



EUSTACE'S CHILD

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Out of all mammals, bats have the largest penis to body ratio. This fact comes blasting into my head in the nave at Dunblane Cathedral. The 15th century misericord seats are carved with weird and wonderful creatures and I am momentarily startled by a huge bat splayed in the dark oak like a hunter's trophy.

Outside the cathedral, in the hot bright light and heady scent of blossom something tries to rise. Something that has been kept at great depth. I hear its murmur and feel it fluttering across the folds of years, gently nudging. By the time I'm on the bus, the first of those distant memories has surfaced...

It's a hot summer's day, sticky, close. We are pushing through long grass, Doug and I, leaving a trail of pollen suspended in the air. The door of an old cottage hangs open. There is an owl roosting upstairs, my reason for being here, but in the cool shade and decay of the kitchen, I let Doug fondle my budding twelve year old breasts before pulling away.

At the top of the stairs I stop, unsure.

'Go on, I dare ya' he whispers, shoving me against the attic door.

Suddenly it gives way. Doug turns tail and runs back down the stairs and I am left peering into a small dark room, my heart wildly beating. There is a fluttering within and a black shadow, scarcely bigger than a butterfly, darts over my head. I step into the small space. The dusty floor crunches with droppings, iridescent with the carapaces of countless insects. Bats fly about me, mapping my body with their sonar. I feel the breeze from their tiny skin wings. I smell their musty scent.

So began a love affair with those nocturnal creatures, those dazzling night-time acrobats, water skimmers, masters of flight who make even a swift look clumsy.

When I reach home, I look out the old notebook. The pages flutter, the memories bank up, jostling for position amongst the pressed leaves and field notes, the snatches of half-remembered song:

...takes you down to his place by the river...

And you want to travel with him

And you want to travel blind...

And then they burst into the light like bats whirling out of a sea cave.

It's 1982, I'd just finished my undergraduate degree. I had the usual student existence charged with parties, sex and alcohol. I studied intermittently until I 'discovered' tropical ecology and became fascinated with the role of birds and bats in the reproductive lives of plants, the precision of the evolutionary designs, the flamboyancy and

at times flagrant disregard for convention. I was eager and bright and it wasn't long before I was noticed. Would I be interested in setting up a long-term project in Dominica? There'd be a small wage, a rented base, a hired car and loads of fieldwork... How could I refuse?

And so I arrived in the tropics, with Steve my boss who planned to spend a month coaching me. He was no stranger to the West Indies. His own thesis had been on the feeding ecology of the Pearly-eyed Thrasher.

When I look back at my notes there are no first impressions. There is no record of smells, colour, people, vistas. Steve crushed all that in me before it ever grew. He worked, talked and taught incessantly. I remember the rain and my feet being wet for days, I remember mosquito bites, weeping and infected, the stupid dried food he'd insisted on bringing to save cooking. We thrashed around in mud, stringing mist-nets to catch birds by day, bats at night. Coereba, Margarops, Vireo, Elaenia. Brachyphylla, Pteronotus, Artibeus. The names started to trip off my tongue. I identified, measured, weighed, released. The intensity of his voice and the extent of exhaustion built up a hate for both him and the dark brooding forest. I felt the weight of his intellect weaving about me like a strangling fig. *Ficus citrifolia*, *Caporis indica*, *Slonanea*, *Dacroydes*. By the time he left, Steve was sure of the potential success of the project and I felt the heavy possibility of its failure.

For the first few days, I tried. I really did. I continued with the same feverish activity, my notebook is littered with data, coded and brief:

8/8 Cloud 5/8 wind 0-1 Site 3

0710 SBT 30 secs, female in tree,

0946 BQ flies off 0948

1026 TR, feeds, chases BQ, BWV flycatching

1900 3 Artebeus , 1 lactating

But then came heavy and thunderous rain...and with it the landslide.

I couldn't pass it even with the landrover. I phoned my landlady, Mrs Astapan.

'Don't worry,' she drawled down the phone. 'I'll send a digger.'

I spent two days waiting for the digger, continuing to work at sites around the house. After all I was being paid. But without Steve's presence, the work seemed trivial, the data I'd collected meaningless. By the third day, I'd eased off and for the first time began to take in my immediate surroundings — the pink of house walls, the empty hanging socket in the ceiling of my room. And the garden, blooming under heavy cloud. I did my washing, hanging it on thin line strung between the grapefruit trees. I phoned Mrs Astapan again. Then I scrambled over the rubble and hitched a lift to market.

