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The Jamoon Tree

Cyril Dabydeen

Humming noises, like a constant whirring; and Dularie is going to some place far, the villagers say. “Why?” asks another dourly. “Really why?” snickers yet another. Dularie’s long hair goes down to her waist and her eyes keep moving left and right, as they look at her; and the Atlantic’s waves roll not far from the village in this way-beyondness of things. Now let those in Europe and America, people with strange-sounding names like Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene think about it.

Will they?

Dularie knits her eyelashes as the ocean’s breakers come closer.

“Oh, why?” asks someone else.

“Why...what?”

That evening Dularie turns in her sleep, fretting and humming to herself. And her ma and pa are not sure what to make of her. “*Obeah* is wha’ dem people *put* pon she,” cries her ma, throwing up her hands. “Blasted obeah, eh?” scowls her pa with an answer. Not Dutch-people’s obeah—people from the sugar plantation—which is more dreadful than African people obeah? A clamour of voices everywhere. And the Dutch were the first to come to these shores: the same who built forts, dams and canals, and who ran the sugar plantations in Berbice and Demerara most of all.

“But African people obeah come from de place called Dahomey,” cries yet another. “More powerful, eh?” asks someone else.

Children also fret among themselves and point to Dularie walking along, so steadfast. Now she must be *jharayed*—exorcised—they all say.

Really that?

Custom and tradition mixed with fear among these mostly Hindu people: as India inexorably comes closer. Muslims among them also keep coming closer, see. As Dularie shakes her head...indeed steadfastly moving along. *But going where?*

The sound of the last ship coming, a ghost ship from the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal, it seems,, as the pundit reads from his Ramayana in a sonorous tone. *Ohm...Ohhhmm.*

Dularie tightens her long hair into a knot and walks faster. Sixteen going on to seventeen she is, and her breasts are taut; and she’s now full-eye, some say. Time for her to get married! But immediately the wayward village youths start laughing. *Who will marry Dularie, a walkabout as she is?*

“True-true, a real walkabout,” hisses another.

Jasmine and neem aromas fill the air amidst cow-dung smells. Mangrove and courida rustle their leaves, the trade winds blowing hard. Coconut trees sway their branches, and one branch falls with a resounding *spllashh!* Houses on stilts rattle at their beams, and zinc sheets topping the houses also rattle. Dularie doesn’t want to listen to anything anymore as she claps her hands to her ears, then twists her body as her muscles start to burn.

Rain starts falling, and her hair becomes wet-wet. She must hurry to find shelter under a tall jamoon tree not far from the village houses, like her only place of refuge...or sanctuary. *Really there?* Black-and brownish jamoon berries hang in clusters close to a long wasps’ nest that Dularie looks at. One particular bunch of berries comes within her reach; oh, she keeps

staring at it. The rain stops after a while, save for small drops forming a drizzle. Will the Eumenides now look at Dularie?

Who...really?

She stamps her feet. "Stop lookin' at me like dat!"

Is madness, eh?

Indeed she's full-eye now; and the suitors point to her with accusing fingers. Ramdass, Joshi, Rohit with their bawdy noises filling the air...their sense of romance in a long night! Stiff bodies filled with blood as they flex their muscles. But Dularie focusses on the berries; and the waves keep rolling, the tide ebbing and flowing. Suddenly the wasps dart out, zig-zagging. More religious chants also come to her ears, from a distant yet close-up place; as her ma and pa seethe. And the Ganges...how really far away is it? Imagine the moon hanging low, making the world appear smaller than it really is: as she thinks of the stars like Saturn, Mars, Jupiter. Now can the astrologers really tell when is the auspicious moment? *Who will marry Dularie?*

Louder the wasps buzz in her ears. Dularie starts mimicking, it seems like, as she wears mascara and lipstick like girls on the cover of fashion magazines that the travel writers ponder about. The jamoon berries form thick clusters. Will the wasps charge at her? *Let the Eumenides tell.*

"Hey,Dularie, is who goin' marry you?"

"Dular...Dularie!"

"Is it me? Heh-heh-heh!"

Instantly she plucks a jamoon berry and puts into her mouth. Oh, the juice drips down to her chin, staining it purple...as more suitors fantasize fastening their legs between her thighs. *Who will want to marry yuh, eh?* And her face starts changing colour, as she closes her eyes. Could any Dutch-man come from a ghost-ship want to marry her?

Who's asking, not telling?

