

The Julie Mango Tree

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Small things give way to large things and large things give way to even larger things. This was how the man explained to himself what he was doing in the First Circuit Court in Down Town Kingston over a mango tree. Not just any mango tree, mind you, he told anyone who bothered to ask, but a Julie mango tree. His favorite type of mangoes. He, who had lived a peaceful nondescript life for most of his life, now had to see his face plastered all over the Jamaican newspapers as some kind of special deviant in this country full of deviants. He'd had to listen to all kinds of cheap on-air radio and television program analyses made of him, as if the people running these radio and television shows and those calling in to these shows did not all know why he had done what he had done. As if he had not been forced to do what he had done. As if they were in his position they would not do the same damn thing. People called him a sociopath. Others said that his actions pointed to how deeply indeed the island was in trouble, because the crimes committed in a society were but a reflection on the state of the society. On and on it went. Very few dissenting voices, saying that he had been provoked. That his actions were understandable. That this was something any last one of them would do. The man looked down at himself. This was the first time in his fifty-five years that he had ever gotten himself into trouble. He who had never even gotten so much as a traffic ticket before. He did not even eat meat or meat products of any kind, in this country where meat was god. Barely made any impact on the environment. The few people who knew him described him as a saint-like character. One who years before had a wife, who left him when he left his job, left corporate Jamaica to become an artist and refused to take on any other kind of regular full time employment. The wife, they said, had stuck around for a while, but when it became clear he had no intention of going back to work, she packed her bags and walked straight through the front door. This was not what she had signed up for. He has been driving the same car for some thirty years now, and could not sell the car now even if he wanted to, it was so old. His one saving grace was the house in Harbour View he purchased all those years ago when he had a good job in corporate Jamaica and all the fruit trees that he had planted in his yard.

“Jamaica was a very different place then,” he would eventually tell the lawyer assigned to his case, “in those long-ago days us Jamaicans seem to have more respect for ourselves and for people’s property.”

The house in Harbour View. It was on a slope that faced the often tranquil blue Caribbean waters. He remembered the days when the beaches were free and open to the public and he and his wife would saunter over on a Sunday evening and walk along the beach, him skimming stones along the water’s edge. Sometimes, his wife would finish cooking early and they would have dinner on the beach. Other times, she would tell him to go, and he would take up his paint brushes and you would find him on the beach painting. He had so many views of that beach, before it all changed. Paintings of fishermen pulling in their dingies after being at sea all night, and women coming to buy the fish to sell in Coronation market down town. He had thin clear seines of web spread out in pristine white sand under the dappled light of almond trees. He even had paintings of Air Jamaica planes flying low coming in for the landing with the orange and yellow humming birds on the tail of the planes. Air Jamaica no longer existed. He used to know that beach like the back of his hand. He used to know this Palisadoes strip of landing before it all changed, before Jamaica all changed, like the back of his hand. He had painting after painting to prove it.

Sometimes he would go along the Palisadoes Road that led out to the airport and to Port Royal. God, that road used to be so beautiful with its white sandy beaches and coconut trees. This was before the government ugly it up and spoil it up by removing all the natural vegetation and putting in a flat ugly highway and those awful bill board signs saying “welcome to Jamaica, your new island home.” He wondered who the hell they were welcoming with bill boards like that? He had lovely paintings of the old Palisadoes before it was “improved” upon, and he now wondered if he was the only artist on the island who had such paintings. That might be important, he found himself thinking distantly as he sat in the court room hearing all the charges being read against him. That he would be the only artist on the island with what that part of Jamaica used to be like before it changed. Before it had been “improved” upon. And old beautiful Port Royal, he had some paintings of there too.

Of all the places, maybe only Port Royal maintained any semblance of its former self. Most Jamaicans didn’t have access to most of the beaches on the island anymore, never mind that beaches were supposed to be crown land. A fence would go up around the property where the beach was and a big “Trespassers Keep Out” sign would appear on the fence. There would be a club or some such thing before long on the property, and the trespassers were now common workaday Jamaicans who could not meet the fees of going into those establishments. Anything for the almighty dollar, he found himself saying one day, when he was first denied entry to the beach

in Harbour View where he had gone since he was a boy. Anything to keep down --- keep out --- poor black Jamaican people.

He must have said something like this to the security guard at the high fence of the beach, because the security guard laughed and said,

“The new owners of this establishment my friend, is someone looking just like you and me. The rules have changed. People looking like you and me, they the ones now keeping out people looking just like you and me. They the ones now mashing up this country.”

The security guard then looked away, before he lighted up a cigarette. He did not know why he lingered, but he did and then the security guard spoke again.

