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Galera Point

excerpt from a novella

for Jackie Hinkson



Jackie Hinkson, “Cumana Rocks” (2001)

The late morning sun was right above them, lighting the grey road with an intense clarity. The sea breeze swayed the trees and ruffled clumpy vegetation on both sides of the road; and far out, a ship headed south. There were intermittent beaches of beige sand, some of them rocky, others lined in coconut palms and, beyond them, outcrops with hunched sea-monster backs.

Marc watched the driver, Old Man Trinidad, look seaward for a few seconds, and then glance inland to the forest, dense and alluring, dark. Now he jerked his head in the direction of a coved beach below, like the one where Farah was, patiently waiting for Marc. As if to say, *Look look, man, that so lovely for bathing. I could take you and the lady for a visit there.* The inlet water was a light emerald-green, sloshing onto a pebbly beach. Leaves gold, brown and green dappled the water and rose in low easy waves. Marc had a desire to go down there, put his belongings in a plastic bag, tie it to his waist, and swim the rest of the way along the coast to the house. He saw himself coming out of the sea and walking to Farah lying on a large blue towel on the beach there. As he stood over her, water dripped on her skin and she opened her eyes, and there they were.

A man walking on the left side of the road, barefoot and naked to the waist, shouted an obscenity at them and raised a club-like stick in the air triumphantly. He had a brown cloth-like bag over his right shoulder and matted, neck-length hair the colour of sapodilla. His black shorts were much darker than his skin.

The words *Man, Slave, History* came to Marc instantly; they sat in his head like newspaper headlines before fading.

“You see that?” Old Man Trinidad said, with a backward jerk of his thumb, indicating the man on the road. “That is a possible madness right there, eh. As a boy, nine and ten years, I use to come nearby here to visit my mother family during the August holidays. The place was safe, safe then. I see a tiger cat on a beach once at sunset. You could step across them rocks in the water and throw a line, and lo, dinner, lunch, breakfast. Water in the forest streams so clean like it was from Eden. But that gone – fast-fast. In youth you never think that. You think it long and boring at times, yet the older you get the faster everything going. Time change everything, but if many people involve, specially city people, things speed up much more than they should. And nobody know where we going, or for what. Eh? I still see and feel the past I had here. And compared to now, was perfect. Just that I didn’t know it as a boy, but now... Most of human life spent not being young. Is about learning how not to be too sad as you age, and to go on. Learning how to die as best you can, not so?”

Marc nodded, uneasy. “You must have had quite a childhood.”

“Yes, oh yes.”

Then they were silent. Up ahead, in the sky and along the coast, there was a strange colour, as if a previously unknown hue of the spectrum had been revealed and was tinting everything. Marc didn’t know what was happening – an eclipse? He had a curious sense of danger, and of hope.

She sensed a dimming of the noon light, a faint tint that caused the colours of the rocks, sand and water of the small cove she was in to appear a bit surreal, as if part of the light now came from within them. A soft, salt-and vegetal-scented breeze came from the sea. The palms' long-leaved branches were clustered over her, swaying, thin swords of light incessantly crisscrossing shadows onto her and the large blue towel. If she'd been more aware she would've thought maybe an eclipse of some kind was underway, she'd seen one before. Had she looked upward from where she sat on the beach, arranging the picnic for Marc and herself, and becoming, she had to confess, a little anxious about his lateness, she'd have noticed the blues of sky and sea were slightly off-colour, a shade of violet altering them and suggesting another time of day.

The wind blew across her face tendrils of limp brown hair that had slipped from her chignon. She removed a clip from her purse and gathered the tendrils in her fingers and set them back into the knot of hair. It was a quick task, careless she knew, but not worth the bother: only the hair away from her eyes mattered. The day was sublime so her preparation of the picnic lunch was a mild annoyance: she had meant to have it over with sooner, but instead had indulged herself: water and Chardonnay on ice, fruit, cheddar and biscuits, salad, pita bread and oysters. Extra ice.