The waves roll higher. Dularie starts walking again along her beaten path, and more suitors call out to her and indulge their love-making fantasy. "Dularie! Dularie!" The seagulls also call out. An albatross, then a kingfisher, swoops down low. Sailors listen when the ship's foghorn noise deafens. *What...really?*

Turkey vultures circle about the royal palm trees as the village teeters, houses on stilts walking away, if more imaginary than real. Now will another ship come to unload its cargo? *A slave ship?* The foghorn noise grows...louder. Really a ghost ship? Dularie's ma and pa insist she must be jharayed...exorcized.

All that the Eumenides tell from long ago!

One particular youth appears, like someone she's been expecting all along: someone from the slave ship, he seems, And in his line of vision are distances travelled by the likes of Odysseus, note well; and where's Ithaca? The Aegean Sea...how really far away? Not the Arabian Sea anymore? Dularie keeps thinking what the astrologer will say about when's the auspicious time. In the village the pundit's chants echo...as Dularie looks more *full-eye*. But she stands her ground: she will have none of the suitors from the village, which the Eumenides already know from long ago: from the time of Alexander the Great who'd indeed travelled to the north coast of India. Now how really far away is the Indus from the Guyana coast?

The jamoon juice trickles down Dularie's chin with a dark hue, like a shadow.

Hallucinatory time...as the youth from the slave ship beckons. "Who're yuh?" Dularie asks.

"Who...am...I?"

"Yes, who?" Then, "Why d'you come here?"

The wasps keep circling. And hair scatters about Dularie's face, like a mirage. "You really come from across de ocean?"

The youth smiles, and his dreadlocks hang conspicuously.

Dularie's suddenly afraid. Imagine her ma and pa invoking the Mahadevi-Durga, if not Kali, the destroyer. And what does this youth come from Dahomey really know? Who will want to invoke a Greek goddess named Diana...or Cassandra? Vultures hop on the ground in a strange rhythm. Dessicated palm tree branches emit an ancient smell coming from desert as if from the time of Egypt's Tutankhamun.

Such a miasma! *Who really knows?*

She will bring a curse on the village; and it's not natural for her visage to change overnight, she who was once so fair. Who's really asking? Dularie's pa makes a scoffing noise; as her ma silently cries. But Alexander the Great and his warriors start fleeing the Indian coast, just as Hector predicted. A mighty wind named Aeolus blows harder.

Now the village children call out in their sleep: "Mad, mad!"

The one youth from the slave ship keeps dogging Dularie's path, indeed. A Dutch captain's voice Dularie also hears; and the sugar plantation is indeed all. Jamoon berries are veritable wasps flying about her face. *Black-black.*

The youth from the slave ship studies her footprints...on the hard ground, and he follows her path step by step; then he stretches out a hand to her...on the close-up coastal ground. And does Dularie still need to be exorcized? *Who's really asking?*

The youth's heart gladdens, how he never felt before: never on a slave ship! More waves threaten to overwhelm the village. But Dularie only wants to go to a distant place...where the travel writers come from.

Really...there? Her ma and pa moan louder. Imagine, eh? The pundit spreads ghee on sandalwood which burns and the smell crinkles everyone's nostrils, worshippers all. *Who believes...what?*

Now hand-in-hand Dularie and the youth walk towards the sea, the waves and breakers accompanying them in high tide...then, comes low tide; and their hearts beat faster. The moon comes down low-low, like a miracle. And the jamoon's sweet-tasting...as never before.

Dularie feels a strange tremor in her breast when the youth tightens his grip, his hand in hers. *Going...where?*

The villagers begin to think Dularie never existed...has never been among them. It's what the children say in their sleep; and one or two start walking from one end of the village to another and pretend being Dularie...mimicking her like a game they're now playing.

"Mad! Mad!" voices call out.

Others pretend to be real suitors, their own hearts beating faster; and they will go near the jamoon tree to see if the wasps are still there.

But whirring noises only they hear, ah. A shadow lengthens out...growing longer. *Who...what?* And some villagers ask how really far away is the Corentyne Coast from the Arabian Sea—like what the travel-writers will keep writing about. And maybe other ships will come, now more than an imaginary Dutch ship.

Not another slave ship?

Only the Eumenides will know because of the one named Homer will keep writing his Odysseus fable. Now who indeed needs to be exorcised, if not the entire village? Indeed the astrologer hopes for a genuine auspicious moment, you see...in his own tremor.

Who can really tell: who...from so long ago with time passing, if only what the travel writers will cogitate and write about with their long memory? What perhaps only the Eumenides know...as waves keep beating; and as she and her escort from the slave ship walk into the water and the foghorn noise comes again, sounding louder.

Indeed, there's nowhere else to go, despite a far distance as the jamoon tree rustles its leaves, and the wasps fly about once more—what the villagers will never truly know, and only the Eumenides can tell...from long ago.