“I know you. You don’t know me, but I know you. I used to do security work over at the supermarket in the square and would see you come there all the time with your wife. I don’t feel good about this, about keeping you out, but this job paying me more money than that security job over at the supermarket used to pay me, and I need the money. But no, I don’t feel good keeping out people who been ‘bout here forever. But I have to do what I have to do. You have a problem, you take it up with management.”

After that, and especially after he left his job in advertising, his home with the still glorious view of the harbor became his refuge. They hadn’t put up some horrible hotel yet to block his view of the harbor. He turned his attention from painting as much broad landscape work to doing more portraits of people, and still-lives of the fruits and flowers in his yard. He ended up actually, with what he considered a series of truly lovely portraits of children from Harbour View, many of whom were grown men and women now, and who, from time to time, came back to purchase their portraits as children. The things he’d had to do to get those children to sit still. He’d had to bribe them with the fruits in his yard, and he’d had to do the portraits under a tree out in the yard so everyone could see what he was doing, because by then his wife had left and there were all sorts of rumors going around about him. To quiet those rumors he sat the children, especially the little girls out in the yard, and set up his easel and painted. As he worked, there would always be a little group of people who either stopped by to see what he was doing, or gathered around to see what he was painting. They would ooh and ah at every brush stroke, and to be frank about it, he found it all quite irritating, but there was nothing really to be done. He got some lovely portraits out of endlessly fidgeting children. Some sitting under his panganat trees with their yellowish-green fruit and bright orange flowers. The leaves of the tree casting endless shadows across the

children's innocent upturned faces. Children posed against bright red or yellow hibiscus flowers. Sometimes he heard the things whispered about him as he worked.

"He is a vegetarian you know," he heard one child saying to another while he was intently drawing a flower.

"What is that?" The other child wanted to know.

"Someone who does not eat any meat."

"No meat at all?" The child asked, astonished.

"No, no meat at all?"

"Not even oxtail or chicken?" The child asked, still a little confused.

"You stupid or what?" The other child wanted to know, "I said no meat didn't I?"

"Not even ham at Christmas time?"

"No, not even ham at Christmas time."

The child was quiet for a while, before she continued. "That just sounds strange to me. A person not eating any meat at all. I hate it when my mother cooks callaloo or cabbage even."

"Even if the cabbage have bully beef?"

"That make it a little bit better, but I just can't imagine not eating any meat at all."

He made the mistake of getting into the children's conversation and explaining to them that he was not vegetarian but really vegan.

Four even more confused eyes looked back at him wanting to know what the hell that was?

"Well," he explained, relishing his role as teacher, "this is when you not only stop eating meat but you also stop eating meat products as well. So, no eggs nor cheese for me."

He was to regret telling the children this, because they of course told other children and before long it got to the ears of adults and parents. Finally, they all seemed to understand something about the tall skinny man who every Friday morning drove the old dilapidated car that he still had to Coronation Market in downtown Kingston to buy all sorts of nuts and beans and fruits and vegetables that he blended together and ate.

"Tell you the truth if I was his wife, I would leave him too." A woman named Deloris was heard to say passing his house. "Man just looking for all sorts of ways not to spend any money! Man don't even want to spend money on himself and definitely don't want to spend money on no woman nor any children! Give up him good-good job to sit home

every-day and call himself artist! That is for rich people living up in hills not for no man that drive a car looking like that!”

Another day and another woman was heard loudly saying, “Man don’t even have a television in him house is how I understand it, listening day and night to some old rickety radio. And look at that house. Nice house like that. Years now it could do with a nice coat of paint! Talking ‘bout him is artist and vagan whatever that is. Not even vegetarian but some extra-ness called vagan. I wonder what that is? And I wonder how many paintings him sell! No sir, I wouldn’t do it either if I was his wife. I would leave him too. Is not like him putting up him things to sell in the craft market or something!”.

The woman was right about that. He did not sell that many of his paintings, for each one of Patrick’s paintings became his babies. Something he could not bear to part with. Or something he had the greatest difficulty parting with. Not that there were people beating down his door for his paintings. Patrick had the weirdest ideas about art. On the one hand, he believed that he should give up everything for his art, which was exactly what he had done. He gave up his life in advertising and he gave up his wife and god bless the few friends that he still had.

But on the other hand, he did not believe that he should do anything to bring attention to his art. People should find him, he seemed to think, start talking about him. People should immediately see his genius and pursue him for his work. In the meantime, he seemed to be prepared to be the starving artist. After a while, even his lawyer would start to wonder, as he came to know him, if this was not some role that he was playing. Something he had read about in a book. That one should suffer to create good art? Patrick seemed to be playing that role to the fullest.

