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## AN EXTRACT FROM THE NOVEL *GOODBYE BAY*

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It is 1963, one year post independence. Macaima is a fictional, Trinidadian village in a declining cocoa producing district that is haunted by a story of violation suffered by the island's indigenous peoples. Annabelle Bridgemohan leaves Port of Spain to begin a temporary job there as post mistress in the hope of finding new direction for her life. The extract is taken from a meeting organized by the Women's Coalition of the ruling party. Brenda Moses upstages the meeting and opens the way for Anna's own questioning and growing self awareness.

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Minutes before four o'clock, the Coalition rolled in, a modest motorcade of two or three cars and a minivan. The women, serious faced and purposeful, accessed the venue. After a brief exchange with one of the leaders, Franco left with his workmen in trail. Three women took their positions at the head table exuding confidence as they exchanged whispered comments and cast inscrutable glances at the gathering. Expectancy built in the interim. Miss Gomez was in her element. She perked up, sitting with ankles crossed, clearly admiring the women's ensembles that outmatched the modest schoolyard setting, but nevertheless suggested a get-it-done work ethic balanced with an unmistakable feminine accent. Bodies were harnessed in tailored skirts and sleeveless bodices in checkered and floral prints, matching accessories, lightly styled hair, bright lipsticks and stylish stilettos and pumps. The Coalition's lesser bedecked supporters, in maidenly skirts and blouses (they seemed to favour white), filed into the seats behind Miss Gomez.

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A little after ten past four, we were encouraged to come closer. Miss Gomez frisked from her seat as though she had been paid a personal compliment. Baby and Deborah exchanged comments behind curtained mouths. Mischief playing on their faces. Miss Gomez fussed some more. A few of the accompanying members tried to draw the rest of us in. Nobody moved. The majority remained on the outskirts, looking on, stubbornly non-compliant even as urgent deliberations ensued among the lead members. They wanted to begin. The main speaker, a Mrs Somebody, adjusted her posture in her seat, dusted away something from the surface of the large note pad on her lap. The woman seated to her right blotted perspiration from her brow with tissue paper that left white specks behind. Another invitation was issued for us to draw nearer. I decided it was time to yield but wondered at the reluctance of the other women. It wasn't exactly shyness or timidity. Brenda remained where she was, Alisha and Obadiah beside her. After more consultations, the member elected to do the introductions, a Mrs Ottley, called the meeting to order, trumpeting the party's well-known platform boast that touted its greatness that would prevail and so on. She ended with an exuberant: *Welcome, sisters of Macaima!*

A round of applause followed, the cadence unsteady. We waited. Introductions were made. We learned that the main speaker was a Mrs Alphonso. Mrs Ottley directed an appreciative round of applause her way. The supporters joined in and their effort caught on in pockets among the Macaima women. Mrs Ottley spent considerable time outlining the important role the Coalition had played in winning votes for the election that freed the country from England. She reminded us that its members were the invisible backbone of that victory, its indispensable foot soldiers. and so on. The party had them in its debt. The members clapped and nodded their agreement. Mrs Alphonso rose and directed her applause to the members in white before she indicated to Mrs Ottley that she wanted to say something to the gathering. Mrs Ottley gave way, returning to her seat in the stooped gait of someone trying unsuccessfully to be inconspicuous.

- Sisters, ladies, women of Macaima, I want you to feel comfortable and at home. I want you to know that the Women's Coalition of the People's Independence Party is interested in *human* rights and we are dedicated to

improving the condition of women throughout this blessed nation. Be assured, our meetings are meant to foster unity and to support those in cabinet whose appointed task is to lead. Do not be afraid. We are not, as some might have you think, unbridled feminists. So, ladies, let us get to work. Unity is strength. Welcome.