When I return, the landslide is gone and someone sits on the verandah, wearing only a bright rasta tam and a pair of baggy colourful trousers. Getting to his feet, he extends his hand in greeting, smiling a big broad smile. I breathe his pungent scent, of sweat mixed with spice, like the snuff my father uses. I notice the breadth of his arms, his torso like an anatomical drawing, his contours beautifully and fully moulded. He is the digger.

His name is Eustace. I remember him, helping with my bags, laughing at the price I'd paid for things in the market, offering to help with my work. He knew, he said, the forest like the back of his hand,

the favourite feeding sites for parrots. He knew the coast, the reefs, the unmapped currents, he knew caves with so many bats you couldn't count.

He comes with me as I check my study area. We sit in silence while I record activity in the tree, the type of bird, what they do, how long they stay, what they eat. When we leave, Eustace gently parts the vegetation near him. I am drawn to the tense dark knot of muscle in his arm as he holds back the leaves. I notice his risen veins and how his skin shines, almost with the iridescence of the Ani birds I'd seen on the roadside catching grasshoppers. He points to a tiny cup of fine grass, bound with spider silk and lined with feathers. Somehow, despite all my long watches here amongst dense scrub, I'd missed it. One egg lies cold, waiting.

At the house, he shows me how to peel plantains, squatting easily on the veranda. He crushes groundnuts for a sauce and from his bag brings custard apples, heartshaped, fleshy.

Come early evening he helps me string mist-nets between bamboo and in the clearings, we catch bats in the fine mesh, struggling like fish. I work quickly to free them, holding their head delicately between thumb and forefinger, wary of their bite. Eustace watches as I untangle the cool leather wings and count palatal ridges. I record length of arm, ear and tail neatly in my notebook. Then I let them go. As the last one flies and I furl the nets, I become acutely aware of his presence. He has removed his hat and dreadlocks tumble about his shoulders. His eyes shine steadily on me. My whole nature seems to sharpen, intensify. Gently he touches my shoulder, runs his fingers down my arm. He guides my hand to the line of his chest to the hair below his navel, to his groin. He is warm with the warmth of an

animal, his sex, stiff, erect. I'm confused, excited, shivering though the night is sultry. I cannot move. I do not know how to move. He takes me in his arms and kisses my neck, my face, and removing my shirt, he sucks my small breasts. He guides me down to the rough grass and he presses his heavy loins against me, panting with animal desire. He plunges into me, again and again. And I am given over to him and filled with a strange dark ecstasy which leaves me breathless, exhausted.

That night, the moon shone beautifully through the uncurtained window. The cloud had finally rolled away, leaving the peaks of the mountains silhouetted and stars dancing in a massive sky.

I wake late and start to panic about the work I haven't done. Stumbling onto the veranda I see the lantana bushes draped with washing — my white T-shirt, M and S pants, Eustace's colourful loose clothing. His bag is on the floor and there's the smell of fresh coffee.

'If you let me stay a few days, I'll show you around,' Eustace says in his lilting voice. I can't say no.

We drive down to the coast. The beach is fringed with coconut palms and the stiff erect stems of morning glory. The sea is calm and blue. A lone brown pelican stands on the sand watching us. Throwing me snorkle and flippers, Eustace pulls me into the waves.

I am unprepared for such beauty, just beneath the surface. Eustace points out corals, seafans, sponges like ancient glowing urns. Among them bright fish dart and weave. Angelfish, trumpetfish, blackbar soldiers. I float on and on, mesmerised by the colours, shapes and patterns. Suddenly it all drops away, I have come too far and I hang suspended over a huge abyss. As I peer into the vast oceanic depths beyond the reef, I make out vague and misty shapes far

below me. I panic and frantically swim back to the safety of the shallows. Eustace laughs.

‘Things aren’t all they seem,’ he says. ‘You analyse and probe too closely. You need to take a step back, see the whole picture. There’s so *much* unnameable depth out there’.

It’s almost as if this lesson had been planned.

Late in the afternoon, we take out his canoe. I sit uneasily as Eustace paddles across the bay and down the coast. We come to the yawning mouth of a large sea cave, waves crashing over the rocks at its entrance. There is a heavy stench of guano. It takes a while before I realise that, roosting inside the cave, covering the bare rock like a fur lining, are thousands upon thousands of bats. They heave and shift in their wakening. We wait, bobbing like a cork amongst the waves, drenched with salt and spray. As it grows dark the bats begin their exit, slowly at first, ten, fifty, a hundred maybe, whirling round and round, swarming like bees. More and more fly out to join, until they are all spiralling together, whirling and twirling around each other, their flight synchronised into one huge orgasmic movement. Finally the great swarm takes off, like a gigantic beast, a great dark helix twisting and pulsing over the waves.

