

## LORNA GOODISON

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*Bella Makes Life*

He was embarrassed when he saw her coming towards him. He wished he could have just disappeared into the crowd and kept going as far away from Norman Manley Airport as was possible. Bella returning. Bella come back from New York after a whole year. Bella dressed in some clothes which make her look like a chequer cab. What in God's name was a big forty-odd-year-old woman who was fat when she leave Jamaica, and get worse fat since she go to America, what was this woman doing dressed like this? Bella was wearing stretch-to-fit black pants, over that she had on a big yellow and black checked blouse, on her feet was a pair of yellow booties, in her hand was a big yellow handbag and she had on a pair of yellow framed glasses. See ya Jesus! Bella no done yet, she had dyed her hair with red oxide and Jherry curls it till it shine like it grease and spray. Oh Bella what happen to you? Joseph never ever bother take in her anklet and her big bracelets and her gold chain with a pendant, big as a name plate on a lawyer's office, marked 'Material Girl'.

Joseph could sense the change in Bella through her letters, when she just went to New York, she used to write him D.V. every week.

Dear Joe Joe,

How keeping my darling? I hope fine. I miss you and the children so till I think I want to die. Down in Brooklyn here where I'm living, I see a lot of Jamaicans, but I don't mix up with them. The lady who sponsor me say that a lot of the Jamaicans up here is doing wrongs and I don't want to mix up with those things as you can imagine. You know that I am only here to work some dollars to help you and me to make life when I come home. Please don't have any other woman while I'm gone. I know that a man nature different from a woman, but please do, try and keep yourself to yourself till we meet and I'm saving all my love for you.

Your sweet, sweet,

Bella

That was one of the first letters that Bella write Joseph, here one of the last letters.

Dear Joseph,

What you saying? I really sorry that my letter take so long to reach you and that the Post Office seem to be robbing people money left, right and centre . . . Man, Jamaica is something else again. I don't write as often as I used to because I working two jobs. My night job is doing waitressing in a night club on Nostrand Avenue, the work is hard but tips is good. I make friends with a girl on the job named Yvonne and sometimes she and I go with some other friends on a picnic or go up to Bear Mountain. I guess that's where Peaches says she saw me. I figure I might as well enjoy myself while I not so old yet.

Your baby

Bella

Enjoy herself? This time Joseph was working so hard to send the two children to school clean and neat, Joseph become mother and father for them, even learn to plait the little girl hair. Enjoy himself? Joseph friend them start to laugh after him because is like him done with woman.

Joseph really try to keep himself to himself. Although the nice, nice woman who live at the corner of the next road. Nice woman you know, always talking so pleasant to him. Joseph make sure that the two of them just remain social friends . . . and Bella inna New York about she gone a Bear Mountain, make blabba mouth Peaches come back from New York and tell everybody inna the yard how she buck up Bella a picnic and how Bella really inna the Yankee life fully.

It was Norman, Joseph's brother, who said that Bella looked like a chequer cab. Norman had driven Joseph and the children to the airport in his van to meet Bella, because she write to say she was coming with a lot of things. When the children saw her they jumped up and down yelling mama come, mama come . . . When Norman saw her (he was famous for his wit), he said, 'Blerd Naught, a Bella dat, whatta way she favour a chequer cab.' When Bella finally cleared her many and huge bags from Customs and come outside, Joseph was very quiet, he didn't know quite how to greet the new Bella. Mark you Bella was always 'nuff' but she really was never as wild as this. She ran up to Joseph and he put his arms around her, part of him felt a great sense of relief, that she was home, that Joseph and Bella and their two children were a family once more.

Bella was talking a little too loudly. 'Man I tell you those Customs people really give me a warm time. Oh it's so great to be home though, it was so cold! in New York!!' As she said this she handed her winter coat with its mock fur collar to her daughter who staggered under the weight of it. Norman who was still chuckling to himself over his chequer cab joke said, 'Bwoy, Bella a you broader than Broadway.' Bella said, 'Tell me about it . . .'

