

Anton Nimblett

JUST NOW



In the south of Trinidad, a young man begins a trip from the office of his family's construction company. It's sunny and clear, and the young man – Glen Moore – will make his way easily up the Butler and Hochoy Highways, only slowing in traffic near the flood planes of County Caroni. In a few years this arable flatland will be all but transformed – rice paddies will be replaced by a patchwork of housing developments, sewn with homes from the affordable to the exclusive – but for now there is still sodden earth and sprouting green. And for now, Glen drives north and west, crablike. He skirts the busy streets of Port of Spain and then heads north again.

As a little boy, Glen sat sometimes in one of these big trucks as one employee or another from Moore Construction Ltd. drove over bumpy roads. Glen's favorite driver, Mr. Jarvis would speed up on safe straight-aways, lean hard when they rounded a wide turn and make screeching noises when he braked to a stop. It was the best adventure that Glen could imagine, but, those truck rides were really Glen's father's way of getting him to worksites. The Old Man's trick to ensure that the boy saw dirt and dust, back-hoes and wheel-barrows, bent backs and sweating brows – ensure that Glen knew what work looked like up-close. The Old Man had done the same with his other children, even with the girl Gloria.

Today Glen will come in contact with more than just work – Glen who has been lulled to sleep by breakers lapping on sand almost every day of his life – today Glen will travel into the northern hills, deep into “the bush”, where light must curve around leaves to touch ground. He

will meet adults and children for whom gazing at sea or playing on sandy beach is an event – because, even on an island the size of Trinidad, there is a world of difference between life on the coast and life inland.

Glen's mother is excited about this trip. Marjory Moore didn't raise Glen as the baby of the family, even though he is her youngest. Marjory, a woman who could find some worthwhile trait in almost any stranger, found much to be celebrated in each of her children as they grew. And while she took it as a challenge to nurture the different wonders that formed each one, Marjory wasn't naive – *That same boy who come first in test*, she could say with a small smile, *that boy, my son, is the one who I catch cuffing up his bigger brother*; or she would reply to someone admiring her daughter, *Yes thank you, my girl-child with the pretty-pretty plaits was not too long ago chasing a fowl under the house in her church clothes*. And so Marjory took on the even bigger challenge of harnessing her children's wayward traits.

It's different now, though, they're all grown. Gregory and George are both married with children of their own, and they have firm reigns on the family business. Gloria, thriving as a single woman, is at the beginning of creating her own catering company. It is only Glen who hasn't yet found his path.

But now from her view on the other side, Marjory can focus on her baby, enjoy his uniqueness just a bit more. Having a favorite child is a luxury afforded the dead.

In the hills where Glen will end up today, Cecelia Mendoza woke up at about the same time that Glen started his journey. And now, as Cecelia changes into the white outfit that she has been instructed to wear, raindrops form a beaded curtain at the windshield of Glen's truck. It is the rainy season, and mornings that begin blue sky and sun, must be expected to turn to rain.

Nearly blinded by this rainfall, and unfamiliar with these roads, Glen winds his way up The Saddle – where opposing slopes rise and fall like a calculus function. Maybe he should stop, but the narrow road doesn't leave much room for that, and Glen wants to get the truck to the site as promised. The engine drones in a low gear, the wheels turn steadily. Glen has a point to prove. He fought hard to be driving, instead of marching to his brothers' orders. His

brothers disapprove of Glen doing this job, driving a truck. Glen's brothers take things too literally, they still believe that the Old Man ferried them out to construction sites to prepare them to run the business, to see the legacy up close. But Glen understands the more subtle meaning and Glen also knows how to get his way. Years of dealing with the Catholic Brothers at Presentation taught him – an offer to set up labs for Brother Timothy, got him out of the unending announcements and off-key hymns of morning assembly; a spectacular goal during a football match, saved him the extra practice laps. Glen is as clever as the Old Man, and as tenacious as Marjory. So for the past year, he has been hauling bricks, pouring cement and driving trucks – doing what he wants to – instead of working on a degree or at least training in the office. Glen drives on through the rain.

At the top of the hill, as Cecelia's uncle tucks a yellow orchid in her braid, the sun regains its sovereignty over the sky – the shower ends just as quickly as it began.

Glen faces a fair sky, and a sudden memory – he is kite flying with the Old Man, sailing a home-made “mad bull” way up high, and in a flash the wind drops, the string goes slack and the kite plummets fast. Now, Saut D'Eau Road draws him further into the stepped, herb gardens of this village. He drives, rocking in and out of rain-filled ruts, skirting muddy gutters. When he tries to turn in a broad flat yard, the tires of his truck sink into soft mud, and he is stuck. Glen is no longer on the planned route.

