

HER
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NAME

Edited by
Pamela Mordecai
and Betty Wilson



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Heinemann Educational Books (Caribbean) Ltd
175 Mountain View Avenue, Kingston 6, Jamaica

LONDON EDINBURGH MELBOURNE
SYDNEY AUCKLAND SINGAPORE MADRID

© Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson 1989
First published in the Caribbean Writers Series in 1989

Her true-name. - (Caribbean writers series)
1. Fiction in French Caribbean Writers, 1945 - Critical Studies.

I. Mordecai, Pamela II. Wilson, Elizabeth

III. Series

843

ISBN 0-435-98906-5

Photocet by Wilmaset, Birkenhead, Wirral
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire
89 90 91 92 93 94 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library
University of Warwick

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ARE YOU UNFORGETTABLE?
A MAGIC FORMULA TO LOSE WEIGHT WITHOUT DIETING
TRUMP! SEXUALLY WITH YOUR HUSBAND
PRINCESS LEE RADZWILL'S PERFECT DINING ROOM
INSIDE THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF ALBA'S HOME

The settings of dreams began to appear in the glittering photographs. A growing sense of lassitude forced her to lie down on the drab sofa. All of a sudden she burst into that house of wonders and little by little felt a surprising transformation as the rooms grew larger, the lights brighter, as she discovered — what a wondrous thing! — the cushiony depth of an armchair, the fine carvings of a sideboard, the pure whiteness of embroidered linen draperies, the warm hues of a plush rug. . . . She went from one room to the next listening in rapture to the swelling sounds of a regal waltz; she dreamed herself a duchess in this new forest of tapestries inhabited by nymphs pursued by satyrs, winged horses and unicorns; she admired herself in quicksilver mirrors, which, facing each other, multiplied to infinity the misty vases filled to overflowing with so many azaleas, lilies, hydrangeas, heliotropes and roses.

Oh! how she would have liked to prolong indefinitely her giddy wandering among the Limoges porcelain, madly piled on heavy mahogany sideboards, to continue to whirl gracefully around the dusky piano, reflected in melancholic bevelled mirrors, to stroke the velvet cushions, the crystal and the shining silverware, to admire the blackened roasting trays laden with pheasants and quails. . . . Yes, she would have loved to return to the dining-room, pausing on the way in the picture gallery, where beautiful harlequins showed off their carnival clothes and timeless still-lives slept their peaceful siestas. Oh! To be able to reach the Victorian-style dining-table without disturbing that roundly perfect moment in the slightest! She would have sat down discreetly with the condescending amiability, the cool deference of a Parisian model, tinged with a sadness that was skilfully heightened by a dark dress and a seemingly careless hairstyle. She would have been wryly amused by contemplating the extravagant display of silver candelabra and sumptuous china; she would have witnessed the ceremonious procession of trays laden with fowl splendidly dressed in artfully prepared sauces; she would have feasted her eyes on the profiferoles, the pastries, the fillings of truffles and brandy.

But she never reached the table. . . . The appalling ventilation forced her to get up; she came out of the dream unwillingly, gathered her bundle of magazines and clippings, and headed for the kitchen. She spread the most appealing recipes on the pink formica top, and painstakingly set

herself to read the list of ingredients for succulent sauces. It was like fishing in the troubled waters of thousands of words of all sizes and colours, exotic spices which slid like eels between her busy fingers, fragrant herbs which reminded her, she didn't know why, of the plant-life of distant shores, sensual condiments, the mere sound of which aroused sleepy calphs and maharajas. Such a lustful profusion of names — *tarragonscamfomnaniscurmerawaycardaoregano* — struggling to attach themselves to her memory, overwhelmed her, leaving her with the terrible inadequate feeling she had so often felt during the thirty-six years of her life. But no. She had to overcome her foolish inhibitions and dare to explore those foreign aromas, she had to be capable of achieving the subtle nuances of taste, the magic alloy of herbs and spices, the happy delivery of meats dripping with voluptuous nectars. Resolved to take stock of her provisions, she opened the cupboard doors. Her eyes glided in a hopeless pilgrimage past the cans of symmetrically-lined Campbell's soups, past the cans of tomato sauce and beans cooked in water and salt. She turned around, quickly gathered together the magazines, and closing her eyes for an instant, she saw Doris, plump-checked and double-chinned, inspecting the freshly-set table with open gule, and Paco, now leaning towards you, softly stroking his moustache — an Arturo-dé-Córdoba gesture that still bewitches you — especially as he whispers to you: 'What marvellous succulent beans!'

