

Monique McIntosh Lover's Leap

I

In this present state of hearsay and confusion, we women of this island can say for certain that the first man that August to jump to his death off the cliffs of Negril was Euton Mattis, 31, from Portmore, St. Catherine.

Most witnesses lingering late in the night at the nearby Barracuda Bar and Lounge noted no trouble with the first man to die. Euton was fresh and smiling, smelling of the sea and of rum and cold ice. He was offering jokes for anyone to hear and boasting to the bartender about his exclusive passes into the weekend's roster of parties.

His friend Jericho Brown, also of Portmore, St. Catherine, was the last to see Euton alive. Jericho swore to police that he last saw his friend in the neon blue light of the bar's patio. A girl was with him, said Jericho. Just a club girl making the rounds. A working girl in a gold-sequined mini dress and long, acrylic nails scraping Euton's jaw.

There was a look in her eye, confessed Jericho. One brief moment, the club girl's eyes found Jericho's face and stared right at him, deep and unrelenting. Jericho said he looked away, pretending not to see them. That was the last time he saw his friend until the next morning, when the body of Euton Mattis was found along the rocky path below Negril's picturesque cliffs.

A few days later, the body of Jericho Brown was found floating face down along the same cliffs. The early morning waters were receding and the sun was making its slow, languid way towards dawn.

We know for certain that at least ten more men were to die by the end of August, either diving or falling unseen late at night into the warm water below.

Lying awake in our beds as the sea made its nightly throes against the rosy limestone cliffs of our home, we wondered and worried over the tragic fate of these twelve men. Through that terrible August our town waited each night for the next man to die. Nights would pass by without event, and we would breathe easier for a brief while, until another body was found dead and broken along our coast.

And always, said the reports, there was the woman. Just before. At least one of us can lay claim to witnessing the woman with gold sequins and long nails, last seen smiling and gleaming in the joyful faces of the men fated to drown. Despite somewhat thorough searches and inquiries into the identity of this woman by the limited resources of local constabulary force, the woman would not be found.

And without fail, one man after another was claimed as victim.

But for a moment, our homes remained tranquil. Our men did not yet look at us from the corners of their eyes. Acrylic nails remained then just a mundane decoration, although we collectively noted a rise in requests at the numerous beauty parlors within our community.

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In such a vacuum of knowledge, we debated over the woman's unknown identity. The sensationalists amongst us argued that she was the soul of a scorned and disappointed tourist, returning to charm men off the cliffs to their deaths. Some of us, who lived close to the shore all our lives and always looked to the mountains far off into the distance with great suspicion, claimed she was one member of a hidden clan of Maroons, still hiding undiscovered in the

unexplored caves of the Cockpit Country, only emerging to unleash the occasional havoc.

But in the spirit of full disclosure, we must confess that we all watched the horizon of the sea closely, fearfully. Lying in bed, trying to sleep, under the skin of our eyelids we dreamed of a dark spot far out at sea, at first, nothing more than a stray beach wood or the rump of a dolphin.

Then a face would creep above the surface, then shoulders and arms. And soon the woman would come strolling towards us through the waves, high heels dangling in her hands. She wore a gold mini dress, with sequins falling off and washing ashore at our feet. She smiled at us. She gleamed from sea water glazing her skin, or from something else.

Then we would wake up and for hours lie in bed, debating with ourselves silently whether to fall asleep again.

Meanwhile, the tourist season of late September loomed ever on the horizon, with the expected flood of visitors eager to try their hands at diving off our once deathless cliffs – cliffs once nothing more than a feat of harmless daring.

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Although lacking in absolute certainty, we can honestly argue that beach hair braider and part-time prostitute, Janice McGregor of Treasure Beach, St. Elizabeth, was the first one among us who stopped sleeping.

Janice was brought to the police on the recommendation of Dr. Karl Willis, after Janice came to his office in town complaining of insomnia.

Janice told both Dr. Willis and the police that she had not slept for three weeks, ever since she saw one of the men fall to their deaths on her usual walk to the Barracuda Bar and Lounge. She always went that way to the bar, she said, carefully picking her path along the rocks.

That night Janice attested that she saw a man fitting the description of Euton Mattis, who was then standing along the jagged edges of the cliffs.

His eyes were closed, she said, against the wind and the salt blowing off the sea. He was clenching the hand of a woman who stood beside him, with her eyes also shut tight and chest heaving.

The police asked if the woman matched the descriptions of the working girl spotted with Euton on that patio. They told her of gold sequins and plastic nails.