The one thing the publicity did do though was to bring Patrick to the attention to the art establishment on the island and when they came calling there was no denying the mastery in his paintings. His still-lives, it was decided, were particularly remarkable. Over the years, Patrick had worked and reworked the West Indian cherry, lime tree, ackee, sweet sop, East Indian mangoes, and especially Julie Mangoes into perfection. Bunches of guineps, custard apples, dark purple Othaheite apples, June plums, moved effortlessly on his canvas, and oh the flowers! He had a huge Lignum Vitae tree and a Flamboyant tree he painted over and over again to the point where they seemed not so much to even be on the canvas anymore but were fully realized creations in their own right in and on the world of the canvas.

In his backyard, Patrick had planted a patch of escellion, thyme, onion, hot and sweet peppers, and carrots and turnips, and before they made it into a meal, they made it onto his canvas. His work was simply stunning.

Then there were the landscape paintings. Patrick had been right all along. They not only captured aspects of the island that no longer existed, but they captured growing tensions on the island as to who had access to certain parts of the island, the beaches in particular, for in his anger, Patrick had started painting from the outside all the new clubs and establishments set up on the seaside in Harbour View, the no-trespassing signs posted on the chain link fences of these establishments, and the security guards in their smart new uniforms standing guard at the entrance posts of these establishments and patrolling these places. He even started painting the ridiculous billboards welcoming people to the island on their way in from the airport along the Palisadoes and the new airlines that had taken the place of Air Jamaica --- American Airlines, Air Canada, and Jet Blue carriers --- as they flew in to land on the island.

“Why you never showed anyone all of this before?” His lawyer wanted to know, when he became aware of Patrick’s paintings.

“I did my work for me, not for me and company” was the reply.

But Patrick was secretly delighted at all the acclaim finally coming to his work. He was being compared to Cezanne! Was being called Jamaica’s very own Cezanne and there was not another artist he loved more than he loved Cezanne! When the police was trampling through his house after the killing, pushing things aside, and throwing down books and canvases, he made sure to safeguard as many of his canvases as he could and all the books and pamphlets he had collected over the years on Cezanne.

“We might have to sell some of your works to pay your fees,” the lawyer tested.

Patrick did not answer.

“Anyway Patrick, go ahead and tell me your side of the story. Tell me what happened.”

They were in the lawyer’s office and Patrick did not know where to begin. He kept looking around him. The lawyer had a small office in downtown Kingston. Maybe this man too was feeling the pinch, Patrick thought, looking at the small cramped hot place. Maybe he would understand what he was talking about. How change often happened imperceptibly. Maybe this man would understand that it’s not like you could say things was one way one day but totally different the next day. Instead, what he started to notice, what everyone started to notice, about a dozen or so years back, was just a lack of respect for people and people’s property. The lawyer nodded his head when Patrick started talking. How, it may be that the ordinary Jamaican was feeling squeezed out of the things of their society, but instead of taking it out on the people doing the squeezing, they started taking it out on each other.

The lawyer looked on closely, again nodding his head knowingly at what Patrick was saying.

The Jamaicans being squeezed needed to take out what they were feeling on the people putting up the “no trespassing” signs on Jamaican beaches and keeping ordinary Jamaicans out, on the politicians and people in power allowing them to do this, Patrick was saying and the lawyer was rapidly writing it all down on yellow legal pads, but instead they started taking it out on each other. What did he mean exactly by this, the lawyer wanted to know, and Patrick explained further. The people in Harbour View for example started to realize that they could not enjoy the fruits of their labor. No, he was not speaking in riddles and parables, he assured his lawyer, he had a point that he was getting to. Whereas before, you could have a fruit tree in your yard that you plant and you water and you bring to fruit and enjoy the fruit of your labors, literally, this was no longer the case, people were casing the place and picking off all the fruits from off the trees and leaving not even one fruit from your own tree for you to eat. They pick the ripe fruits and they shake the green ones off the trees to get to the turn fruits. What was worst, they climb on your own house-top to get the fruits, damaging your own house-tops to do their picking. Gangs of roving boys and grown-ass men doing this. They wait until you gone to work or to a doctor’s appointment or somewhere and then they all over your yard as if they own the damn place. They even found his little garden in the back and made all his vegetables their own.

One day he said to one of the fleeing men, grown, big as him, “Why the rass you doing this man? You have no conscience at all! You can’t even leave one or two of the ackees on the tree for me!”

The man stopped, leaned nonchalantly against a large white pail and said something about feeding his family. But somehow, he knew the man was lying, that this was just a quick and easy way for the man to get some money.

“So, this is how you teach your family that you feed them? That you take care of them? Is by thieving people property? What kind of example you setting?”