Her comments were intended to put the gathering at ease, but they served more to unsettle. Amid the general shifting were whispered queries about the word *feminist*. Should we care if they were? Mrs Ottley was instructed to carry on as planned. All were invited to stand for the Coalition's prayer. Members passed around printed copies. The head table rose in unison. Raising her voice to a pitch that she felt would not just be heard, but command attention, Mrs Ottley began:

- *O Almighty and all wise God / We dedicate this meeting to thy care and guidance, / Unite our hearts in the oneness of purpose...*

... and so on and so on. Each word was precisely enunciated in a way that distracted more than invited real listening for being so forced.; but the moment was Mrs Ottley's. She prayed on:

- *Keep us O Lord from pettiness / Let us be large in thought, word and deed / Let us be done with fault-finding and leave off self-seeking...*

And so on....

Things, though, started to collapse with the reading of each verse of the prayer, some of which I recognized but could not immediately identify the source. Not a sound came from the gathering. Not until the first, *Oh no!* -- almost inaudible -- intruded at the end of the *leave off self-seeking* supplication. Mrs Ottley scanned the small gathering, as if to reassure herself that she had been mistaken. Someone could not be attempting to interrupt her praying. She continued.

- *May we put all pretence aside and meet each other face to face...*

... and so on and so on.

It was in truth a very long prayer and maybe too ambitious in the work it had set out to do. With every verse, every petition, the voice from the back of meeting grew more insistent with its *Oh-No!* So, by the time the goodly prayer reached the entreaty to the Almighty to: *Make us grow calm, serene and gentle*, a very audible, unmistakable objection exploded:

- No! I say, No-No!

Some paused from their conscientious following of the words on the slip of paper in their hands. Others opened eyes that were squeezed closed in a show of concentrated sincerity. They raised bowed heads and looked about them to ascertain the source of the disturbance. Mrs Ottley would not be fazed. She persisted with what she had been elected to do, pushed through to the very end with what I later discovered was an adaptation of the Mary Stewart collect prayer. The Coalition's version was dotted with petitions for the protection of the political leader and his party from the *snares and fiery darts of the enemy for Jesus sake*.

We saw Mrs Ottley's eyes change from a disbelieving squint to oversized buttons of alarm trained on the woman standing at the back, who had suddenly become front and centre stage of the meeting's gaze. Pushing against the surging current of dissent, she read on and on in denial of the protest that was brewing. She lifted her voice to a shouting pitch in an effort to drown out the protestor, but to no avail. A hurricane was on its way.

I say, NO! What on earth you telling me here today? Not me. I, Brenda Solomon, who jus walk outta estate life and into this place we call independence. You cannot expect me to be handmaid for no damn party. Not when we live for years-plus-years saying *yes-Suh-no-Mam*. You asking me not to find fault, not to have grievance or opinion – and to seek nothing for myself! I-me, all-ah-we here, who know what it is to satisfy with seconds, to work for pittance so *Mr-Dis-&-Mrs-Dat* could live big. Oh-No! Not today! Not I-ME-WE, who had to make a study of *pretence*, playing *quiet, calm and gentle* in the face a plain selfishness and bold-face injustice. I who had to take backseat in school, in church, you not asking me to pray to God to save me from whatever *you* call *petty*. No-No, Miss-Lady, Not so! Is not Brenda Solomon, you asking to not *forget to*

*be kind*, like I know nothing about my own human heart! And to make matters worse, you sound like woman alone equip for bad-mind, small-mind and mauvais langue. Miss-Lady, I say, No! Not today. You cannot come here in my place to welcome me — WE. You cannot say *your* prayer like Sandra and Devi not present. Look, Yasmin right here, and Baba Cortney wife. Look Mama Gloria here too. What about their heart — and their God? I have to wonder where, in all that betterment that you say you want, all-ah-we fit in? And I mean everybody here, and those who on dey way, or elsewhere. So I say, NO. Not today, Miss Coalition! *You* not ready for *WE*.

Brenda untied the wrap that bound her hair to signal she was done, grabbed her children by their arms and stormed way. Mitra blew his horn. Sandra knew that it was time to go. Lucille, who had been silent throughout the whole turmoil looked directly at Mrs Alphonso, her eyes ablaze:

- Brenda is right! This meeting not ready for we. Not until *your* politics change.