Swimming earlier she'd worn just a floppy grey-green hat and her big sunglasses, at times standing up to her shoulders in the clear, leaf-strewn water, the delicious cool shift and heft of her nude body by the gentle swells an ultimate reassurance, finally, of the security guaranteed by the landlord whose salesmanship replayed in her mind – *Never a thing happen here that wasn't asked for, Miss Farah. The fence, since we put it in, allows no one or anything onto the property. You and your loved ones safe, safe. Is a fact. Absolutely nothing unwanted, nothing at all like that, going to happen here except what you make happen.* His mouth was pursed and twitchy, his dark eyes blinking rapidly.

Mrs. Farah, she'd reminded him curtly. She wished his face would calm down; it made her nervous. *And good*, she'd thought, *if only more of human history had been like that: people leaving one another alone.*

Mr. Ramkumar's words comforted her somewhat only when he had explained precisely what kind of fence he had installed, its depth and its razor-wire-knotted height, and told her about the switch in the master bedroom that activated its main deterrence. *Use anytime it please you*, he'd said. *On, off. Very simple.*

Click, click, she'd muttered, noting his skin tone was like hers. She took the keys from him, thanked him and gazed out at the weekday afternoon from the low-walled porch, the blue and silver of sky and sea, and the palm trees' branches waving in the wind. That was when she'd actually begun to relax, with Mr. Ramkumar saying his goodbyes, and the sheer anticipation of the stay, of something sweet in life, once again,

warming upward from her core and offering the dreamy, childish promise of this green coast and its rich solitude.

All morning her muscles and tendons, her skin, her mind, had been savouring the days to come. She and Marc should live here, or at least arrange their lives to allow for longer periods away from the city and its outlying areas, fast becoming more congested and polluted. She knew he wanted to *get away*. Mr. Ramkumar might sell. Marc was fifteen years older than she and insistent lately about their doing what they wished with the rest of their time. What there was left to do, and to repeat for love and other worthy reasons, seemed now more important than anything. Simple pleasure, of whatever kind, was one good reason. Curiosity another. Travel, maybe, as her holidays regularly coincided with Marc's. Farah taught upper-level art at a secondary school for girls.

She moved onto her knees, sighing as she eased herself upwards, looking around pleased with the way the light fell on the food and drink, especially the metal ice bucket with the bottle of Chardonnay. An uncanny light, she noticed, was beginning everywhere. The air had a strange tint to it, darker, richer but, remaining ever so slight, the faint violet implied a hidden energy, a change in the celestial order of things.

She sat in the rickety, low-slung canvas chair, wearing her crimson bikini bottom and green blouse now. The collar-like flaps of her half-opened blouse quivered in the breeze.

The shadows from the overhead palms crisscrossed on her body and the towel with the food and drink. She felt hidden on the beach in the small cove, yet wondered if Mr Ramkumar had placed cameras in the bushes along the top of the semicircular cliff. There had been a vague and lustful menace about him, his eyes narrowing at her, and his moist lips parting. No doubt his security system entailed cameras as well. She would have to find them.

Her gaze settled on little waves running toward the pebbly shore, their surf in this strange light the colour of amber. Part of her mind had registered the change in light, casually dismissing it as another eclipse – moon, earth, sun, she couldn't remember, there'd been endless news reports during the last two years of such phenomena, including repeated warnings of catastrophes, the end of the planet's ability to safely harbour people, a tiresome litany of end-time scenarios.

She enjoyed the unusual tints, deciding it was an eclipse, and recalled a similar event of a few years ago in a friend's garden when the harsh light had dimmed, and everything became clearer, deeper and softer.

Where *is* he? she thought.

The temperature had dropped a few degrees. The strange noon light in the sky appeared as solid as the sea had been earlier, and the line of horizon was all new: sharper, closer, a definite border between earth

and sky. She dared not look at the sun. The changing tints and colours had recast textures and shapes, and what she hadn't quite noticed before over the last two days now became recognizable. There were submerged rocks at both ends of the cove where the enclosing cliffs had deteriorated. On arrival she'd given them scant attention, thinking they might be worth snorkeling over, sighting of a moray eel or two likely among the jagged protrusions. The rocks were visible now like stumpy, moss green creatures as the new light shifted them back and forth through the water, eerie forms asserting themselves in another light.

