

## The Silk-Cotton-Tree

*Written by: Khadijah Jabari-Bent*

“What do you mean Google Maps doesn’t work here...” I look down at the now useless device in my hands- no comforting blue line through the mountain path to ease my growing anxiety. Google’s pleasant Android voice is alarmingly becoming a distant memory.

It’s been almost a week since our arrival in “sweet, sweet T&T” and I am still growing accustomed to the lack of GPS, spacious roads or guardrails up the ever frequent perilous winding hills. I peer out the window of my great Aunt’s 2003 Honda Civic, double-checking our proximity to the cliff.

“Read the instructions again,” Auntie Peggy waves the piece of paper behind her for me to grab. Her cursive is scrawled on the paper; archaic forms of directions that I’d much prefer Google singing for me. Despite being in her seventies my great Aunt sports a stylish burgundy TWA (teenie, weenie Afro).

“It says, ‘pass the campus and continue on Maracas’--” I am interrupted by the sound of the bottom of the car acquainting itself to the pavement for the fifth time today. I don’t bother continuing. She doesn’t notice.

I look over at my mom beside me, “some doubles would go down real nice,” I whisper, a mischievous grin stretching along my face.

She smiles, returning the same energy, “Maybe after we can stop somewhere”.

Despite this moment, the trip so far has been a success. I have managed to eat enough doubles, pholourie and split-pea soup to make up for my four-year-long absence from the island. As a Caribbean Canadian, visiting “back home” always meant staying with family so it was rare to feel like a tourist but today marks our first official “touristy” activity. Our car endures the sun on its silver hood to confirm if Trinidad *really* is the land of the hummingbird.

Strapped in the back of the battling civic, I try to settle the uneasy feeling that is beginning to take root inside of me.

*We’ll make it- maybe a bit late, but this is the Caribbean, and I’m sure Caribbean Standard Time applies.*

We have already gone 15 minutes in the wrong direction but unswayed, we continue to ask every Trini we pass on the roadside for directions.

“Good afternoon, pardon, do you know where Yerette’s Hummingbird Sanctuary is?”

Each person returns the same polite confusion of the last--I’m starting to think this place doesn’t exist at all. As this cycle continues I look back to my hands, remembering the original use of a phone and decide to try giving the place a call. As the ringing reverberates in my ear, I hear the debate between my mom, Dad and Aunt but my mind’s awareness is drawn away to the lush mountains and colourful houses streaming past in the distance. I wonder what it would be like to live in a place as bright as this, where natural landscapes and city landscapes can be found in step with each other. I wonder how my life would have been different, if this place, with its homes of reds, blues, yellows and greens were what I called home. My musings are interrupted by the familiar singsong tones of a Trini accent on the other line:

“Good afternoon, Yerette’s hummingbird sanctuary”

“Hello- good afternoon,” I return the customary pleasantries. They sound foreign in my flat Canadian accent, “We have a reservation right now but we seem to be lost...” I pause, knowing that absolutely nothing about this situation is uncertain- we are unwaveringly and unapologetically lost...

I press end on the call eager to relay the key to our deliverance, I quickly relate the information to the pilot and co-pilot; my Dad, who sits calmly on the left side of the Honda Civic.

“We have to turn back. When we get to the main road, turn right and follow the same road through the fork,” I feel a sense of pride in my ability to clearly deliver the directions, but, we’re about to learn just how many forks this path truly has.

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“Are you sure this is the way...?” Everyone's face is creased with different shades of worry. I look to my mother to answer her question. Her blue and brown glasses attempt to conceal the doubt in her eyes. My mother’s eyes are arguably the only feature we don’t share, and now they risk crumbling the confidence presently plastered to my face.

“Look,” I push the half-functional GPS towards her, “it has to be, plus she said follow the fork.”

