

Looking for My Homeland

I've always, for as long as I can remember, felt like an outsider, no matter where I'm standing. I've never fully felt like I *belonged* to any particular place or tribe. Members of my immediate family, even, at times, felt like strangers to me. When I was younger this was a source of great existential angst for me – who would stop me from throwing myself over the cliff, if I belonged to no one? (In high school Sartre and Camus were *everything* to me.) As I grew older, though, I wore my lack of belonging like a badge of honor – an authentic counter-culture progressive creative, such as I imagine myself to be, can only really at best belong to a loose coalition of other counter-culture progressives if he wishes to retain his authenticity. Still, I always believed (hoped?) that there was waiting for me a moment of connection, a moment of recognition, where I would stand among a people, in a place I had not yet visited or discovered, and think, “this is my tribe.” I would finally recognize this place as my home. In other words – I'm a hopeless romantic.

I had great hopes of finding my tribe when, a few summers ago, my mother, my sister and I took a trip to the Caribbean island of Barbados, where my family on both sides can trace our heritage back to the time of slavery. (I'm the first person in my family to be born off-island.) My husband Paulo – Guatemalan by birth but kinky San Francisco hippie by choice – tagged along (to the delight of my mother and sister – more on Paulo later).

The trip itself was a revelation, clarifying how little I really have in common with the average Barbadian – or Bajan, as the locals call themselves. I feel as if it's immediately obvious to any native that I don't belong there – I'm as foreign to 'real' Bajans as snow, or sentimentality. Though a scant 500 miles from the coast of the South American nation of Venezuela, Barbados reaches some 4,000 miles across the North Atlantic to manifest its kinship with The United Kingdom, the island's most recent colonizers. In my estimation, that kinship is most clearly expressed in the general attitudes of the average Bajan. It's as if they've taken that emotional coolness for which the British are renowned, and let it congeal and harden until you couldn't cut through those layers of iciness with a chainsaw. I felt it most articulately in our typical interactions with merchants and workers in the service industry – wait staff and the like. I'm sure that the staffs of the island's numerous five-star hotels are trained to express their absolute pleasure to serve tourists (after all, tourism is the top income-generating industry in Barbados) and to smile until their lips are stretched almost back to their ears. I'm talking more about folks in your average restaurant or market. I remember when my husband and I marveled at a local fruit stand with a mountain of avocados that, instead of the expected green, were a deep, brilliant burgundy, a stunning shade of red, we felt. These weren't available stateside, as far as we knew, and we decided to buy some, if only to see whether they tasted any different from the avocados we were used to.

"I'd like to buy two of these beautiful red avocados," Paulo said, smiling at the unpleasant-looking woman who ran the stand.

"They're not *red* avocados," the woman said, clearly irritated. "They're just avocados."

Neither of us had been expecting at that moment to be chastised by our salesperson, and certainly not for something so trivial that it did not seem to rise to the level of an actual offense.

“How much?” Paulo asked, smile fading.

As we walked away we mulled over appropriately snarky comebacks we *should* have launched her way.

“So, you find rudeness to be an effective sales technique, then?”

“What’s wrong in your life that makes you feel the need to lash out so?”

“Well, what color would *you* call it, sweetie?”

(We generally attached a “sweetie” at the end of each burn. We felt it added just the right amount of smug condescension.)

On a different occasion, my sister and I visited a local ice cream parlor, and were served by the sullen young teen behind the counter in near-absolute silence. I feel it best to present the scene thus; for the purposes of this scene, my sister will be identified as (obviously) "Sister," I will be identified as “Brother,” and the young teen will be identified as “Icylene.”

SCENE:

INTERIOR: an ice cream parlor. The door opens – enter a plump American woman (SISTER), well dressed, in her late forties or early fifties. She’s accompanied by her brother (BROTHER), chubby himself, possibly a few years younger and exponentially shabbier in presentation – he’s wearing flip flops, faded gray cargo shorts, and a white “Vote for Pedro” tee shirt well-stretched at the neck and sleeves. Brother and Sister approach the counter, behind which a sullen shop girl (ICYLENE) stands.