They all went home. Joseph kind of kept quiet all the way home and allowed the children to be united with their mother . . . she was still Mama Bella though, asking them about school, if they had received certain parcels she had sent and raising an alarm how she had sent a pair of the latest high top sneakers for the boy and that they had obviously stolen it at the Post Office.

Every now and again she leaned across and kissed Joseph. He was a little embarrassed but pleased . . . ! One time she whispered in his ear, 'I hope you remember I've been saving all my love for you.' This was a new Bella though, the boldness and the forwardness was not the old Bella who used to save all her love for when they were alone together with the bolt on the door.

She would not encourage too much display of affection before the children. That change in Bella pleased Joseph. There were some other changes in Bella that did not please him so much though. Like he thought that all the things in the many suitcases were for their family, no sir, while Bella brought quite a few things for them, she had also brought a lot of things to sell and many evenings when Joe Joe come home from work just wanting a little peace and quiet, to eat him dinner, watch a little TV and go to him bed and hug up his woman, his woman (Bella) was out selling clothes and things. She would go to different offices and apartment buildings and she was always talking about which big important brown girl owed her money . . . Joseph never loved that. He liked the idea of having extra money, they now had a number of thing they could not afford before, but he missed the old Bella who he could just sit down and reason with and talk about certain little things that a one have store up in a one heart . . . Bella said, America teach her that if you want it, you have to go for it. Joe Joe nearly ask her if she want what? The truth is that Joe Joe felt that they were doing quite alright. He owned a taxi which usually did quite well, they lived in a Government Scheme which gave you the shell of a house on a little piece of land under a scheme called 'Start to build up your own home' . . .

. . . and they had built up quite a comfortable little two-bedroom house with a nice living room, kitchen, bathroom and veranda . . . What

did Bella mean when she said, 'You have to make it'? As far as Joe Joe was concerned, he had made it. And him was not going to go and kill himself to get to live upon Beverley Hills because anyhow the people up there see all him taxi friend them drive up that way, to visit him, them would call police and set guard dog on them . . . Joe Joe was fairly contented . . . is what happen to Bella?

'Come ya little Bella, siddown, make me ask you something, you no think say that you could just park the buying and selling little make me and you reason bout somethings?'

'Joe Joe you live well yah, I have three girls from the bank coming to fit some dresses and if them buy them then is good breads that.'

After a while, Joe Joe stopped trying to reclaim their friendship. After a month, Bella said she wanted to go back to New York. Joe Joe asked her if she was serious. 'You know that nobody can't love you like me, Joe Joe.'

Joe Joe wondered about that. Sometimes he looked at the lady at the corner of the next road. Their social friendship had been severely curtailed since Bella returned home, but sometimes he found himself missing the little talks they used to have about life and things in general.

She was a very simple woman. He liked her style, she was not fussy. Sometimes he noticed a man coming to her, the man drive a Lada, look like him could work with the Government, but him look married too. You know how some man just look married? Well this man here look like a man who wear a plaid Bermuda shorts with slippers when him relax on a Sunday evening, and that is a married man uniform.

When Joe Joe began to think of life without Bella, the lady at the corner of the next road began to look better and better to him.

'So Bella really gone back a New York?'

'Yes mi dear, she say she got to make it while she can . . .'

'Make what?'

'It!'

'A wha it so?'

'You know . . . Oh forget it.'

And that is what Joe Joe decided to do. The lady, whose name was Miss Blossom, started to send over dinner for Joe Joe not long after Bella went back to New York.

'Be careful of them stew peas and rice you a eat from that lady they you know, mine she want tie you.' Joe Joe said . . . 'True?' and continued eating the dinner that Miss Blossom had sent over for him. He didn't care what Peaches said, her mouth was too big anyway. He

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just wanted to enjoy eating the 'woman food' somehow, food taste different, taste more nourishing when a woman cook it.

