

Been around the world: Moss Side, Jamaica and back

Linda Brogan

In 1973 when I was 14 my dad sent me to Jamaica. It was £99. My Irish mum, Jamaican dad, brother and three sisters came with me to Manchester airport. I had a sign around my neck so the air stewardesses would know who I am. They sat me at the back of the plane to keep an eye on me. As we crossed the ocean I began to cry. It got worse when the sky was engulfed in a fiery red sunset.

The plane landed. There were black people with thick unfathomable accents everywhere. I thought my dad's was bad.

'She look like him dough, Bas.'

'She favour him well.'

'See de nose, see de nose der.'

One woman stuck out above the rest. She took control of me. 'Come here so.'

She didn't pull my face this way and that to catch the light. She was dignified, like my dad. Her Sunday best outfit wasn't covered with flowers or fruit. Her hands looked like mine, like his. She was his eldest sister. Adlyn. I got in the back of a car with her. The cars set off up the mountain. The mountain was steep. The car had three wheels. There was a foot, if that, of dirt road beside the car. Beside that was a sheer drop. The car had three wheels. The driver kept looking back. 'Me raaase, how she favour him dough.' My aunt didn't talk. We arrived at her house. A shack. But hers wasn't silvering. Her husband John was the local carpenter. Adlyn's house was varnished from tip to toe. Both bedrooms. There was no kitchen. No bathroom. There was no taps. There was a pass-through, onto the balcony,

that served as the living room. There was his chair, and her chair, and a view to die for. I nearly died. Over the Blue Mountains, as far as the eye could see, were stars. I don't mean piddling little far-away stars, like the Mancunian stars I was staring at the night my dad died in 2003. But huge stars: like rips in bed sheets with a light pouring through. Terrifying stars. Unnatural stars. Fucking frightening stars. It all got worse. All the St Elizabethans who couldn't fit in the caravan of cars that came to meet me were surrounding me now.

'She favour him dough.'

'Watch her nose.'

'Look at her han''

"Watch how she walk.'

'Apart from gal she gal, me would a t'ought him a 'tand der.'

It went on all night. The face pulling. The hand examining. 'Walk make me see you walk.' The kerosene smell of the lamps. The tiny strange lights all around me. The laughing. The white rum. The stars. The cooking on rock-stones. The terrifying stars. The bats on my bedroom ceiling as huge as cats. The terror. The crying. The begging to go home. Not out loud. I was well aware that Adlyn would show no comfort.

In the morning when I woke, the clothes I had on the night before were hanging washed by Adlyn on the boulders at the back of the garden. In front of me was a laden table. Steaming milo. Huge tomatoes. Corn bread. I can smell them as I write. It was abundant: like the view. Lush. As far as the eye could see: like an infinity pool, Adlyn's kitchen garden that grew everything I was about to eat dropped away into the Blue Mountains. I ate alone, listening to Jimmy Cliff and Johnny Nash on the cassette recorder I had brought with me. I smiled just now thinking of it.

Adlyn and my dad's next sister, Chickita – I was almost called Chickita, but my mum thought it was too black – took me to see my nana. She looked

at me, then carried on with her own business, carrying her washing on her head down the hill to Black River. There was a rumour she was 96. Her tiny bent body. Her waist-length grey plait. 'She has hair down to here so,' my dad always said. He wasn't lying. 'Her poppa a Scottish man, McDonald, white, silver hair to here so.' I could see it now: she was about the same colour as me. She looked at me, put her basket on her head, and began the trek that I would never master without stumbling. Her bed piled high like the Princess and the Pea already, I left the lemon blanket my dad had instructed my mum to buy on Alec Road and had personally packed into my suitcase, and the batteries for her radio. He sent no message of love, though he hadn't seen her since 1957. Her one-room shack was silvering. Not a drop of varnish.

Ma' Country's son, Trevor, the manager of his dad's store, had one arm, beautiful caramel skin, and beautiful short sleeve shirts – especially his pale blue one that matched his pale blue eyes. On their porch were the sacks of rice, sugar, flour, the reins for mules, the shovels; inside was the finer things, think *Little House on the Prairie*. Out back were the drums and the white rum on Saturday night. Adlyn and Chickita would kick up their heels. Chickita would be back in knee bandages on Sunday for the Lord to take her. 'Take me, take me, take me, Lord!' I was upset He never took me. But I never dared drop to my knees in the aisle and demand it. My granddad was buried in the picket-fence churchyard. 'A dark man, big as that door.'

'T'ump her, Des. Lick her down. Make her fart.' Me and all my cousins would tune in on weekday evenings on nana's porch. Nana would keep the radio to herself on the other side of her silvered, warped shutters.

'Cut it der so. Der so now.' I lifted the machete. And whacked it down. One stroke and the head stayed on the flat rock. But the chicken's body kept running. Them all laughing when I scream. Them all laughing when I can't reach the oranges on the tree. When Ida makes the cow's eye jump before

adding it to the potion for Chickita's knees.