The sand was tawnier, a deeper yellow-tinged brown suggesting fertility, she felt, the ancient colour of lions. Like the beaches in a Jackie Hinkson watercolour. *The earth giveth and giveth*, Marc was fond of mumbling lately. *As we go forth and multiply sins against the world*. There was a tint of lavender along the island's far green coast. The strange eclipse, she fancied, was a signal of all the change that would come upon the world.

A distant shout: one word, unclear, its urgency not lost in the easy wind and surf. A man's voice, no doubt, and then she heard it again: still distant, still unclear, not a cry for help; more like an alert, an encouragement of some kind.

Take note, it said.

Now.

After the car passed, he steupsed and frowned at what he'd seen: the white man in the back seat, black driver in front, both going nowhere as fast as the Almighty Devil's Kingdom of Greed (the present world) was carrying him, Nathan Sebastian Jones, and all of humanity to the Final Destruction.

"Praise the Lord," he whispered to the forest and the road ahead, its pitch here as dark as the night that began the universe. Seeking sympathy for his witness, he lifted his staff, looked up at the sun and sky, his eyes blinding and tearing, and said, "Don't bless that car and its occupants, Father, and especially don't forgive them, for they *know* what the fuck they doing. Every second Saturday of the month, this supposed to be a car-free area, so what happen?"

All morning he had walked after leaving the shack on the cool green hill in San Souci's early light to head to Galera where, with the blessings of the Winged Black Virgin of Toco, God willing, he would stand on the eastern-most point of Trinidad, overlooking tremendous rocks and boulder islands partially collapsed from the mainland and abraded by centuries of sea and wind near the Victorian lighthouse. There, on the exact spot the Black Virgin had gone beyond this life, Nathan Jones would receive her visions of guidance for the future.

The salt breeze dried his eyes. He adjusted the large burlap bag on his shoulder with two-dozen, sandy plastic bottles inside it. On the roadside he bent to pick up two more plastic bottles, one a liter size, the other half that.

It was never-ending. He had resolved to clean the entire Toco area of plastic, and had written a short, blunt letter to the Prime Minister to inform him of the task, what it would cost the state, et cetera, and who he, Nathan Jones, was: The (Presently) Earthbound Environmental Representative of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Cost of Cleanup: 1.5 million Trinidad and Tobago dollars.

Time Needed for Cleanup: one year, seven months, two weeks, three days, fifty-nine minutes.

Tools Needed – spades, pickaxes, trucks, cars, men, tractors, etc.: none.

Publicity: none.

Recognition after Completion of Task: none.

Hope for the Future of the Island's Unique Environment after Completion of Task: to be discussed.

The work, walking, bending and picking up, was considerable, and he knew it would remain so for a while yet.

He walked.

He bent.

He picked up.

Everyday. Sunrise to sundown.

The Prime Minister had never answered his letter.

Fuck he.

But Nathan Jones knew what he was doing, why it was important, and, more than anything else, he knew who he was.

The world was crying in its beauty, dying, despite the seemingly eternal sunlight, he thought. Sunlight, starlight, moonlight, whatever light there was and would be, had always sought an eye, and always would. The eye was forever. Light saw to it. If nothing could be saved, and humanity and all it beheld and dwelled in here on this blue, roundish dot-island spinning in the supreme Dark-Rule of the Universe was nothing more than the strangest poem given flesh and blood, and therefore mortality, then his duty was to praise its sacred nature, live in worship of the miracle that had given him and those he loved life for the simplest and most difficult act of human life.

Witness.

Learning to see, in order to see. And understand.