At Uncle Val’s Beach Bar there’s a Full Moon Party. We drink rum and dance to reggae before walking back up the beach. He embraces me from behind and when I turn and run my hands lightly over his nipples and undo the cord of his trousers, I find his sex huge, musky, glowing with moonlight. He pushes me down on the sand. I kiss his lips, tasting the moist scales of the sea as he comes deep inside me. Afterwards, we swim naked then lie where the waves crash against the sand and ghost crabs chase receding waves. The moon

hangs, a great disc of stillness, sucking at the tide.

One day he takes me by the Layou river to his house in the forest. We wind up the narrow path past mountain cabbage, wild fuchsia, tree ferns. In a sudden explosion of colour, it appears, thatched with coconut palm. A vine trails along the veranda, a mix of flower and fruit, insects and pollen. Bracts of red ginger thrust up among the heartshaped aroids, their phallic blooms emitting foetid odours. Orchids nestled in the crotch of old branches and in a clearing a small plantation of avocados, banana palms and cocoa are heavy with bud, flower, fruit, pods at every stage — expectant, gravid, dangling, hard. It is the most sexual show of horticulture I'd ever seen. I tell him.

‘But that’s life, full of sex, you can’t escape it... except for this freak of nature.’

He grabs a cut breadfruit from a pile on the veranda and tosses it around like a football. ‘Crazy thing, no sex, no seeds — you have to grow it from root’.

Inside his house smells rich and enticing. The floor is tiled with rounds of smooth wood. A table stands littered with unfinished work — incense sticks made from tree sap, a half-carved calabash shell, some woven baskets. All trinkets for the tourist trade. Indian throws cover cane chairs and a low bed lies hidden under swathes of mosquito net. There’s a book of poems by the bed, open. I read three lines of Wordsworth:

*...our meddling intellect
misshapes the beauteous forms of things
We murder to dissect.*

We make Calaloo soup and fry that freak, the breadfruit. Later, after we make love, he plays his guitar. He’s full of surprises. Leonard

Cohen, Rodrigo. I watch him from under the mosquito net, his tranquil face bathed in soft warm lamplight. And feel moist with desire.

And so the days and nights passed, each one waiting to be discovered, explored and let go because we knew there were others to follow. We asked nothing from each other but somehow I knew he was mine and I was glad. And afraid. I did little or no work. It rained often and on those days we stayed in bed, exploring each other's bodies, drinking rum from pineapples and going further than the stars on Eustace's grass. We made love on beaches, in the river, pressed against the back wall of clapboard shacks. We trekked through elfin forest, knarled and dripping, to the Valley of Desolation, where tectonic friction spewed up in a series of boiling lakes and sulphurous fumes.

One morning I pick up a telegram from Steve. A fellow student is planning a trip out. Could I show him the work I was doing?

I start to panic. Besides the few sites round the house and the odd bat cave, I'd done nothing. We'd used all the cash on rum and days out. I needed to focus. I needed a rainforest site and some hard data. Eustace said he'd knew a place but I'd have to camp there for a few days to get anything decent. Alone. He'd take me but he couldn't stay, he had stuff to attend to. He'd return after a few days to fetch me.

I remember the trek up through the warm wet womb of the forest. The huge buttress roots and glowing orange trunks. The strange green light and rasp of cicadas. The smell of dead leaves pricked with pinmould. I remember the Devil's tree, reaching for the sky, Eustace telling me how it housed spirits and at night its flowers attracted hundreds of bats, their petals opening fifteen minutes after

sunset. I remember breaking onto a ridge where trees dripped with epiphytes and bristled with fruit — yellow berries, bright red seed-pods, bromeliads like wild purple pineapples — and Eustace scrambling up the mossy trunk of a fallen fig tree which leant out over a deep valley. On reaching the crown, he sat suspended over the valley floor like a king on an emerald throne.

I tell him the site is perfect. That night we make love, his body heavy on me, sleek and black, bone and flesh. I kiss hard as he pushes into my sex like a sent prayer, then watch as he sleeps, his shoulder blades like wing stumps, rising and falling in a great slow pulsing. The next day, Eustace goes with the mist as it licks over the far ridge and disappears.

I begin my watch in the fig's strangling branches. Parrots, thrushes, tremblers, thrashers feeding and flying, feeding and flying, dropping flesh and dead flower bracts about me like snow. I gather data minute after minute, hour after hour, page after page in a frenzy of activity. I don't stop. The nights are long, the days humid and heavy. Red ants cluster as if expecting a storm.