Maybe, said Janice. She did not remember the state of the woman's dress or nails. Janice could only swear that the woman was beautiful under the moonlight, glistening with a sheen that may have come from the fine ocean spray glossing her skin.

Janice was still pondering the wonder of her skin when Euton went leaping off the cliff. He kicked his legs forward like he was riding a bicycle to the moon, said Janice. Like that movie so long ago, the one she watched in the dark in the huge cinema in Montego Bay, where her first love first slipped his hand under her shirt.

But back to the cliff, said the police. Did the woman push Euton?

No, no. Euton jumped. But there was a moment, confessed Janice, just when Euton leaped to his death high as a hop off a trampoline. The woman was still holding his hand, and for a moment she may have jumped too, may have gone hurtling along into the air.

But the woman had let go. She had stood and watched as he fell against the rocks, and watched some more as the first wave came crashing over his body.

The police thanked Janice for her account of the incident, and dutifully recorded a

report. Dr. Willis then gave Janice a powerful sleeping draught, as Janice had begun twitching.

And as Janice dozed off she muttered, but that's not why I can't fall asleep. A dead body is nothing.

This was when Dr. Willis upped her dose.

He told the nurse on duty to keep a watchful eye on her for the night. But the next morning, the nurse claimed she was too busy, too occupied through the night with two code reds to keep a constant eye on a single patient, especially one who slept so quiet and soft. So she missed her that night. Did not see when Janice McGregor left her hospital bed bare come morning light.

So the nurse told Dr. Willis, and the police who returned the morning after to check on their witness. The nurse did not tell them how Janice may have slipped out the window. How she may have made her slow, delicate way to the coastline.

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Days after her disappearance, Janice was found wandering the early morning streets, dripping with wet sand and seawater. To those few passers by making their way to their daily employment in our town's hotels and bars, ever so briefly, Janice seemed to gleam under the golden light of dawn. Janice would stare right back at those who looked, kept staring even as they averted their gazes and shuffled too quickly away.

The police did not touch her. That weekend, when the local constabulary force secretly collected the homeless quietly passed out on the streets to pack them on trucks for relocation into the vacant countryside, the bare-faced constables kept their distance from Janice, then sprawled out and smiling at the street corner.

Each constable, when pressed by us late at night in bed in our arms soft and warm, confessed that they stayed away from the sea-soaked Janice sprawled out on the street corner not out of fear. Instead, they confessed, the underneath of their fingernails itched and burned as they watched her, longing to grab on and never let go.

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It is here in this tragedy where our truth merges with uncertainty, where it borders on gossip and ambiguity, thanks to the now well-known newspaper exposé about the lies and half-truths of Janice McGregor.

Janice testified in the article, which featured a full center spread, that a new obeah woman strange to town was giving away the power for women to lure men to their death. Every housewife and beggar across Jamaica followed her from across the country.

We women all do her bidding, claimed Janice. We bring men for her. She feeds on their spirits, their manhood, until she is done. Then we dispose of the men, all used up and left dry. Not just over cliffs, but toppling over balconies, or quietly choking in hotel beds, wallowing in swampy gully sides and crystalline blue pools. These are the deaths that are quiet, said Janice, that slip away into the small headlines of the back pages, among the mundane suicides and accidents that pale in comparison to the gruesome details of the island's daily murdered. At night, when the full moon rises, the obeah woman calls us. And we come from across the island, making our way to a secret cave among the cliffs of Negril. And we dance naked in the dark, hollering against the cavernous walls as we touch each other.

In exchange, said Janice, we women would get the gift of killing men. Not with guns or knives. For us, one mundane kiss would be enough. Just one along their jaws or on their

cheeks. And then the men would go hurtling to their deaths over high cliffs and buildings, smiling with joy and relief as they waved farewell.

For a moment, the men among us sitting at breakfast tables paused from the morning newspapers and watched us as we poured the morning teas.

Sometimes, the men among us would wake in bed in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. They would reach out in the dark, feeling their way across to our sleeping bodies, and watch us breathe, still and unmoving, until the sun rose.

And we had let them watch us. Because we too could not sleep, not for weeks. We lay awake and waited.

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We know that there are many of them, these obeah women, along the alleyways and gullies of Negril. A town of such desire and indulgence must have their obeah mystics hawking their potions. For the working girls of Negril – the beach girls, the club girls, the sophisticates offering private rooms for their clientele – obeah is an occupational tedium, for tempting good luck and cursing the success of our competitors.