We had all agreed that this path was the lesser evil of the two, but as we venture further down the single-lane road, that hugs a reasonably deadly cliff, doubt and concern collect in the air. By the time we realize it, we have gone far enough to be certain that this is not the way. We

are now perfectly wedged between the edge of a hillside, a rickety bridge that leads to someone's garage, and a wall of vine-infested rock.

"We're going to have to back up and turn around," my Dad's voice; the sole figure of calm.

My Dad assumes his role as director outside of the vehicle as my mom and I sit inside. We are silent cheerleaders for my Aunt; the burden of the task visibly weighing on her shoulders. As my Aunt revs her car to propel us on our journey to freedom. It occurs to me at that moment that this area must rarely have visitors as the vines that lay dormant on the rocky surfaces seem all too eager for our company. They stir, seemingly waking from their slumber to take hold of our car.

My mother and I gesture frantically at the vines wrapped around the side mirror, hoping my Dad will notice. My Aunt makes no indication of concern, instead, she floors the gas pedal more than her car is meant to, powering us out of the unwanted plant reunion.

Having only *nearly* lost a side mirror we are relatively unscathed. This close brush with disaster and the gratitude for its end returns energy to all our spirits.

I redial the sanctuary, eager to update them on our successful completion of our latest trial, "-but we ended up at someone's house, were we supposed to turn right or left?"

The faith our hosts once had in us dries up with this question, she does not bother to answer and instead informs me that the cavalry has been dispatched to extract us.

My Aunt is unfazed, instead, she has been imbued with a new sense of optimism. Optimism, however, has a knack for being distracting.

We only pass our turn by about two meters. But two meters is a lot when you're looking down the barrel of a 45-degree angle. With a car in front, a cliff side to the right and only enough room for one car to pass comfortably, there is barely enough room to pray.

As she tries to reverse up the steep decline, my Aunt's confidence can be seen evaporating with each direction from my Dad, who has once again resumed his duties as director outside the car. With each lurch up the hill, the car slides back down a few feet as her foot lifts off the gas.

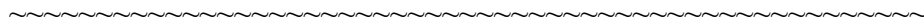
*This is how it happens.* I think to myself as I realize that death is considering vacationing our way.

Being forced to contemplate the realities of my own mortality leaves me clutching the grab handle of the car. Preparing my body for pending impact and managing to find the room to pray to every deity in existence.

“Oh lord- okay--oh goodness no, I not able,” Auntie Peggy pulls the parking brake, flees from the car and instructs my Dad to take over. Despite having the steering flipped, he assumes his role as co-pilot. His thick salt and pepper moustache and dark angular glasses fit the look. Dad artfully floors the gas, commencing our second trial, one that only he can complete.

He begins his dance, toggling between brake and accelerator with precision. Minutes of gruelling seesawing up the hill, then stillness. I take my time declawing my hand from the ceiling handle and crack open my eyes, afraid I’m about to see the clouds and golden gates of heaven. But, instead, I am comforted by the familiar view of more green hills and cascading mountains.

Trial two is complete, and as timely as ever, the cavalry arrives. We buzz with nervous laughter as the SUV escorts us up the remainder of the mountain. Auntie Peggy’s Civic reintroducing itself to its old pavement friend.



In the garden, surrounded by the golden and amber hues of the Hibiscus flowers and the pointy leaves of the Heliconias, I listen. I tune in as the strumming wings of hummingbirds dive and swoop around us. Their beautiful melodies fuse with notes of my island’s history. I hear the tales of the Silk Cotton Tree. Once, it sat at the centre of spirituality for both the Amerindians and African arrivants that inhabited these lands. The beacon of the forests; believed to house the spirits of the dead--a tree at the focal point of “obeah”, magic.

As I sit, the vibrating hum of the hummingbirds allows me to leave this space. A sense of warmth I associate with home fills me, a sensation foreign to me but one I have yearned for my entire life.

My mind wanders to the spirits of the forest that I know surround us. I can't help but think of our harrowing journey, and our safe arrival making the moment that much sweeter.

I smile and remind myself to place a grateful hand, before I go, on the old Silk Cotton Tree.