She too walked away. We all looked on, stunned. The members at the head table froze. Speechless. That was the end of the meeting or you might say the start of something else.

The lower reaches of the hills were already in shadow when I left the junction. Evening rays caught the leaves of towering immortelles in the hills of L' Avenir, so that although it was not their season for flowering, they appeared to glow like brief flames before nightfall. I walked home canopied by that beauty and rage. Brenda's emphatic *No* had upstaged the meeting. The sheer energy of her refusal was infectious. We were all, I imagined, a little out of our depth. Even so, I felt the reverberation of her voice awaken every cell of my being. Her objection had surfaced, it seemed, from every age and circumstance to touch the unvoiced protest that we each carried with the prayer's unconsidered or deliberate omissions of the very lives the Coalition sought to liberate and recruit in the work of the nation's development.

I walked upheld by the possibilities she had opened in us. Maybe some felt she had overstepped. I had overheard Yasmin's hushed complaint to Sandra, whose wide-eyed

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confusion remained intact, when she asked, *Who Brenda feel she is to talk for we?* That she had found it necessary to insist that *she* was not voiceless was itself a gain. None of us were. That was the evening's greatest gift – the recognition that to speak is both risk and responsibility. Were we ready? Brenda had introduced us to that question.

I released my body to her word's defiant current, as if to test my own limits. The toasty sweetness of the cooling earth mingled with fresh mountain breeze pushed at me, past the remains of *Our Lady of Victory*, past the De Valremy holiday house, right down to Goodbye Bay. I could not think of the bay without remembering those drowned runaways or the violation of that woman at the site of the church. Possibly there were more than one. They were my grandfather's people. Who was she – and what does she now, with so many others, demand of us – of me? I had turned to catch a glimpse of Mama Gloria when Brenda called her name at the meeting but saw no one that could match the face I imagined to be hers. Maybe I had long failed to see her.

And what of the promise my grandfather had supposedly left with his family: *when I leave I will return*. It depended on a shared recognition – that someone would know the one who had returned. My mother had refused me part of my history that was not so much lost as concealed. True loss heals because its substance is real and so can be found, over and over again, changed maybe, but present, recognizable. I had never challenged her silence enough, perhaps I too wanted to keep the peace in the Henderson's house that she saw as our *luck*. And what of the woman on Beach Trace? The recognition she had extended to me, mistaken or not, I could not return. Who was she and from what past or present did she belong? Some part of her history wanted to be known, or to make itself known to me. Maybe Macaima wanted me to share its own complicated story or to recognize that I already did. Thea had once said what I thought the oddest thing when the rift between Comrade and the PM became public knowledge: *It was the first major failure of our democracy*. When I asked why she sighed. I must have disappointed her tremendously because her only reply was that *half of a heart can't beat properly*. In that moment, I realized, for the first time, that for the greater part of my life the emotion with which I was most familiar was grief.

With the few buildings clustered at the junction at my back and all they echoed of the estate Brenda had thrown to the surface of consciousness, it was relief to allow the fast arriving presence the night to take over. The singing bush, the river's insistent wash down to the waiting bay and the push and pull of the waves against the shore, I felt I had slipped backwards in time to the very beginnings of the place, the island, the land, before its naming and making. And even further still out to the moving channel, between the island and the Main, and into the open ocean, and endless sky above. All together that expanded space held me, became a breathing lung, a rhythm to which the life of the place answered.