Two pre-school boys in the yard across the street stop their play to watch the giant toy. Glen sits in the driver's seat, knowing that trying to move the truck will only get it mired more deeply. His hand lingers on the gearshift for a moment, and then he shifts to park and turns off the ignition. The little boys try to make their young voices low like the engine as it turns over and dies. *Brrroogh*. Glen steps out and mud rises past the heel of his boots, threatens the hems of his coveralls. And when he walks toward the nearest house, the threat is made real and dark mud splatters his legs.

“Well-well, that didn't take long at all,” Tio Pedro says, watching from the kitchen window.

Cecelia –dressed in white, with a flower in her hair – watches from the front stairs.

Last night Cecelia walked through the forest. She picked her way through thick mist that hid the leaves that grazed her arms and legs. Chilled by moist air against her naked body, she padded through wet dirt that forced its way between her toes at each step. One foot in front of the other, unguided and unsure of any direction, she walked until a group of lizards moved into her path. A dozen reptiles, a score – some long as a forearm, others pinkie-small, brown ones and green ones, brown-and-green, rough and smooth – slithered in staggered, crooked lines, forming patterns in the mud before her. Cecelia watched transfixed. She thought she recognized some pattern, maybe a design, but always the creatures moved before she could fix any image in her mind.

One mottled lizard broke away from the troupe and began a fluid crawl, moving closer and closer to her. As she considered escape, the wet, white haze about her took on a new form. Where, a moment before, Cecelia had seen the air billow and swirl as a single cloudy mass, she now sensed dozens of separate darting movements: a cloud of pale yellow butterflies flew off in every direction about her, moonlit wings soft against her skin.

The fluttering cleared and Cecelia looked down again. The rogue lizard had stopped inches before her feet. It angled its head, its eyes met Cecelia's, and it opened its mouth as though about to speak.

First thing this morning, Cecelia went to Tio Pedro. Cecelia's never known the concern of a mother like Marjory, or even guiding wings of older siblings. Cecelia's mother left a little village, this village, running away from *country-bookie* ways and all the dusty old-people-business that held her brother Pedro in place. Cecelia's mother didn't have her brother's interest or his sight. But in town, instead of modern office work and suitors with sharply-creased trousers, Pedro's sister found menial labor and sweaty married men who rushed home to their wives. And when she found herself pregnant, she came back to this village, back to her brother. She watched her brother between the groans of her labor, she watched him afterward with the baby girl whose face was veiled in a bloody caul – watched him clean the child and bury the caul and the navel string, following the old *country-bookie* ways. Watched him in the days and weeks afterward, and had enough sight then to know that she wasn't needed again.

So it is Pedro to whom Cecelia turns for advice and comfort – it is only Pedro to whom she tells her dreams.

And today, Cecelia started her story, “first I was walking . . . just walking and walking.”

She described her dream and Pedro listened carefully, translating each detail in his mind. And when she reached the end – the almost talking lizard – Pedro sat quiet. In long moments, still, he bridged the gap between worlds and times. Pedro lives in a present filled with yesterday’s ways and forgotten knowledge.

He began his instructions, “go and boil up some sage-bush, yes?”

Cecelia nodded.

“Then after it boil good-good, when yuh see the color change...take it off the fire and then add-in some *vertivier* leaf. Bathe yourself good in that essence water,” Pedro said.

The herbs changed from one time to the next – lime bud, *cousin majoe*, shining bush – sometimes they were added to bath water, sometimes they were steeped as tea, but always they soothed Cecelia, grounded her. When she was a child, Pedro would make the baths himself or steep the tea and hold the cup as she drank. As she got older he began guiding her – standing over her as she pinched the leaves or stirred the water. Later he only instructed her, and left her to work independently. And some months ago, he began asking her questions, that led her to make her own decisions. “What lime bud does make yuh feel like? Yuh think de chandelier-bush will go good wit’ what yuh see?” And so, on the last two or three occasions, Cecelia had told Tio Pedro not just the details of the dream, but she had also told him what bath she would prepare for herself, what leaves she would steep. And he had nodded and smiled, and pulled down the flesh under his right eye.

This morning though, he had carefully given the instructions – taken control again – and Cecelia had been glad, because last night’s dream was not like any she had had before. Last night she had been more of a participant, less an observer. Last night felt intensely personal.

