

A KIND OF EDEN

AMANDA SMYTH



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ONE

They say it gets chilly here around December, almost like spring in England or in Canada. Although the days are hot, most evenings, right up until the end of February, it is cool enough to leave your butter out. Today he'd realised that wasn't true, and he told her as soon as she had arrived, presenting her with the oily glass butter dish which she always complained about. Look, his butter has melted. So what do you want, she said. A medal? At which point he didn't know whether to laugh or take offence. Then she tossed her handbag on the chair and kicked off her sandals—the flat tan girlish sandals she wore for work—and he knew she was okay; they would probably sleep together tonight.

Later, he looks up at the wooden rafters; there is just enough light from the passageway to see the shadows they make. Once, not long after they first met and they were lying naked, a cockroach fell and landed big and hard like a boiled egg. He shouted something, sprang from the bed and it scuttled over the sheet. Safiya laughed, and flipped up the sheet. Kill it, he said, kill it. But she lay there laughing, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'You're so English,' she said, when she found him sitting at the kitchen table. 'I had no idea I was going out with such a limey.'

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He clicks on the small bedside lamp; she turns, and in one movement, tugs the sheet and rolls onto her side. He stares at the triangle of her brown back and the mess of her black hair on the pillow, the neck exposed. Her skin is shining and he knows she must be hot. She has never liked the air conditioner so when she stays he turns it off. But tonight he has forgotten to open the louvers, and the air is thick from their lovemaking. The last three weekends they had made sure to visit his favourite beach at Blanchisseuse. Although they kept in the shade of the trees and close to the rocks for most of the afternoon, they both came away burned. Now her skin is tanned to a delicious shade of tea. She pulls up her arm; her fingers curl against her full soft lips. When they first got together and he admired her lips, she told him, 'Yes, I have a *rude* mouth.' The gap between the nose and upper lip is short and it makes her look younger than she is. She looks quite different when her narrow, hooded eyes are shut.

A dog is barking now. It happens almost every night at this time. A gang of dogs gathers on the crossroads and when someone walks by they start and set one another off. He's been caught a few times, thinking the road is clear, walking down to Hi Lo grocery or Ali's pharmacy, and next thing they are rushing at him in a little pack. He is nervous of them: there is rabies here and a dog like that, the vicious little black one with slitty eyes like a pit bull, could rip your face right off. Some time ago, he saw a young man on the news lying in the street in a puddle of dark blood, his eye torn from its socket. 'How can they show these things on television?' he'd said to her. 'What about the man's privacy, his family?' 'Get used to it,' she said. 'This is Trinidad.'

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It must be getting late. He wonders where they might eat tonight. Last week, he picked her up from outside her mother's house in Woodbrook and he didn't say where they were going. From her damp hair and sweet, soapy scent, he could tell that she was freshly bathed. On the radio, Supertramp's 'Logical Song' made him think of his youth, and he cruised steadily along the west coast feeling, for no apparent reason, lighter than he'd felt in days; feeling as if he'd had good news, which he hadn't. In many ways things couldn't have been much worse.

They passed the shopping complex with its Showcase cinema—he had seen two films there, *Shrek*, and *War of the Worlds*—and her favourite Ruby Tuesdays restaurant, which, despite her protestations, he had never liked. Not just the décor—the American old-fashioned posters and traditional wallpaper, but the food: he was certain they used additives in the strong sauces—barbeque, honey glaze, garlic cream, Thousand Island—and they made his head feel peculiar. 'It's all flavour-enhanced,' he'd said that last time, 'like fake food. No wonder it's tasty. It could only come from America.' When he told her this, she rolled her eyes and said he was getting old and miserable; you shouldn't have to worry about stuff like that at her age. 'There's nothing wrong with America,' she said. 'New York is a lot of fun. And nothing beats the shopping in Miami.' At one time, he might have mentioned a string of shops in London: Harvey Nichols, Harrods, the whole of the Kings Road, but he knew it wouldn't go down well.

After West Mall and the new Spanish-style condominiums, he slowed down. This was a wealthier part of town: you could

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look up at the soft dark hills and see the middle-class houses perched there, the glow of yellow lights. He had imagined everyone at home, taking a drink on the porch, getting ready for dinner, the evening news coming on; people with lives and aspirations. But then the road became narrow, dark, the houses more ramshackle and patched up. And as they drove through the shabby village before Chaguaramas, the village where only last week a man was shot twice in the back of his head while alone watching television in his living room, he wondered what Safiya was thinking about.

‘Penny,’ he said. She looked at him and he saw that she was sad. He pulled up at the far end of the car park. There weren’t many people here, and he was glad. It was better that way; she wouldn’t be in the mood to see anyone they knew. She was wearing a purple blouse, and dark tight jeans that he’d bought for her in Long Circular Mall. He liked that she dressed up like this when they went out. And he liked when she tied back her hair, wrapped it about her fingers and twisted it into a knot; it was like watching a magic trick. He took her hand, and she didn’t resist as she sometimes did, and they walked slowly and without speaking down towards the seafood restaurant where little white lights hung along the wooden balcony of the upper level.

To the right, the water was black and silky. It was night, and yet patches of blue sky were still out there towards the horizon; stars punctured the dark world above them, and he wondered if the curved line he was looking at was actually the Plough. And then there was a white curl of moon. ‘The moon’s like a scythe,’ he said, pointing, and he felt pleased that he’d thought of this. And he recognised how romantic this moment was, and

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how unlike him, or at least the him that he was used to and had known for forty-nine years.

