

Ramcat

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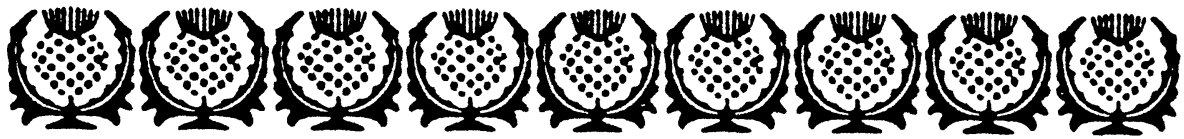
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Nigel Thomas

■ A lot of incidents interested him during those months at home. One day his cousin Laurel called from the canal bank asking for his mother. He told her she was in the kitchen.

“I hear them throw yo’ outta school,” she told him.

He winced.

Laurel descended the canal bank. Eunice came to the door of her hut. She was now too weak to work in the fields — every four or so steps she took would cause her to pant and pause for breath — so she depended solely on String’s earnings and the neighbours’ charity. His mother came out of the kitchen. Only the deaf could miss Cousin Laurel’s metallic voice.

“Comsie, how yo’ do, gal? Eunice how ’bout yo’? Me hear Clipper break outta jail and he hiding in the canefield them? We ha’ fo’ watch out?”

Cousin Laurel worked weeding for his father, now that his mother had to stay home with Yawesi. Even when she didn’t work for him, he supplied her with vegetable staples just the same. His father and she had been raised by a grandmother. Both of them lost their mothers quite young. His father’s mother had died giving birth to her second child when Henry was only four. Laurel was much older when hers died. His father said he remembered Aunt Lorna quite well. She used to bring home lots of food on evenings from the greathouse where she worked as a cook. She met a White man at the greathouse and fell in with him and he lured her to Aruba, where she died when Henry was about twelve and Laurel was eight. Some said that it was the man’s wife that poisoned her when she found out that Lorna was sleeping with her husband. So his paternal great-grandmother had raised them both, and they looked on each other as brother and sister.

Cousin Laurel lived in the village just across the stream. They merely had to go down two houses, skip the stones, and in five minutes they would be at the house. She still lived in his great-grandmother’s house, which she had inherited. It was a two-room, wooden house; most of the boards were rotten and weeds were growing in the shingles on the roof. He was present once

¹ Extrait de *Spirits in the Dark*, à paraître en automne 1993 (Toronto / Londres, House of Anansi Publishers / Heinemann). Dans ce roman, les métissages tant culturels que biologiques proviennent d’abus de pouvoir; les comportements des personnages en témoignent. Pour rétablir sa santé mentale, le protagoniste cherche à réconcilier les forces contraires qui s’opposent en lui. L’extrait relate une des expériences qui l’ont marqué et dont il tente d’évaluer l’impact. L’histoire se déroule sur Isabelle Island, île caribéenne fictive que l’auteur a située quelque part entre la Grenade, Saint-Vincent et Sainte-Lucie.

when she tried to persuade them to move in with her. “Yo’ all can come and live with me. I don’ have chick nor child, and when I go, I leaving the little place fo’ Jerome.” He had smiled, thinking it would be all rotten long before Cousin Laurel died. His mother had opposed the suggestion after Laurel left. “I not living there, Henry. We gwine stay on Mr Manchester land ’til we can afford a place o’ we own. When two ’oman live in a house like that, them fight like dog and cat, and me have no interest in fighting with Laurel. She all right as long as we not living under the same roof.”

When Cousin Laurel left, Eunice said, “Comsie what she ha’ fo’ worry ’bout? Ain’t them say the doctor stitch it up?”

“How yo’ expect me fo’ know?”

“Well is you that did tend to she after.”

“Well I don’ know what the doctor do from what he don’ do.”

“She right; we should keep we eye out fo’ Clipper cause with him outta jail, none o’ we is safe,” Eunice remarked with a lot of excitement in her voice.

He watched the faint smile on his mother’s face. They were sitting on the bleaching stones. He was sure she was thinking, like him, that an orgasm would have finished off Eunice.