And who among us women of this island have not thought to seek such assistance? We who must lie quiet in our beds as the chasms between us and our men grow ever wider. And have we not also considered breaking away, breaking each finger of our men's hands which still cling to us so tightly?

This much is true, that when the woman from the sea washed ashore the beaches of Negril under the skin of our sleepless eyelids, indeed we came calling. From across the island, we women of Jamaica made our way to Negril. We watched each other strolling down the beach and through the shops, one eye straying to every woman that passed, wondering if she was the one.

It was Janice that found us. One by one Janice claimed to our faces that she was the first witness, that last sleepless night when she slipped out past the hospital's sleeping guard and made her way to the beach. The woman, said Janice, waited for her there. She stood under the moonlight, dripping with seawater and golden sequins from her dancehall mini dress. Janice fell to her knees and kissed the woman's sandy feet.

In that moment, swore Janice, something trembled along the skin of her lips and crept between her teeth, down between the fine crevices of her organs. A vibration, like the tremors of strong sea air blowing between fingers – never contained, never grasped.

One kiss was enough, said Janice. Or a fine scrape along his jaw. One would be enough, enough for the moment when we look into the faces of our men knowing that we could, if we wished, have them jump off a cliff. Only if we wished.

We did not know what to expect. Janice warned us that we would never directly meet with the woman from the sea. The woman was too delicate. But we had hoped for a memento, the typical talisman or poison in brightly labeled bottles.

But before we had time to make such demands, Janice kissed us softly on our mouths. Often we were mid-sentence in our demands, so the blow landed directly on our teeth, like an adolescent kiss.

Janice asked if we could feel it, the tremor of sea air. We told her yes, for she was not the only one who could lie.

We walked away, returning home to our men who waited for us so patiently. As we left Janice watched us, smiling. We wondered, not for the first time, if we were duped.

The twelfth man to fall to his death off the cliff of Negril was Donald Bloom, age 21, from Mandeville, Manchester. The night had a coolness in the air that tempted us to wander from the warm, darkly-lit security of clubs and bars into the streets.

A week had gone by without death, and for a moment, we were forgetful. We enjoyed each other's company, the cold perspiration of drinks sweating in our hands, the way music from sound systems lingered a bit longer in the cool air.

Donald was a new graduate from the university in Kingston. He had two younger sisters, both who in the days of their mutual youth would leap onto his back and demand piggy-back rides as he went sprinting down the hill leading to their family home.

Donald was last seen with the woman in a gold-sequined dress and high heels hanging from her fingers. The paper soles of her shoes were peeling off and flapping in the air as she walked passed us, weaving her way through the crowds and clenching the hand of Donald Bloom, age 21, following behind.

The woman may have been there among us that night. She may have been lost in the crowds of us women. We confess that we women were taken then, and now, with donning shades of gold and baring slivers of skin, except for our nails, tipped in sharp acrylic.

As the twelfth man to die, Donald was found washed ashore along the cliffs in the usual manner, alongside the dead body of Janice McGregor from Treasure Beach, St. Elizabeth.

Janice McGregor was the only woman to die by the end of that August, either diving or falling unseen late at night into the warm water below.

The bodies of Janice McGregor and Donald Bloom were found within inches of each other, limbs broken and sprawled out on a brief, virgin strip of white sand between the rocks.

The bodies, despite their proximity, never touched.

That deadly August then came to a close. There have been no deaths since. As a result of the relative tranquility, the official police reports concluded that former witness Janice McGregor may have all along been the woman leading men to their deaths along the cliffs of our home.

We may never know the true fate of the twelve men who fell to their deaths that August.

Many nights now we sleep well and quiet in our warm beds. No longer do our loves watch us in our sleep.

Sometimes however, when the day has been long and weary, we confess that we do lie awake at night, listening to the rise and fall of the tide and of the breath of our loved ones.

We are tired from the weekly travel to market in Kingston to sell callaloo and scallion. Our husbands have slumped late into our matrimonial beds, smelling of white rum and curled up tight like the fetal bundle of our newborns.

Or we are lying down on our side, letting the air conditioning wash over us as we pretend to be sleeping, not hearing the persistent cellular buzz heralding calls from the mistresses of our beloveds. We pretend not to feel the rise and fall of the mattresses as our beloveds get up to leave us.

Sometimes, if we lie very still, we can feel the slow, soft burn of an itch underneath our fingernails. Itching to clench tight. Itching to let go, and let fall.