On the fourth day, the storm strikes.

I am high in the crown when a wild wind roars through the valley. Rain comes in torrents, great rivulets weaving down the mossy trunks. By the time I reach my tent I am soaked and chilled with no means to get warm. That night I have a fever. I dream that Eustace grows huge and beautiful wings, his fingers elongating, the dark skin of his arms stretching like drumskin, tight and thin. I watch as he feasts on passionfruit, pomegranates, rolling the seeds in his mouth, spitting them out, tasting their flesh before spreading his wings and soaring high above the tree tops. Others join him, tightening their

flight about him, squeezing and caressing him until with one violent explosion the forest is drenched in his semen.

When Eustace comes for me, I'm still feverish. He half carries me down the mountain. I can't stop shivering and humming Leonard Cohen.

*Eustace takes me down to his place by the river...
And I want to travel with him and I want to travel blind
And I think maybe I'll trust him
Because I've touched his perfect body with my mind.*

He lays me on his bed.

I'm woken out of a deep sleep by the rich call of a grackle bird. A woman is there, white-skinned, older, fifties maybe. The fever has left. I feel weak but fine. She gives me herb tea.

'Where's Eustace?' I ask.

'He'll be back, sometime' she says soothingly. She seems too familiar with his possessions, tidying his clothes, flicking through his poetry.

'And who are you?'

She laughs. 'Why, I'm his wife.'

Suddenly the earth seems to tilt and sway. I am thrown into confusion. I remember struggling to dress and leave, apologising, crying, my heart beating painfully. Charmain fusses over me like a mother. In the end I accept her offer of a lift to Mrs Astapan's. As I slam the door of the jeep she calls after me.

'Come and see me when you feel stronger' she says, 'I stay just behind Eustace, a little further on up the track.'

I quit my work, telegramming Steve that I am ill. The next few days I busy myself, changing flights, settling up, packing. A sensation of numbness takes hold of me. Before I go, I walk past Eustace's house once more. There is no one there and the garden looks old and tired, the bracts of ginger faded and fallen fruit crawls with insects. I continue on up the path.

Charmain's house is like gingerbread, sickly sweet. It stands on carved stilts, surrounded by streams and pools, paths and grottos. She reminds me a little of Baba Yaga, that Russian witch. I find her sitting naked, meditating, her white flesh hanging loose and leathery on her thin limbs. She seems completely uninhibited by her nakedness. She has her face painted, a rising sun on her forehead. I wonder what it means and whether she knows. She tells me how Eustace married her so that he could go to college in the States. They've had a good sex life, and he still comes to her, occasionally. He has lots of lovers, she knows that, they all contribute to his style. She smiles whimsically at me. No, no children, not by him. Low sperm count, she expects. She has kids in the States, grown up now, of course.

I leave her feeding her tame agoutis.

The day before my flight, I go to the beach. Eustace is bending over his canoe, sorting fishing gear. I hadn't expected to see him. I erupt without wanting to.

'Why the hell didn't you tell me you were married? What the fuck has this been all about? How can you just use my fucking money and screw me? Don't I mean anything to you?'

He stands arrested by my outburst, looking at me with the same tranquil expression, before an unconscious pain fleetingly crumples his brow. It's as if he struggles to find the right words.

‘I warned you things aren’t what they seem. You were like a strange orchid washed up by a hurricane...I wanted you, and I wanted to show you all this.’ His hand sweeps around him in a wide gesture. ‘You can still stay.’

I imagine living like Charmain.

‘How many strange fucking orchids do you want?’ I yell.

He’s pulling his canoe to the water’s edge and I grab at his clothes, dragging him into the waves. I want to tear him away from the reefs and rainforest and keep him for myself in eternity. I want to drown him. I’m suddenly sobbing on his chest, beating him with clenched fists and then we are hugging, kissing, crying. He fumbles for a moment with clothing, then lifting me above the surf like a mermaid, he slowly brings me down onto his erect penis. His fingers shush my lips, his tears fall on my face.

I remember, on the plane, feeling his absence like an echo, tasting each kiss, running each touch through my mind like a rosary.

I miscarried at five months in a mess of blood and still life.

And now, as I close the books and try to stack back the past, I feel a huge release. You have finally surfaced. The last out of the cave. You, who could have traced your line back to the tropics, who could have smelt of spice. I think of your tiny molecules out there somewhere, defying gravity, dancing in the moonlight, stardust caught in the eddies of bat flight. And I smile.

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