Suddenly you burst out laughing as you throw the magazines into the bin one by one, repeating to yourself the newly discovered refrain: 'You fool, you perfect fool!'

Translated by Elizabeth Paravisini
From the collection *Virgenes y mártires*.

Ana Lydia Vega

Ana Lydia Vega was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1946. Currently Professor of French and Caribbean Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, Ana Lydia Vega is also one of Puerto Rico's best-known writers. Educated in Puerto Rico and in France, Vega holds a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Provence. She has written numerous reviews, articles, essays and a foreign language

textbook as well as fiction: children's literature, a film script and the short stories for which she is so well known. Vega is fluent in English and French, as well as her native Spanish. Her work is characterised by an innovative and liberating use of language: she mixes metaphors, registers, colloquialisms and classical allusions, slides between linguistic codes, even switches languages mid-sentence, with exciting and challenging effect.

Her works include the prize-winning *Virgenes y mártires* (*Virgins and martyrs*: Editorial Antillana, Puerto Rico, 1981), co-authored with Carmen Lago Filippi won the P.E.N. Club of Puerto Rico National Literature Prize Short Story category, 1982. Another collection of stories, *Encancaramblado y Otros CuENTOS de Naufragio* (*Cloud cover and other stories of shipwreck*) won the prestigious Casa de las Américas prize in 1982 as well as the P.E.N. Club of Puerto Rico award for 1983. Her short story 'Pasión de Historia' won the Juan Rulfo International Short Fiction Prize in 1984. A third collection of short stories, *Pasión de Historia y Otras Historias de Pasión*, was published in 1987 (Buenos Aires, Argentina, Ediciones de la Flor). In 1985 Vega was named author of the year by the Casa del Autor Puertorriqueño.

Ana Lydia Vega's works reflect a preoccupation with the struggle for women's rights and human rights in general and a commitment to exposing exploitation and oppression. Her stories also address the question of Puerto Rican and Caribbean cultural identity. With satire, wit and humour, Vega continues to challenge the canon and bring new dimensions to the Caribbean vision.

Cloud Cover Caribbean

September, the agent provocateur of hurricanes, has declared war, filling the seas with urchins and men o'war. A suspicious breeze swells the guayabera, makeshift sail for this makeshift vessel. The sky is a conga drum stretched tight for a bembé ceremony.

An ugly thing, this muscled arm of sea that separates Antenor from the pursuit of happiness. Compared to the real dangers lurking, the sharks are no more than a pimple on a mosquito's ass. But Antenor must pull through. This is his second day deep in monotonous waves that seem to roll down from the clouds. Since leaving Haiti he has not sighted so much as a fishing boat. It is like playing the discoverer while secretly wondering if the world really is round. Any minute now, he might reach the edge and plunge headlong into the fabled chasms of the monsters. The putrid mangos, emblems of diarrhoea and famine, the macoutes'

war-cries, the fear, the drought – all are behind him now. Seasickness and the threat of thirst once his meagre water rations run out – that is the here and now. For all the menace, this wretched sea adventure is a pleasure cruise compared to his memories of the island.

Antenor settled in beneath the sky's broiling cauldron. Between the boat's rocking mezenque and his own weary body he would have sunk into slumber like an island village, had it not been for the Dominican's shouts. You didn't have to know Spanish to understand that the man was shipwrecked and needed a hand. Antenor helped him aboard as best he could. As he did so, a mocking, derisive spirit, the type that lived in Caribbean trade winds, blew over the little skiff. It was so violent it nearly tipped the two men overboard. At last they managed to quell it. 'Thanks, brother,' the man from the Dominican Republic said, with a sigh of relief that moved the sail to pity.

The Haitian passed him the canteen, then almost had to tear it from his hands to keep him from gulping it down in one. After exchanging long looks, mutually impermeable words and exhausting gestures, they reached the cheerful conclusion that Miami couldn't be far away. Then each told the other, without either understanding, what he was leaving behind – which was very little – and what he was seeking. They told of the endless pain of being black, Caribbean and poor; of deaths by the score; they cursed clergy, the military and civilians; established an international brotherhood of hunger, a solidarity of dreams. And as Antenor and the Dominican, whose name was Diogenes, a neoclassical baptismal flourish, reached the height of their bilingual ceremony, fresh cries rang out beneath the forbidding vault of the heavens.