Into that chamber of raw sound, Brenda's protest travelled like a beginning word searching for a response, a *yes* to a future. It followed the road all the way out to Railway and the acres and acres of cane fields, the sweat-soaked land of cocoa and citrus, fragranced by fresh and rotting green, running rivers and salted coasts. Her word spanned the entire breadth of the island from St Madeleine to Caroni like the body of a story. It touched the valleys and mountains to the north of the island, in Diego Martin and Petit Valley, Paramin and up to Maracas, Blanchisseuse, and across to Matelot, Grande Riviere and San Souci. It found every shore no matter how inaccessible, every village and town, suburb and yard, before swinging at Galera to pay homage to those who flew from its height or swam back home. It travelled down the east coast to Matura and, cut a path through Sandre Grande and Valencia, it reached Cumuto and Brazil, then travelled the length of the east-west corridor all through Arima and Curepe, St Joseph, Mount Hope to San Juan Junction, Barataria and Laventille to Port of Spain, and finally to the Gulf before whipping across Chaguaramas and Carenage. It flew towards Mucurapo, St James and Woodbrook to end up in the People's Parliament at Woodford Square, where it hovered over the Red House and stirred the bones of every violation and injustice buried in its foundations. It settled there at my first political meeting that had spilled out into the streets and took the road Chaguaramas...

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. . .I could not forget... We were all there that day, in the Square, pressed tight in the



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crowd that hung on the Primer's words. Miles and Yolanda had insisted that I go with them to hear his speech. So that Friday, I found myself there. April 22nd, 1960. We stood together in the belly of the *People's University*, and felt in ourselves the opening of a future. We stood drinking his words, watching his every move as he burnt those *seven deadly sins*. With him, we chorused as the flames rose: *To Hell with it!* We were all there, part of the ritual at which he was high priest, exorcizing the burden of a history, or at least wanting to believe that it would be that easy to begin afresh. Each document was a broken chain: from colonial constitution to that thorn-in-the-side Chaguaramas Base agreement with the Americans, and every other shackle from newspapers to telephone ordinance that represented Union Jack control. Everything went up in flames. Smoke spiralled up from the bandstand in Port of Spain; then the wreath was laid, and like an affirmation from heaven, the rains came . . . And the march started. . . Singing: *To hell with it!* Together, we were making a world, a new day from those flames: *to Hell with it...* that was the promise...

The day's anthem had become a running code of defiance among the younger staff members at the post office. Everything was in a whirlwind of change and Thea was there, talking about justice for workers. Some were suspicious of her. She wasn't exactly rank and file. To me it didn't matter. I found her firebrand style attractive; not unlike my own, as she would say, spectator disposition. I was amazed that she even tolerated my general naiveté and skepticism. Her rationale was that I had not yet found my fight, but her almost teasing prediction that stays with me, even now: *Oh but you will Miss Bridgemohan – once you have really loved somebody and something deeply enough.*

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... and what of Brenda's *No?* I listened to it travel along the western coast, keeping company with the Gulf and all it contained. It went past Caroni, Claxton Bay until it reached San Fernando, La Brea, Point Fortin to Cedros, Icacos, Erin and Moruga before it boomeranged back to Harris Promenade and Naparima Hills, Siparia, Penal. It swung back across to Fyzabad, Rio Claro, Princetown to Mayaro. It hit Guayaguayare and Galeota and finally landed in Macaima, where that stalled Women's Coalition meeting had trickled to an end, but never really came to an end. Not in me and,

possibly, not in those who had heard it.

The shuttle of the tide at Goodbye grew stronger as I neared the house that would be my home for the year. The story I had heard about the runaways returned on its current. Somehow it had endured and burned beneath the surface of Macaima's very existence. Whether truth or fiction, it wanted completion. Those Warrahu, if that was in fact the tribe, had found it necessary for their living to reject the mission's enclosure, its order, language, faith. They had travelled east until they ended up at the foot of the hills Columbus had named, and no longer wanting to live exiled from themselves, had opted for a return to the Main when they entered the sea at Goodbye. Perhaps the piecemeal remembrance of that fatal day the villagers passed on was the endless *return* their farewell had anticipated – and would their gift to those who remembered. Maybe those runaways were trying to say that they had made a choice to save themselves, for themselves, and for those who would remain, so no one should ever again have to make the choice that they had made. Maybe it was wrong to even think of them as on the run; but as people who had refused to settle for the prison others had chosen to make of their home.

All of this brewed in that *No* that demanded from us all the labour for the *yes* that was ours.