SISTER: (addressing Icykene) Good afternoon.

ICYLENE: (staring wordlessly back at Sister) ...

SISTER: ...

ICYLENE: ...

SISTER: ...

ICYLENE: ...

SISTER: (turns to Brother) Do you think she’s a mute, or...?

BROTHER: I think she’s just waiting for you to order.

SISTER: Oh, I see. I couldn't tell. When I walk into a store I'm used to having my greeting acknowledged with a similar greeting in return. Or at least a "hurry up and order bitch." You know, *something*. (Sighs) Okay, I'll have a small rum raisin please. What are you getting, Brother?

BROTHER: At this point I find it safest not to order.

The only words Icylene uttered during the entire transaction were "nineteen dollars" (the exchange rate from Barbados to U.S. currency is two to one, for those wondering exactly how expensive that ice cream was).

Of course, most teens are sullen, I suppose.

One more example: one afternoon, we all – my mother, my sister, Paulo and I – went to lunch with Sherman, my sister's local 'friend.' (That's how my sister introduced him, although clearly, they were fucking and she's been to visit him yearly since, but that's not the point of *this* story.) We 'discovered' a local beachside dive – you know the type of place, dingy fishing nets, rusted out anchors and colorfully painted life preservers on the walls – tucked between two internationally known brand-name hotel properties. We sat down at the closest available table to the water, because when you're at a beachside dive, that's the table you choose. It hadn't been bussed yet. No worries – I started to meticulously stack the plates and cups (if you don't understand that this is an art, then I feel sorry for you) and wipe down the table with a clean couple of napkins I had in my

pocket. As the woman I presumed would be our waitress approached, I continued. Being helpful didn't seem to me – at the time – to be an insult.

“What are you doing?” My mother tried, unsuccessfully, to warn me (although I did not recognize it then as such). “Let the lady do her job.” Clearly, my mother sensed something I did not. Whether it stems from their shared womanhood, or shared Bajan-ness, or something else entirely, I do not know. Regardless, my mother somehow was aware that I was over-stepping.

I was myself, however, completely *unaware*. “She won't mind,” I said cheerfully, while wiping up the last of the beer-bottle sweat rings. “I'm being helpful.”

“I'm not a SHE!” the woman snapped. “I have a *name*.”

I was, this time, much closer to stunned. Although, to be fair, by this point I was less stunned at the *fact* of the occurrence, and more stunned by its ferocity.

“...But you haven't told us your name yet,” my sister said, softly, calmly as one might say to a man holding a gun to the head of a hostage.

The woman snatched up my architecturally assembled pile of dishes and stomped off.

“Maybe “she” isn't his or their preferred pronoun,” Paulo suggested. Did I mention – San Francisco? Hippie? Kinky?

In retrospect, it's doubtful that I could ever have truly 'belonged' in this place. Homosexual acts are illegal in Barbados, where the offense can carry up to a life sentence. Wikipedia and other sources will tell you that these laws are rarely enforced – as if this fact offers some level of consolation. What these sources will not tell you is that, while no one may receive a life sentence for engaging in same-sex activity, persons – in particular men – who've been caught in compromising positions with others of the same sex (sometimes in public, sometimes in their own or other folks' homes) have in been assaulted, arrested, had their names and photos published in the island's newspapers, and generally been subjected to such humiliation and harassment that they've had no choice but to leave the only homes they've known.

I was at first quite reluctant to make the trip to Barbados. Paulo, my husband, is a very emotional, expressive, and affectionate person. He takes no heed of where he is when it strikes him to express his affection. I've had, for example, to ask him not be quite so expressive in professional settings, and he's grudgingly accommodated me in this respect with minimal pushback. This, however, still leaves him many public places to 'express' himself, such as the grocery store; more than one church; a local IRS tax office, once (he rubbed my thigh as an assistance officer explained the implications of married filing separately); in front of his family and mine; and in front of a host of strangers, including, since we travel so much, dozens if not hundreds of airport and airline officials.

