you know!'

Dorothy laughed.

'Honey child, I jus' have to look 'pon a woman an' I could know. Don't get vex. Is nottin' to shame 'bout. You will keep it?'

'I don't know.'

'You want it?'

'No. Yes, I mean, I don't know.'

'Well, you have to make up yu mind what you will do. If you don't want it, I could help you fix yu problem. It will jus' cost yu three hundred, an' you will not land up at hospital. But you have to mek your mind up early, otherwise nottin' doing.'

That night Julia took the money out from under the flooring, counted and recounted it, went to bed and worried.

Wednesday morning dawned bright and early. Today was the day she had planned to go and shop for the linoleum for Granny and to do all her other Christmas shopping. She took the money out again from under the flooring and stared at it. She did not put it back under the flooring but left it scattered on the bed. Midday she came home for dinner; she looked at it and tried to decide what she should do. Still, she could not. Wednesday night she bundled up the baby, put the money in her purse and decided she would go window-shopping. Maybe a decision would

come along the way. She returned, tired, her feet aching and the wad of notes still tucked in a pocket of her purse.

Thursday night, Christmas Eve, she did the same thing. Only now she went all the way to Lake Independence, picked up Granny and took her along, hoping that Granny would want something so bad she would feel like she had to spend the money to buy it for her. But Granny could not walk far and soon got tired. The cold weather made her joints ache and the crowd of Christmas shoppers confused her, she said. After barely an hour she and Julia had to take a taxi home.

Later that night, Julia sat with Granny in the crowded church listening to the Christmas Carols being sung by the choir at the Christmas Eve service. At midnight the church bells rang out loud and Granny turned to her and hugged her.

'Merry Crismus, baby.'

'Merry Crismus, Granny,' she answered, tears in her eyes. 'Sorry I couldn't get yu nottin' for Crismus.'

Granny waved that aside.

'Cho!' she laughed. 'You never believe what I tell you. I done get my Crismus gift. Me, you and this baby with healt' an' strength. That is Crismus for me. An' if that is everyday thing then I got Crismus every day.'

There was nothing Julia could say. She just hugged Granny hard. Suddenly she reached into her bra and pulled out the wad of dollars, thrusting it into Granny's hand.

'Granny take this. I don't care what you say. You mus' could buy something you need with it.'

Granny was silent and they both stood still as around them the noise of well-wishers full of Christmas cheer rang out. Then Granny reached up and took Julia's small face between her wrinkled hands saying gently:

'Thank yu dahlin' but I no need it. You need it more. When you eighteen and pregnant, is no joke. You use it. You do whatever yu think right with it. That is my Crismus gift for you.'