Bella write to say that she was doing fine.

Dear Joe Joe,

I know you're mad with me because you didn't want me to come back to the States, but darling, I'm just trying to make it so that you and me and the children can live a better life and stop having to box feeding outta hog mouth . . .

Now that really hurt Joe Joe. He would never describe their life together as that . . . True sometimes things had been tight but they always had enough to eat and wear . . . 'box feeding outta hog mouth' . . . that was the lowest level of human existence and all these years he thought they were doing fine, that is how Bella saw their life together . . . well sir. Joe Joe was so vex that him never even bother to reply to that letter.

Joe Joe started to take Miss Blossom to pictures and little by little the line of demarcation between social friends and sweetheart just blurred. Joe Joe tell her that the married man better stop come to her and Miss Blossom say, him was only a social friend and Joe Joe say 'yes', just like how him and her was a social friend . . . and she told him he was too jealous and him say yes him was 'but I don't want to see the man in here again', and she said 'Lord Joe Joe.'

Little by little Miss Blossom started to look after the children and look after Joe Joe clothes and meals, is like they choose to forget Bella altogether. Then one Christmas time Bella phone over the grocery shop and tell Mr Lee to tell Joe Joe that she was coming home for Christmas.

Well to tell the truth, Joe Joe never want to hear anything like that. Although Miss Blossom couldn't compare to Bella because Bella was the first woman Joe Joe ever really love . . . Joe Joe was feeling quite contented and he was a simple man, him never really want to take on Bella and her excitement and her 'got to make it'. Anyway, him tell Miss Blossom say Bella coming home and she say to him, 'Well Joe, I think you should tell her that, anything stay too long will serve two masters, or two mistresses as the case might be.'

Joe Joe say '. . . mmmmm . . .' but remember say 'Bella is mi baby mother you know and no matter what is the situation, respect is due.'

Miss Blossom said that 'when Bella a take up herself and gone to New York and leave him, she should know that respect was due to him too.'

Joe Joe say, 'yes' but him is a man who believe that all things must be done decently and in good order, so if him was going to put away Bella him would have to do it in the right and proper way.

Miss Blossom say, she hope that when Bella gone again him don't bother ask her *fi nuttin*. Joe Joe became very depressed.

If Bella looked like a chequer cab the first time, she looked like Miami Vice this time, inna a pants suit that look like it have in every colour flowers in the world and the colour them loud! And Bella broader than ever . . . Oh man. Norman said, 'Bees mus take up Bella inna that clothes dey. Any how she pass Hope Gardens them must water her.'

Bella seemed to be oblivious to the fact that Joe Joe was under great strain . . . She greeted him as if they had parted yesterday . . . 'Joe Joe what you saying sweet pea.' Joe Joe just looked at her and shook his head and said, 'Wha happen Bella?' They went home but Joe Joe felt like he and the children went to meet a stranger at the airport. Bella had become even stranger than before to Joe Joe. When she suggested that he perform a particular act to her while they were making love, he asked her exactly what she was doing in America, if she was sure she was just waitressing at the club . . . Bella said, that he should come forward, because this was the age of women's liberation. Joe Joe told her that she should liberate her backside outta him life because he couldn't take her.

Bella cried and said how much she loved him . . . Then things became really intense and it was like a movie and they had to turn up the radio really high to prevent the children from hearing them . . . Oh well, as Bella always said, 'Nobody can love you like me.'

Joe Joe decided to just bite him tongue while Bella was home. He took to coming home very late all through the Christmas season, because the house was usually full of Bella's posse including 'the Yvonne' of Bear Mountain fame and when they came to visit the house was just full up of loud laughing and talking and all kinds of references that Joe Joe didn't understand. The truth was that he was really dying for Bella to leave. He really didn't much like the woman she had become. First of all everything she gave to him or the children, she tell them how much it cost . . . 'Devon, beg you don't bother to take that Walkman outside, is twenty-nine-ninety-nine I pay for it at Crazy Eddie's', or 'Ann-Marie, just take time with that jaggging suit, I pay twenty-three dollars for it in May's Department Store.' Oh Lord.