“When you finish, put on white clothes. Only white, you hear?” This part was new. “Make sure they don’t have no other color, yes. No little purple piping or red stripes or nothing so.” Pedro pulled down the flesh under his right eye – the familiar gesture that sealed agreement between dreamer and knower. But this morning Cecelia thought she saw something more in Tio’s eye .

Pedro watched his niece walk off to follow his directive, pondering all that the day would bring her. Now, for the first time, Glen walks up to Pedro’s house.

Cecelia standing on the top of three steps, is a head above Glen. She stares at him, plainly, without guile. The separate features of his face – eyes, nose, lips – stand like hills formed on a single orb of dark stone. But the hems of his green coveralls are splattered, and he’s flustered by being lost and stuck and late. So all through his body there is the sense of arrested motion, of indecision. He looks like a caught animal.

He stares at her. She’s not a pretty girl in any standard way – her eyes are disproportionately large for her head, her ears too prominent. Lanky legs jut from her white shorts. But her hair, plaited loose, forms a wavy frame around her face. Glen considers the whole image – curve, color and light – and he remembers the day in art class when he was the only boy who thought the Picasso portrait Mrs. Baptiste showed them was beautiful. He remembers that hot Friday afternoon, remembers the way harsh angles blended into smooth arcs, remembers wishing that he could see the real canvas, the way the paint lay on it. He remembers not caring about the *fatigue*, the pointed teasing from his classmates – *that is why Moore eh have no girlfriend, he waiting fuh a choonks with two eye on the same side of she head.*

Now, two little boys cross the street to examine the truck that to them is beautiful. Pedro examines his niece and the stranger.

“Mister, what yuh watching me so for?” Cecelia flashes her teeth, playful. “Like yuh expect me to move your truck for yuh.”

“Move my truck miss?” Glen joins in the game, quick. “What make you feel that right there in that spot, is not exactly where I want that truck to be.”

“Oh-ho. You wake up this morning and decide to drive all the way up here, and park in my Uncle yard?”

“Nah, hear what happen, eh?” Glen places one booted foot on the first step, slips a hand in his pocket. “I was going and spend the day by the beach, play some football and thing, but this fella come and tell me that if I drive up here I could see the nicest woman in Trinidad.”

“And is what? Yuh want me to help you look for she?”

“Nah, don’t try that trick, girl.” Glen says. “The fella tell me to find the girl with a yellow flower in her hair.”

“Oh, well wait ‘til I see that man,” she says, “I tired tell him to stop sending just any and everybody up here to me.”

“Well, in truth, people don’t usually call me ‘Anybody’, or ‘Everybody’ for that matter,” he says. “People does call me Glen.”

“Well right now, I think I should call you Muddy.”

“Alright you could call me that, but then don’ get vex when I make up a name for you.”

“Before you start calling people names, better remember you is the one with the truck trap in the mud.”

The two stand playing and laughing for a while. The boys are playing around the truck, feeling the heat of the engine, measuring themselves against the huge tires. The steel creature is, to them, far more interesting than the timeworn banter between a young man and a young woman. But Marjory is interested, she likes this girl who's strong enough to make her son work, funny enough to make him laugh. And Pedro is interested. This is his niece, this is future.

Pedro examines Glen's height and size, the way he stands and how his eyes move when he talks. Examines the way his niece responds. To unknowing eyes this would seem a casual conversation. But Pedro sees brightness around his nieces face, sees how she seems to cleave into Glen, how his body curves around hers. So Pedro, no casual observer, sees the changing, the leaving. Present in this moment, Pedro breathes a fading past and sees a deepening future. Pedro sees Pedro standing alone.

Pedro is not a selfish man. He spent his life tending to ways that have lost value, worked nights with those who didn't want him near – a lifetime misunderstood – and at this stage he feels unready to let go, unprepared for this change.

So as much as Pedro considers Glen and Cecelia, he is considering himself – his own fears and worries, the things he has done, things left undone. He looks at them now, and he rehashes the past and contemplates the future. And if Cecelia were to look at him, just now, she would see for certain that there is “something more” in his eyes. But she is still looking at Glen.

I want to see him closer, Pedro thinks.

And Glen remembers that he is supposed to be at the construction site, not standing with this girl-woman in a muddy yard in this small village.

“Yuh know, I was supposed to be in Santa Cruz ages ago,” Glen says.

“The tune change already?” Cecelia says. “Yuh well forget about the man and the yellow flower, fast.”