They were shown to a table by the waterside, and from there they looked out at the anchored boats which came from all over the world. He had been here once in the day when it was busy with young people, at the start of his trip, and there was a boating regatta of some sort, loud music pumping out from gigantic speakers on a truck. At first he found it irritating, the pounding of the bass, the unfamiliar soca tunes. But then someone handed him a beer, and he realised that the only way to fully enjoy the regatta was to carry on drinking. He had never known people drink and drive like Trinidadians. There was talk of bringing in breathalysers from England. But the cells would be full in no time. Here there were no health warnings, no mention of units, and definitely no drink-driving laws.

‘So how was he?’

‘Tired. Scrawny.’ Safiya shook her head and then looked away at the water. ‘He looks like a hundred years old.’

‘He must’ve been glad to see you.’

She shrugged her shoulders, and he thought she might cry. Safiya’s father had been terminally ill for a while. The hospital had sent him home that day with a small supply of morphine; there was nothing more they could do. There would be no follow-up care, no health visitor calls, no Macmillan nurses, no telephone helpline. Safiya’s father had come home to die in the room he’d shared with his wife for thirty-seven years, except the bed had been moved and a new adjustable electric one was in its place. There was talk of getting a night nurse, and he

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had even offered to pay a contribution, but her mother was resistant—he wouldn't want a stranger in the room.

'It's mom I worry about. She's scared; I see it in her eyes. And she's anxious about money. This whole thing has eaten up their savings.'

The first time he met Marjorie Williams he arrived for dinner with a bottle of Californian Merlot; she was pleased: how did he know she liked red wine? She took him straight to the kitchen to taste the salt fish fritters she was frying. He told her, 'This is the most delicious thing I've eaten since I got here,' and he meant it.

'Thank you,' she said, and to Safiya, 'A sweet talker; he can definitely come again.'

At that point she didn't realise that he was sleeping with her daughter, taking her back to his apartment at the end of the day; sometimes in the middle of the day, if their schedules allowed it. No, to her mother, Safiya had simply described him as a lonely old English guy she had met through work, no more than that.

He was surprised by the old-fashioned feel of the house: the olive-green Formica cupboards and the white worktop, the narrow gas stove where the big coal pot rested, and the large fridge covered with paper scraps, postcards, mementos. Safiya was born in this house, and apparently nothing much had changed: the same wooden floors, the ceiling fan in the living room, the cabinet packed with crockery and her grandmother's cocktail glasses, the silver cocktail shaker. He'd noticed a line of blue glass bottles outside the swing door, and Marjorie said these were to keep away bad spirits.

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Vagrants sometimes wandered into the yard and slept on the steps. Just a month ago, while going to lock up the gate, she almost tripped over a sleeping vagrant. He had long dreads—a headful of snakes—and no shirt on his sweaty chest; his trousers were held up with old rope. You could see his pubic hair sticking out. The vagrant cursed her for kicking him, and she told him she'd already called St Ann's, the madhouse, and a van was on its way. Since she'd put the blue bottles out, he'd stayed away. Black people were frightened of blue bottles; Safiya said they are both religious and superstitious. If someone robs you, start saying the Lord's Prayer and see how fast they run.

That night Marjorie cooked up a West Indian feast: rice with pumpkin and beef; she prepared a large salad with lettuce and tomatoes. There was garlic bread, cassava, fried plantain. They sat at the dining table, the oval mahogany table which she said her husband had made when they first got married in 1955. It was an easy night, and he managed to avoid discussing anything too personal about his life in England. They mostly talked about Trinidadian politics, the recent Miss Universe competition, and the appalling rising crime. He was always taken aback by how seriously Trinidadians thought about their ruling government; in England he could not imagine having a similar discussion about New Labour around the dinner table. When Safiya said goodbye at the door, he knew she was pleased; the evening had gone extremely well.

But a month later, when he went back to the house, Marjorie did not come to say hello; she stayed in her bedroom and watched *CSI Miami*. She had found a birthday card in Safiya's bedroom. There was a poor choice of cards in the mall and

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he'd settled for a soppy American Hallmark. On the front was a cute Labrador puppy with a red bow around its neck: *To the world, you may be one person. But to me, you are the world.* Marjorie confronted Safiya, who told her, yes, they are having a relationship, and yes, it is complicated, and no, she isn't worried about what she is getting herself into.

That night he waited to speak to her in the living room; Safiya made him a sandwich, brought him a cold beer. She wished that he would let it go, there was nothing more to say. But he waited, all the while listening to the American voices coming from her mother's room. Eventually, when he got up to leave, Marjorie appeared in the doorway.

'I don't want you in this house again,' she said, calmly. She looked as if she had been crying. 'My daughter is all I have.' Then, 'An old man like you, you should know better.'

He drove away into the night, around and around the Savannah, until eventually he pulled into the car park at the Hilton Hotel where he shut off the lights, pushed back his seat. It was shocking to him, at his age, to be reprimanded by someone's mother.

He steps quietly through his apartment, stopping to collect a beer from the fridge, to the back where his small veranda is in darkness. He unlocks the wrought-iron gates, and pushes them open. He dislikes the bars, but they are necessary. He has become less security-conscious in the last few weeks, and he knows that he needs to be careful. Just last month a woman in her fifties was found dead not too far from here. Someone had seen two men at her door, and she apparently let them in