Bella also came armed with two junior Jherri curls kits and one day Joe Joe come home and find him son and him daughter heads well Jherri curls off.

Joe Joe nearly went mad. 'So you want Devon fi tun pimp or what?'

'Joe, you really so behind time, you should see all the kids on my block.'

'On your block, well me ago black up you eye if you don't find some way fi take that nastiness outta my youth man hair, him look like a cocaine seller. . . . Bella what the hell do you, you make America turn you inna idiot? Why you don't just gwan up there and stay then, me tired a you foolishness. . . .'

Bella couldn't believe that Joe Joe was saying this to her. . . . then she told him that he was a worthless good for nuttin and that him never have no ambition, him just want to stay right inna the little two by four (their house) and no want no better and that she was really looking for a better way and that he clearly did not fit into her plans.

Joe Joe say, him glad she talk what was in her mind because now him realise say that she was really just a use him fi convenience through nobody a New York no want her. Bella said. . . . then he said. . . . Oh, they said some things to each other!

One thing though Bella catch her afraid and try wash out the Jherri curls outta Devon hair. No amount of washing could bring it round, the barber had was to nearly bald the little boy head and he spent the worse Christmas of his life.

All his friends 'smashed' him as they passed by. As New Year done so, Bella pack up herself and went back to New York.

Joe Joe make a two weeks pass before him make a check by Miss Blossom. The whole Christmas gone him never see her. He figured that she had gone to spend the holidays in the country with her family. When he asked in the yard where she was, they told him they had no idea where she was gone, and that her room was empty. Joe Joe felt like a beaten man. He went home and decided to just look after him two children and just rest within himself. About a month later he was driving home when he saw somebody looking like Miss Blossom standing at the corner of the road. It look like Miss Blossom, but no, it couldn't be, this woman was dressed like a punk. . . . in full black, she had on a black socks with a lace frill frothing over the top of her black leather boots. A big woman. He slowed the cab down and said, 'Blossom. . . . where you was?' . . . and then he thought quickly, 'No, don't bother answer me. . . . you go to New York, right?' 'No,' said Blossom, 'I was in Fort Lawdadale. . . . You seem to think only Bella one can go to America.'

Joe Joe never even bother ask her if she want a drive, him just draw a gear and move off down the road, then him go inside him house and slam the door.

Before him drop asleep, it come to him that maybe what him should do was to find an American woman who wanted to live a simple life in Jamaica. Him know a rasta man who have a nice yankee woman like that. . . .

## CLYDE HOSEIN

### *The Man at the Gate of the House of Refuge*

The short policeman said, 'Out! Quick march!' He laughed when Zakir, clambering up, lost his foothold and clung to the tyre buffers.

The boatman teased: 'Bet you the first thing he do in town is find a sweet *jamette* woman.' He pushed Zakir up to the jetty and flung the flour sack of his possessions behind him.

The old man's legs wobbled upon the weathered planks; he scanned the wharf. Out of a customs shed rumbled a truck, its freight under a tarpaulin; stevedores hollered as they loaded the steamer docked beyond the signal station.

'How meself get-um Paradise?' he asked no one in particular.

The short policeman snatched the sack. 'How much money they give you?'

From the pocket of his new khaki shorts Zakir took the handkerchief, untied it. 'Twelve shilling.'

'Is only a dollar taxi fare to Paradise,' the taller policeman said.

The boatman argued, 'Man, fifty cents by train.'

The short policeman took all the coins but three. 'We don't use shillings any more. Nobody tell you?'

'It's we own dollars and cents now,' the boatman explained. 'We in power now, you know.'

Zakir received the seventy-five cents.

The taller policeman led him past the Harbour Master's office. They came to the fence along a street on which cars whizzed. Zakir had seen a car before but it had looked nothing like these metallic fishes. The man