Yes, he thought, treading the side of the road where the grass kept his feet from the hot pitch Raleigh and his men had caulked their ships with in the late 1500s while the Dutch, other Englishmen, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Lord knows who else fought for the world and what it could pay them and their bosses; yes, the soft grass of our Black Virgin of Toco, the grass of the earth, yes, brothers and sisters and children, the grass of the galaxy, the miracle of bush! You ever ask yourself why it so plentiful here and in many other places? And why is not gold everywhere all over the world?

Nathan Jones looked around as if he had a hundred disciples following him and shouted: “*Think ‘bout why it so, mutha fuckers!*”

More plastic – *again*: he stopped walking. He bent. He picked up. Into the burlap sack went three more plastic bottles, two of them flattened and creased, the sunlight showing all their potential toxicity and indifference to the world, to the miracle of creation.

Nathan Jones steupsed. My work will never be done, he thought. Mankind is a pestilence, *oui Father*.

Nearer the coast he saw waves hitting the molasses-coloured outcrops, the surf scattering in unpredictable directions. The quality of surf-light gladdened his heart. The coast was not dirty here, not today, no muddy runoffs, no branches and bushes from landslips into the sea. The thought of swimming pleased him further. He stopped walking, turned to the east and noticed for the first time just how much the light had changed, that violet tint in the air, a mystical colour changing the mood of sea and sky. He began to walk briskly across the road, then down the slope on the other side, moving past waist-high grass and then coconut and sea grape trees. The sand’s lack of heat was a surprise. As he approached the shore, the full meaning of what the drop in temperature and the changing colours meant came to him.

The words of veneration he spoke were lost in the sea wind. He slipped the bag of plastic bottles off his shoulder, removed a piece of rope from his tattered trousers’ pocket, and tied the opening of the bag. There was a coconut tree, its trunk dipping low to the sand in three bizarre curves before lifting its head of leaves to the sun. He looped the extra rope around the middle curve, and satisfied the bag would stay there until he returned, went toward the sea.

All, so far, was as the Black Virgin of Toco had said it would be; and the sign, when it came, would present itself in a dance of light, but not until the sea, sky and land had deepened beyond the colours they were now. There would be a strange night during the day, of a kind never seen, she had said. Nathan was to observe it with an open mind, and fear nothing. She had commanded him to enter the sea when he became aware of its beginning, and to swim north along the coast, staying close to shore, for the change in light would cause big fish to rise from the depths.

And what then? he'd asked.

Stop swimming when you see it. Stand up in the water, and look. That's all what I know.

The sea was cool. His head, inflicted with hot botherations from walking all morning and gathering plastic bottles and contemplating the sins of humanity, eased, his concerns and worries flowing away and lightening his face, limbs and heart. The water was turning faint lavender. He splashed around like a child, soaking his head, smiling and laughing, free for a while in the beauty of the world.

They had stopped on a bluff and were standing either side of the car. The ground was shale and quartz, and the new light lit them as if they were made of precious stones and gold. The sky and sea were pale indigo, the surf amber-pearl.

"I never see eclipse so," Old Man Trinidad said. "Is like a obeah come on the whole island."

Marc had never seen anything like it, though he felt certain it was an eclipse. The new light seemed uniform everywhere in the sky, and on the sea the violet tint remained. Both men took pictures with their phones. Then Marc called Farah.

"Where *are* you?" she said.

"About fifteen minutes south of you. You see the light?"

"Of course. You should be here, on the beach, with me."

"Be there soon. All well?"

She sighed into the phone. "Yes, I think so. This light is really bizarre. Do you feel the cooler air?"

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"It's got to be an eclipse, right?" Farah said.

"I can't imagine otherwise."

"Come straight down to the beach when you get here."

"Yes."

"See you soon."

"Yes."

He put the phone in his shirt pocket and turned to Old Man Trinidad.

"I don't like this at all, at all. Is like the sun slowly going out."

Marc, nervous, said, "It's just an eclipse. Has to be. I admit it's a strange one, but probably some unusual weather playing a role too."

The driver shook his head. “I try to get on the Internet when you was on the phone, and nothing, no connection. And your call was all right?”

Marc nodded. He thought to call Farah again, but decided no, he wanted to go to her immediately.