The man laughed a snickering little laugh which really got under Patrick’s skin. “What I teaching my family is that God make the ackee tree and God make me and so I have a right to the ackees that God make grow on the tree,” the man said, before he sauntered off up the road.

Patrick could not believe how upset what the man said made him. He could not believe the insouciance of the man. A few other people gathered on the street shook their head in dismay and disbelief at what the man said. People were beginning to cut down the fruit trees in their yards to keep the brazen thieves out. Other people picked the fruits themselves and left them

at the front of their gate, to stop the thieves walking on their house-tops and damaging their roofs. One woman complained long and loud on the radio how she came upon a lady thief cutting her prize-winning heliconias and red gingers from out of her yard. When she confronted the lady thief about it, the woman insisted the flowers were to decorate her church altar! As if that somehow absolved her of what she was doing! The hysterical woman kept screaming on the radio call-in show. On Facebook people were posting videos of thieves sauntering into their yards and making off with fruits, vegetables and even prize-winning flowers as you please. The people of Harbour View decided not to buy fruits from fruit sellers in the area, because these people had the nerve to thief your fruits and try to sell them back to you! He would have to cut down his precious ackee tree, is what Patrick was thinking, because ackee bore all year round, and people thieved nothing more than they thieved ackees. It was after all part of the national dish of the island. Where were these people when he had to sweep up the ackee leaves in his yard? When he had to pick up rotten yellow fruit that splattered to the ground? He loved to cook red green and gold rice with his ackees and now he was going to have to cut down his cherished ackee tree to keep the scoundrels out of his yard.

When he got rid of his ackee tree though, that was when he started to notice just how many people had gotten rid of the fruit trees out of their yards. What a shame, he kept thinking. What a god damn shame, that you could not even enjoy the fruits that you had growing in your own yard. Fences kept getting higher and higher, and topped by barbed wire and broken bottles, and there were flood lights everywhere at night. Not that any of that seemed to be helping. People were becoming prisoners in their own homes. Harbour View wasn't even an inner-city neighborhood, Patrick found himself saying to himself. It was solidly middle class. But that didn't seem to matter anymore. From what he was hearing on the radio, scoundrels were ransacking the interior of the island as well. Jesus Christ, Patrick found himself thinking, people will thief and sell just about anything. People will thief and sell their own damn mother. There was no respect for people or their property at all on the island. People were under siege in their own damn country. When had all of this happened? When had Jamaica become this kind of place?

Then one of the newscasters brought a group of thieves onto his show. Wanting them to explain why they did what they did. Why they thieved people's fruits and vegetables and animals and flowers. The thieves gave the usual explanations of poverty and hunger and not being able to find a job. The newscaster said he was glad to hear them say this, because he had a friend that had a farm in St. Catherine and he was looking for strong young men like them to hire. Good enough pay and they would have a place to stay when they worked with his friend if they wanted, but St. Catherine right next door to Kingston so they could go to work every day and come

home every evening if they wanted to. Patrick leaned closer to the radio to hear what the thieves would say. The thieves were upset. They did not see themselves as thieves at all and resented people calling them that. They wanted to make that crystal clear. Thieves broke into people's houses and cars, or held up people at gun or knife point and they did not do that. They even asked for permission to enter the yards that they entered if someone was at home. But what about the job offer the newsman pressed them? Patrick leaned closer still towards the radio. He believed he could hear the men shuffling uncomfortably. Then there was dead silence. Someone? Anyone? The newscaster wanted to know. There was more uncomfortable silence. Still no one answered. After the young men left the station, the newscaster continued. "Poverty and hunger are very real things. But I humbly suggest to you, that that is not the real reason why you have so much widespread thieving going on, on the island."

Patrick could not believe how angry the news segment made him. He did not know why he even bothered to listen to it. He was even more pissed off the next morning when he went outside and saw that someone had picked off all his tomatoes and uprooted all his turnips and carrots. The onions and scallions and peppers were gone too. That was the day when he started stockpiling rocks underneath the Julie mango tree for the next thieving scoundrel that would come bothering his Julie Mango Tree. The one he had planted and grown at the front of his house from a sapling. Of course, he did not know that one of the rocks would connect with one of the thieves and he and his long stick and big white bucket who come tumbling down through the limbs of mango tree and end up tangled up in and electrocuted by the electrical wires at the front of the house. Of-course he did not see the people in Harbour View and all over the island who would be calling for his head and saying what kind of thing that was, him killing a man over a few Julie mangoes. Of-course he did not see himself sitting miserably in the First Circuit Court in downtown Kingston. Of-course Patrick did not see himself being charged for murder.