That was the third time Clipper had broken out of jail. Jerome had never seen him in person but he had read the news in *The Isabellan*. It carried a front page picture of him and news of the breakout each time it happened. RAPIST AT LARGE the headline always read. He was said to have raped a widow, the mother-in-law of Mrs Buntyn’s sister — a Lady Cumberbatch. Her husband was Sir Ralph Cumberbatch. The servants told another story. They said that Mrs Cumberbatch the younger had engaged him as a yardboy. He was sixteen at the time. He spent so much time in her bedroom that they privately called him the chamberboy. Sometime afterwards, according to the servants, she gave birth to a Black child (like her sister, she had a touch of Black blood in her but her husband was a White Englishman), who was given up for adoption in England.

Clipper was said to have attempted the rape one afternoon in the walled-in orchard behind the mansion. No one witnessed the act. He pleaded innocence and even became violent in the court: “Who would want to f___ a dried-up bitch like that!” he was said to have screamed after the judge pronounced the final sentence. That did not prevent his co-workers from saying that “cause Miz Cumberbatch cry out fo’ it so, Chamberboy get a notion that every White woman can’t do without him.”

Even with his breakouts from prison, Clipper was not known to have raped anyone else. But *The Isabellan* gave a lot of advice about how people should travel, what they should do if they should be attacked; and his breakouts were the most important topics of conversation among all classes every time they occurred. Jerome had heard someone say that they should remove Clipper’s testes and penis and then set him free.

His community rarely talked about Ramcat. He was Mr Manchester’s son by an estate labouring woman, but he always called his father Mr Manchester. He lived in a cottage on his father’s premises and supervised the plantation labourers. He was a rapist. He had raped several young

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girls from Compton and the surrounding villages. They were always the daughters of the field hands. He wore a bowler hat in imitation of his unacknowledged father. His complexion was unusual: the closest thing Jerome could compare it to was the colour of his stool that time he'd had jaundice (he was around ten then). Ramcat's face was dagger-shaped and inflamed and pustular from pimples and beehived where the pimples had healed; his lips, bulbous, large, and red, couldn't close — because of his brown buck teeth; it gave him a dead dog look. A bird's nest of dried grass was how his hair looked. Jerome had wondered, each time he saw him, whether Ramcat wasn't suffering from congenital syphilis. His legs were deeply bowed and his back curved, giving him at thirty the physique of someone seventy. Once Jerome saw him blow his nose in his hand and wipe it on his trousers, and each time he saw him thereafter, he shuddered at the thought that Ramcat might touch him, and he felt his stomach getting ready to expel whatever was in it.

A Compton man, Joseph Harry, had stood up to him. After he raped Harry's daughter, Harry had hidden in the canefield one evening, lassoed him off his horse, and dragged him into the canefield. Henry and Errol's stepfather had hidden behind a clump of grass and had seen part of the action. Hours later someone saw his wandering horse. They found him unconscious, in a heap beside the road.

He could not understand why Ramcat raped people that way. For centuries White men had simply ordered Black women to do their bidding. His mother was a product of that, and his grandmother had been a broken woman because of it. All around him were people of all ages who were the results of such command sex. Drop yo' drawers, darling, or else starve. It was more important that the children eat. A comparable situation existed in Hanover town where the dives swarmed with children of White sailors to whom their mothers had hired out their bodies; there was one in his class whom the town mulattoes called Sailor Pickney behind his back, simply because he lived in Corbeauland. Usually the White fathers never acknowledged such children, though occasionally they bequeathed them an acre of land or a hundred dollars. A sort of deathbed plea for forgiveness.

Why did Ramcat rape them violently? All he had to do was to command it. One reason might have been because he liked the girls who were in the thirteen-fourteen-fifteen age range — before they started working in the fields. He wasn't interested in those who were already mothers. "Is only new clothes me like fo' wear; me don' eat nothing what other hand done touch up," he was reputed to have said.

Most of the parents quietly went to him. He paid them to keep quiet, or threatened to dismiss them from the estate and to evict them if they raised a stink. They usually gave in, knowing that with Manchester behind Ramcat, the judge, regardless of his race, would consider it imprudent to convict him. On occasion, usually after a couple of drinks at the rumshop, he named those who had been virgins and those that hadn't been, those who had enjoyed it and those who hadn't.