I suspect that my mother, without saying as much, had been apprehensive as well. She had throughout our trip been tirelessly on guard against Paulo and me being offended by her "Pentecostal" relatives and old friends on the island. More

than once during the trip she suggested that we wouldn't want to meet this or that person because they weren't really "modern" in their viewpoint.

What really bothered me wasn't so much the idea of being arrested – it was having to ask Paulo to temper who he naturally is. But none of this really seemed to bother Paulo. He's easy like Sunday morning, as the song goes. This may be why my mother now, I am convinced, prefers my husband's company to mine. (She will deny this but I swear it's true.) Paulo is the son my mother *wishes* she had raised. Paulo still holds doors and offers women of a certain age his arm when they are crossing the street or stepping out of a car; he'll listen to my mother's stories of the 'good old days back home' into the wee hours of the morning, long after I've quit and gone to bed; and unlike me, he can match her drink for drink (brandy for brandy, to be specific) without getting (too) tipsy.

This – the close relationship between my husband and my mother – is, for me, ever the introvert seeking his quiet time...miraculous. It's a God-send. Should my dear husband ever seek to divorce me, the most immediate and devastating consequence for my life would be the increase in the frequency and length of conversations with my mother. Who I love dearly.

It's this relationship between Paulo and my mother to which I attribute the single most stunning event of our three-week trip.

One evening, after a day of exploring the island, when Paulo and I were returning to the cute little vacation rental we were all sharing, my mother, having seen us coming from the front veranda, came down the road a ways to meet us. Her cousin, she informed us as we walked together toward the cottage, had dropped by, unannounced, for a visit. She was one of these 'Pentecostal' Christians, attended

church four or five times a week, spent huge sums on missions to Africa, the whole deal. Not very ‘modern’ in her thinking at all. My mother, therefore, would *completely* understand if we didn’t want to sit and chat with her while said cousin was visiting.

“Got it,” we said. Paulo and I have no need to force any of my mother’s age cohort into the twenty-first century. We’ve got far better things to do with our time. Like lay on the bed under the air conditioning and crack open that bottle of spiced rum we picked up on the way home. This is exactly what we intended to do – and after we reached the cottage, and my mother introduced Paulo to my cousin as ‘a family friend,’ we headed into our bedroom, an air-conditioned slice of heaven, to drink, to sleep, perchance to dream.

Our reverie was interrupted by a knock at our bedroom door. “Can you come out onto the veranda with me, please?” my mother asked.

“Which one of us?” I asked – though only to be civil. I assumed she was asking for Paulo. She should know better by now than to think I wanted to sit with her and her outdated cousin. I wasn’t nearly genteel enough for that foolishness.

“Both of you,” she said.

Inwardly, I groaned. If my dear sweet mother decided that we needed to be sociable, it’s not like I could refuse her request without being an ungrateful son. Even though I paid for the *entire* trip. (I’ve been waiting to work that in.)

We followed her – me, shoulders slumped, sullen – to the veranda.

“Cousin,” my mother said, gesturing toward Paulo, “I’m afraid I wasn’t clear about who this is. This is my son’s partner, my son-in-law, basically.”

The Cousin’s polite smile grew instantly into a wide grin – whether overcompensating the nervousness or horror she felt, or thrilling at the choice family gossip to which she now was privy, I’m not sure. In any case, she managed to stumble her way through a “h-h-h-how lovely!” before my mother excused Paulo and me.

Later, after my mother’s cousin had left, Paulo told my mother, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” my mother insisted. “I felt terrible. I wouldn’t ever want you to think that you’re anything less than a full member of this family and I love you like I love my own children. I wanted to make sure you knew that.”

My emotional, expressive husband somehow managed the monumentality of this moment with a simple “I know, Mommy” (that’s what he calls her), a smile, and a squeeze of her arm.

I however, excused myself – I had to use the bathroom, I told them. I turned on the faucet to full blast. I hope it masked the sound of my tears. I had a loud, messy cry. At that moment, for once, I felt like I knew where – or at least with whom – I belonged.

Why is it *always* in the last place you look?