“I bet you this is man-made nonsense. White man shit-magic. Call your wife again. See if the phone still working.”

Marc said he would try in the car and that they must get to the house quickly. In the car he noticed an old radio embedded in the dashboard above the gear. “Does the radio work?”

“Not a chance. Sorry.”

Marc tried to call Farah on his phone; it was dead. He said nothing.

As they drove the narrow paved road along the coast, there were no cars in sight, nor could they see anyone. The few houses they passed looked empty and abandoned. Neither man spoke.

She thought she’d heard the voice again, but the sounds of wind and waves made her unsure. The new light along the beach had redefined the pebbles and stones: their colours, even shapes, she thought, had changed and she was selecting the ones she found most attractive. She knew those she chose now she wouldn’t have yesterday, in the normal light of day. They all looked so different, as if each stone and pebble were being seen for the first time on a beach in another world.

She was draped in one of the big towels for the cooler air. Its colour was different too, though she knew it was green, or had been. She could not name the colour the towel was now: a blend of magenta and light violet, perhaps.

Oh, where is that man?

On the phone he’d sounded concerned. His brief responses and questions told her he was a bit apprehensive, unable to talk, the driver nearby the cause maybe. It was also the light, she knew. A definite violet-indigo twilight had arranged itself around her now. The land, sky and sea drew her gaze, were insistent on her eye, as in one of Hinkson’s paintings of early evening light along this coast. Everywhere was new, distances, heights, everything that made up the natural world. Something had ended somewhere, somehow, a mystery. Deferral, she thought, a cosmic abeyance. And quite likely, here and now, a new world was beginning. A foolish thought, perhaps, but what else was there to think? A few stars showed, there was nothing more in the sky; it was unexpected, and not.

She walked the twilight beach, smooth pebbles clicking occasionally beneath the shuffle of her bare feet, a woman tense, waiting, unsure of everything around her except, for now, the air she breathed.

Then, once more, came the voice from the sea.

Nathan Jones, swimming an easy breaststroke along the lavender-tinted coast, had once met a big Jamaican man, muscular and athletic, who said he'd never learned to swim, would not go near the sea or any swimming pool. Deep water was a menace, he said. Too many things were hidden in it. Nathan didn't understand the man then, and for years had dismissed the Jamaican as troubled despite his good humour and hopeful outlook. Nathan had grown up loving the sea, fishing it all his life, never learning what the Jamaican meant. The islands were so different, Jamaica being a much larger island with towering mountains far above Trinidad's highest, and there were many people living inland and in Jamaica's mountain villages. That was it, he thought. Must be. The connection there. *Jamaica man can fly up him mountain and all round dem and run like rass, but him cyah swim save him fuckin life.* But he couldn't help thinking there was more to consider. The Jamaican, who had come to Trinidad to play football, never said anything else. That was many years ago, well before Nathan had become a devoted Environmentalist for the Lord's Second Coming. In this endeavour he had sought answers to Trinidad's plight, and humanity's place in the world. What the Black Virgin of Toco had said made perfect sense: *People feel He coming and that is it, they have nothing to do except pray. Is nonsense. What is the Creation? What most of it make of? Not people, Nathan. No, no. Tell me what it make of.* And she had waved a long, slow arm at the panorama from Galera Point to Galeota one late March afternoon, the haze like silver veils over the green-tinted east coast.

Nathan had nodded. *He coming to see our stewardship of His Creation, Sister.*

Exactly right. And He will judge as He see fit. Not so?

Is true.

We go pray for justice, and we will act. How much plastic bottle you pick up today?

Forty-five for the Lord, and fifty for you, Sister.

And she had laughed, slapping his arm playfully and smiling her big dark eyes at him so he knew there was love between them. Always. But it had remained platonic in this world. She had been a beautiful woman, graceful and tall, her facial bone-structure both noble and sympathetic, her hair scraggly as a witch's past her shoulders and breasts. Since her flight from Galera Point, Nathan found her more alive in his head than ever. Late at night alone he let her straddle him into dreams, and then the peaceful, temporary blank of sleep.