Adlyn and Chickita in dark Victorian dress on Montego Bay flat yellow beach. Adlyn cutting ganga from the doorstep bush to steep in the bay rum for the cattle ticks that are eating me alive. The fruit bat's steps are rhythmic. He doesn't care about me. The strange lights are fireflies. We catch them in jars to light the porch when Des is t'umping Lurleen tonight, after we've eaten from the individual duchy pots that were placed on the rock-stone circles at noon in the circle of individual shacks. I'm middle class. Adlyn's shack is varnished. Her husband Ma' John is the carpenter. She is the seamstress. He is calm and patient. She is stern and school ma'am-ish. She wears flowered dresses, and broke down men's boots. Pretty Chickita has been loved by many, only her arthritic knees stop her now. You've heard the saying, she could dress in a bin liner: that is Chickita. *Her* flowered dresses lie beautifully over her slight body. Whereas Adlyn's cling to every line of her bulky frame. They look like my two sisters. Exactly like my two sisters. I know where I come from. Then one day I am passing along the dirt road to Pisgah when a tall stately woman in her Sunday best street clothes stops to hold out her hand. 'I'm Mrs Samuels.' She's nothing like I imagined her. Five minutes before, I thought my dad was, I thought my dad was, these people were, I thought I was these people. But this is a church lady: a really respectable church lady. The woman my dad left to be with my mum. His wife. The woman who he built a house for, and their six pickney. My dad built a house? My dad couldn't even build a fucking coffee table. It had seven-foot legs. 'Wobbles when you look at it never mind lean on it.' One of my mum's classics. She isn't hating me, like my mum hates her. She isn't. She isn't doing anything. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance.' She doesn't press me for any details. She doesn't hate me like my mum hates her. She

moves past. She carries on her way, away from Pisgah post office. I pick up my mail. My mum has written to me as promised. She wants to know how them lot are treating me.

I will say in my mum's defence that every week she filled out and sent their £5 postal order because my dad couldn't read or write. 'You didn't look back at us,' she screams, drunk in Manchester airport at 9am. Only she has come to meet me. Dad has gone to work, my brothers and sisters to school. 'What did she look like then?' I didn't say it, though I wasn't above it; I loved torturing her back then. I think I was trying to hold onto the peace I had achieved living four weeks in paradise. My eyes were red raw with crying 'cos I didn't want to come back. I'd just checked them, and my tan, in the airport bathroom. The only thing I could have said was, 'She was a decent woman, mum, unlike you.' 'What?' she screams at the man trying to pass us to get to his taxi. She's looking at me suspiciously. She knows I have been friends with them. I have betrayed her. I have sold her out. 'You've always been sly just like him.'

Oh, it got worse. She travels back and forth to the corner off licence all day long. By the time he gets in she is no longer hiding the Guinness bottles. 'You fucking black illiterate cunt.' He takes his radio and extra batteries and locks himself in his bedroom. Around 8 o'clock, Julie of the white MG, with spoke wheels, bars my mum from her off licence. 'You've had enough, Peggy.'

'I've had enough, have I?'

'Mum's fighting with Julie.'

'Mum's fighting with Julie.'

They're rolling around outside Julie's handmade shop. I wade in. Now I'm fighting with Julie, the woman who wielded a hammer to mend her

own roof. I have to win the fight 'cos I'm a Moss Side girl. I have to win this fight. I'm winning the fight. Mum is ripping off Julie's girlfriend's top, scratching her tits. They are never gonna give me my job back tomorrow. We're up off the floor. Julie has to save Elaine.

'You dirty lesbian bastard. You should be ashamed.'

It's my mum who is ashamed. She left her four Irish kids to be with my dad. A genuine love story: I remember watching them, through the bars of my cot, smooch in the square of moonlight streaming through the tall Georgian windows of our one room in Grafton Street, Chorlton On Medlock. The world didn't judge him the same when he left his six.

'You have to do better because you are half black,' she would drum into me.

Okay. Since 2000, I've been a professional playwright, resident in the National Theatre, then Contact Theatre. 2005 my first play was produced at the Royal Court and published by Methuen. You can't do better than that. Major theatres across the country have produced my plays. My last in 2010 did a critically acclaimed 4* national tour, and won an Edinburgh Fringe First. You can't do better than that. 2016 I collect Reno memoirs – a legendary funk and soul, cellar club in Moss Side, heyday 1971 to 1981, predominately populated by 'half-caste' people. 2017 we actually excavate the Reno. 2018 we are finalist in eight national awards. 2019 the Reno is resident for a whole year in the Whitworth Art Gallery. No community venture has ever done better than that. November 2019 I win Outstanding Contribution to Manchester Culture Award. And still someone wants to label me the help in John Lewis. Even though I am wearing a truly stylish floor length Laura Ashley denim dress.

Linda Brogan

Linda Brogan is a multi-award-winning playwright. She has been Writer in Residence at the National Theatre, Contact Theatre, Askham Grange Prison, and the Whitworth Art Gallery. Her recent work has concentrated on the Reno, a legendary 1970s funk and soul club in Moss Side Manchester, predominantly populated by 'half-caste' people born into the 1950s of 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs', and stigmatized by the 1930s Fletcher Report – 'offspring of interracial relationships are born with mental and physical defects'. As a recipient of three consecutive Arts Council England grants, in 2016 Linda collected Reno memoirs; 2017 she excavated the Reno; and in 2018 *Excavating the Reno* was a finalist in eight national awards. In 2019/2020, as *The Reno @The Whitworth*, Linda exhibited the Reno memoirs, artefacts, and teen photo montage in the Whitworth Art Gallery, and was awarded Manchester City Council's Outstanding Contribution to Manchester Culture Award. Currently she is working on *The Reno @Manchester International Festival* for 2022.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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