“I forget that man yes,” Glen says. “But not the flower.”

“Oh gosh mister, come get your muddy ol’ truck out of we yard.”

Cecelia turns to the door. She walks— long legs poke through white shorts, and a plain white tee shirt falls loosely to her high backside. Stark white against the sunny reds of her skin, highlighted by the yellow flower at the base of the single plait running down her neck.

Pedro recognizes that this is the same person who came home from standard two crying, “Tio the girls in school...in meh class...the girls call me ‘horse face’” He told her the usual things that day, “don’ bother with them, they too blind and *stupidy* to see how pretty yuh is.” And he told her too how beautiful horses are. Graceful. That little girl with the tears running down her face. This same woman, walking forward with careless poise. Glen watching and learning behind her, Pedro waiting and knowing ahead.

In Pedro’s kitchen, Cecelia says, “this is my uncle, Pedro Mendoza, people does call him Tio. Tio, this man was trying to swim in the yard.”

“Good morning...” Glen hesitates, not sure if he qualifies as “people,” or if he should use Mr. Mendoza.

Pedro doesn’t give him time to decide, “So you float in here on the rain cloud. and feel you could stand bold-face in my yard, chatting-up my niece just so?”

No smiles, no extended hands. Just three people in a small room, looking at each

other. The wooden walls are unpainted, decorated chiefly with scattered knot holes. The only accessories are white: bleached cotton hangs from a clothes-line at the window; plastic, stamped with a lace pattern, covers the table; and in one corner a trinity of partially burned, milky candles have dripped waxy stalactites.

“Well Mr. Mendoza, sorry, I jus’ . . .” Glen’s apology floats unfinished as he looks at Pedro. For a minute he tries to connect this face to the Cecelia’s. But Pedro’s firmly set mouth, bordered by deep folds of tamarind-pod skin, is too far from Cecelia’s simple smiles – the smiles that made him lose track of time.

“I really have to leave . . . I have to go to Santa Cruz.”

“Leave? Look boy, you ain’ going nowhere right this minute.” Pedro looks at his niece, and tugs at the flesh under his right eye.

Perhaps Glen should be bothered by Pedro’s statement. Maybe he should be trying to figure out what Pedro’s gesture to his niece signifies. But Glen is captivated by the hand itself, more than by the movement of the hand. He follows it in an arc from hip to face and back to hip. He looks at its mirror. Two hands. Hands of an old man, but not so old, maybe the age of Glen’s Old Man if her were alive. Hands of a man who has know work, no harder or easier than the workers on the construction sites. But these hands are different – skin so dark it seems to trap all light near it, creased and cragged. Creviced more than they are wrinkled. Deep lines, not at the knuckles and fingers as they should be, but higher toward the wrist. Skin that looks more like bark, than like an old man’s flesh.

Cecelia knows the hands, so it’s the movement that she takes note of. She should be reassured by Pedro’s gesture – their familiar sign of concord – but for the first time it seems like a means of exclusion rather than like a comforting bond. Cecelia doesn’t want Pedro to exclude Glen. She doesn’t expect him to. She is used to seeing Pedro welcome and nurture, enfold and succor. For the first time, she sees her uncle as this other being, the figure whom the

children at school whispered about as they stood apart from her. *“Don’ get she vex, Pedro is she uncle, he could.... My mother say don’ even talk to she, she family does...”*

“The rain coming again,” Pedro says. His gaze not toward the sky, but aimed at Glen, steady. “Don’ worry we go take care of you.”

Glen looks to Cecelia for help getting out of this compelling invitation, and realizes in this instant that he’s already considering this girl-woman an ally. But before she can take a side, before Glen can continue his protest, the rain does burst forth again.

“Yuh see,” Pedro says. “So just have some sitting down.”

Glen sits at the kitchen table with Cecelia. Pedro stands. Hovers. His awareness of what this day is for his niece does not calm him. Knowing does not mean accepting. Marjory knows and Marjory is calm. Accepting is another luxury granted the dead.

“Mr. Moore, I know yuh eh used to country-bookie ways like ours,” Pedro says. “But make yuhself comfortable.”

And as if to make that very instruction impossible, as if to scare away any hope of comfort, Pedro goes on, “ I cyah understand how the driver of a fancy-fancy truck could end up stick in my yard. Like you thief the truck? Or yuh thief yuh license? Which one?”

“Oh gosh Tio, yuh go frighten the man,” Cecelia says. Her eyes avoid Glen’s now, even when she says, “don’ study him nah, he playing.”