The sea had cooled him and restored his spirit for the future, for the tasks still to come. He was expecting to see a plastic bottle or two in the water and was relieved there were none. The coast was a series

of juts, of coves and promontories with occasional trees and pampered hedges of hibiscus and oleander. Mostly unobtrusive houses with low porches extending to the cliffs' edges, where the sea spray could leap upward when crashing on the rocks, became visible as he swam along. Soon he saw Mr. Ramkumar's property, the faded green roof of the house behind the tall palms that hovered above the cove's cliff. He angled slightly to the right, away from the rocky shore, hoping to glimpse the cove-beach, wondering if the house was occupied. It had been a while since he'd swum out here and spent time at Ramkumar's cove. He had never dared climb the wooden stairs to the house, however: that was a chance he was not willing to take with properties he'd heard were well secured, or even not. Nathan only dallied on the beaches.

Then Nathan Jones saw a disquieting apparition in the light of the early afternoon. Whatever it was seemed to form out of the air and violet-rich light beyond the cove. The object, if it were such, floated low over the sea to the north. It made no sound. The non-religious aspect of the thing didn't trouble him: the Black Virgin of Toco had explained the infinite forms of the Creator. The thing looked like a drone of some kind to Nathan, but one made entirely of light that spun in circles at all angles equidistant from its center, an extreme blue unaffected by the rotations of light. The spinning colours were a denser version of the violet light everywhere. The thing had an unsettling yet non-threatening beauty; and at times it seemed to change in size, as if moving rapidly back and forth linearly to Nathan's position. He thought it might be conscious. He kept swimming. Within half a minute he saw someone on the beach ahead and slightly to his left. The person seemed unaware of the thing just above the sea, then he realized why: it was much further to the north than he'd thought.

He felt an overwhelming and sudden desire to connect with another human being. Nathan shouted as loud as he could, "Heyo!" and continued to swim, increasing his speed a bit and wondering if he should swim to the cove where the person stood still, as if becoming aware of the thing. Within minutes he decided to enter the cove and make contact with the person, and explain, as best he could, what the apparition meant.

Nathan veered nearer the coast, to stand and rest in the water before calling again and going to the person on the beach. He waited. The sky became stranger. The wind made brisk wavelets on the surface. He didn't want to startle the person who, now that he was closer, appeared to be a woman. Something about her gait was familiar. He tried not to think about it, but it was impossible.

He stood to his full height, cupped his hands around his mouth, and yelled.

"Sister!"

The woman on the beach looks anxiously to the southeast, to the end of the cove, beyond her towel and picnic arrangement, toward a bent man coming out of the water. The sea is a dark ultramarine. The entire sky is an otherworldly colour of violet tinged with red, the colour of event, announcement.

The woman's body is already turning back to the land – but her face remains transfixed on the man emerging from the water, his arms extended, palms up – to the cove's cliff edge where, at the top of a wooden staircase, two men are, one starting to make his way down the wooden stairs; he's middle-age and pointing to the sky. The other man, older, slimmer and grey-bearded, is waving both hands desperately at the woman.

There is an unusual object suspended above the coast; it resembles a massive cephalopod eye. There are numerous spinning coils of transparent dark-amber light around an undisturbed, immaculately blue center. The coils are helix-like, intersect each other and maintain a symmetry that is more beauty than power, though the latter, because the object is so fantastic, is undeniable.

As the eye lifts above the cove, the green-roofed house, the coconut palms and the forested hills behind the road, rising high enough to view the entire northeast part of the island, with the enormous gashes in the mountains where illegal quarrying and deforestation are underway, and the vast stretch of seascape to the south, the coastal site's human inhabitants become diminutive, while the expanding setting appears, the higher the eye continues to rise, infinitely purposeful.

There's an ancient beauty still visible, not as it once was, yet not too different. The eye when it was highest and far beyond the air was lured by the ever-widening sea, the primacy of blue water. The eye, for now, records the mysteries and pleasures of colour.