Cecelia is wrong, Pedro is not just playing.

Glen, feeling Pedro's eyes boring into him, believes he is being judged. Glen is wrong, too. Pedro staring at Glen is not judging him. He is not really looking at Glen, as much as he is looking at future. And looking at past. Looking at himself.

Pedro sees himself not through Glen's eyes or through his own, but through Cecelia's. He knows that she is surprised to see him act like this with a stranger: gruff, closed, enigmatic. Cecelia who knows Pedro better than anyone living today. But all that he knows, all that he sees, is overridden by all that he feels. Washed away by the questions: *how it is that my niece get so big? So grown and ready to move on? How it is that I eh teach her everything I supposed to? Is fail, I fail?* The worry, the creeping loneliness, the sense of failure. He excuses himself and walk into the other room.

Glen wonders what Pedro is doing in the other room. And when he suspects that Pedro is eavesdropping, judging, he is wrong again. Glen won't know that Pedro stands staring out the window, tracing drops of rain as they fall from a single leaf at the end of a spindly, curved branch. Watching water appear, bead, roll and fall. Again and again. Hundreds of times, an action repeated on ever leaf on that *pommerac* tree. Repeated on every leaf of every tree in this yard, under this rain cloud. Who but Pedro would see down to one drop at a time? Who else but Pedro or Marjory? Who but the ancient or the dead?

And when the rain slows, and lets up. When the sun throws rays of light, instead of droplets of water, on that solitary leaf. Pedro sees the light and the water on the leaf at the same time. Recognizes that it is all together his now. The sunlight, the rain water, the leaf. The baby with the caul, the girl coming home in tears from school, the woman with the yellow flower in her hair. But Glen won't know, when Pedro knows. Marjory knew it before.

And when Pedro returns, Cecelia and Glen are talking like before. And what Pedro overhears, it Glen saying, "...used to say that the best part of her married life was when they were living in a little shack."

“You never live in no shack, your hand too smooth, “ Cecelia says.

“I never live in the shack but I used to play in it all the time. That shack still standing up. But when my mother used to say that – about how nice life was in the shack – the Old Man used to *stewps*, suck his teeth and say ‘woman don’t talk foolishness’. But I know it was true, I could look at his face and see his eyes watching my mother, happy.”

“So, one day yuh go take some lucky girl and make she live in a shack?”

Glen laughs, “a lucky, lucky girl.”,

Pedro sets a bowl of plums between them. “Don’ go back down the hill and say that people up here didn’t even offer yuh something to eat,” he says.

The fruit run the spectrum from unripe to ripe: they form a polka dotted heap of dark-green, yellow-green and golden-yellow. Once again Glen looks to Cecelia, this time for reassurance or a cue. And then he considers the folly of this. Glen, like every eligible man on this island, knows that it’s risky to eat from someone you don’t know, from someone who might wish to trap you. Perhaps not so much knows, as has heard jokes about “stay home” in the sweet bread, or “sweat rice” that made big-big men lose their power. But Glen looks at the bowl of fruit, looks at Cecelia and laughs to himself. He reaches out and picks up a plum.

And looking at the bowl he feels Pedro’s eyes on him. Glen hands the plum to Cecelia. She knows about the country tales too, and she knows that they have crossed Glen’s mind. She laughs out loud. And as she laughs, Glen takes another plum and together they take bites of the fruit. And Pedro watches. And in years to come – after the rice paddies of County Caroni have been replaced by housing developments, after separate days of blue skies and sun, after rainy seasons and dry seasons – Glen will tell the story. He will say, “I tell myself, what ‘stay home’ she could put on that food that could have me any more catch? I say, if she could make

me more tie down to she, I want that. Just so.” And when Glen tells this story, Cecelia will laugh and her eyes will look like the Old Man’s when Marjory talked about the shack.

For now, Cecelia plucks the ripest plums, savoring the sweet, juicy pulp. She tells Glen about playing high in the hills under the stars. And Glen favors the tart green plums. He talks about mornings on the beach and about the only meal his father ever cooked.

They talk of football and fruit, and of time and tides. And Glen will get his truck out of the mud, and he will drive off as two little boys imitate the truck’s engine, *vroom*. And looking at the road ahead, he will see the rear view mirror in the corner of his eye. He will see Cecelia standing with Pedro. Pedro with his ancient hand on his niece’s shoulder will be saying, “don’ worry, he coming back soon. You go see him just now.”

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