The two raised their eyes to the waves, and there described the kinky hair of a Cuban, bobbing along beside the proverbial plank of the shipwrecked sailor.

'A house full of screaming kids, and now grandma has a baby,' Diogenes frowned. As if he had been born on the far side of the border river, the Haitian understood what he meant. Another passenger: another soul, another stomach, to be exact.

But the Cuban howled so mightily, and was so obviously from Santiago, that they yielded at last and pulled him aboard, muttering a quintessentially Caribbean 'what the fuck' as they did so, and the boat began to rumba.

Despite the urgency of the situation, the Cuban had the good sense to ask: 'You folks going to Miami?' before he grabbed the Dominican's hesitant hand.

The litany of woes started up again. Diogenes and Carmelo, for such was the name of the restless Cuban, raised an unearthly ruckus. From

time to time, Antenor chipped in with a meek *Mais oui*, or a *C'est ça*, when the fury of the moment seemed to call for it. But he was beginning to resent the monopoly the language of Cervantes was enjoying in a vessel which, destined for exile or not, was after all sailing under the Haitian flag.

With Diogenes as counterpoint, and with a discreet touch of Haitian maracas for backup, Carmelo related the misadventures which had driven him from the shores of the Greater Antilles.

'I'm telling you, my friend, it was work, work, work, day and night, no matter where you turned your head . . .'

'Hey, in Santo Domingo there wasn't any work to be had . . .'

'It was cut that cane, boy, day in, day out.'

'Hey, man, where I'm from they bring in all the madamos from Haiti to do the cutting. The rest of us can lie there and rot for all they care.'

The Haitian twitched. The Dominican had mentioned his half of the island, albeit at supersonic speed. He said nothing. Better not to rick the boat any further; it was already giddy with the slap happy rocking of the waves.

'I'll tell you, boy, there is always a stirfy of trouble somewhere,' said the Cuban, initiating with this unhappy choice of words a search for food.

In a shoebox inherited from a trashbasket in a rich neighbourhood, Antenor had put some cassava bread, two or three ears of corn, a pack of tobacco and a bottle of rum, staples which he had gathered for the voyage with the greatest of difficulty.

Lest one charitable act overshadowed another, he had taken the precaution of sitting on the box. But a specialization in black marketeering had given the Cuban a keenly developed sense of smell.

'Nigger, come up off that box,' he said, eschewing formality and eyeballing the shoebox as if it were the very Ark of the Covenant.

Antenor pretended not to hear, though Carmelo's intentions were plainly polyglot.

'Get your black ass off there, madamo, 'cuz it stinks of rum and tobacco,' Diogenes translated, quickly forgetting the vows of mutual aid spoken with his fellow islander prior to the Cuban's arrival.

Still Antenor played dumb. Our undisputed world record illiteracy rate might pay off here, he thought, assuming the most vacant expression possible in the face of his brothers' demands.

They finally became so impatient and indignant at Antenor's passive resistance that they gave him a tremendous shove that nearly sent him overboard on an underwater excursion. They fell upon the box as if it were no less than the celebrated Horn of Plenty.

After polishing off the cassava bread and the corn, the two rogues renewed their comparative socio-economic analysis of the Caribbean nations. Carmelo chewed tobacco while Diogenes bent his elbow, relishing the rum as though he were ogling the Statue of Liberty's charms under her threadbare tunic.

'I plan to go into business in Miami,' Carmelo said. 'I have a cousin who started out as a lowly pimp and now has his own . . . well, dating service.'

'The land of opportunity,' the Dominican concurred, his rum-fogged breath hot in the Haitian's face.

Antenor had not let out a peep since the others had put him in quarantine. But his eyes were two black dolls pierced through by enormous needles.

'In Cuba,' Carmelo continued, 'dating services are banned. Tell me, how can a man get on with so many restrictions?'

'Hey, in the Dominican Republic we have so many whores we have to export them,' Diogenes replied with such a loud guffaw that it scared a shark that was trailing like a bomb in the water behind the boat.

'*Tout Dominiken se pit!*' Antenor grumbled from his tiny Fort Dimanche, which remark Diogenes fortunately did not hear, immersed as he was in weightier concerns.

'The problem,' Carmelo said, digging deeper, 'is that in Cuba women reckon they are equal to men and so they don't want to get out and work the streets.'

'That may be true now, but Cuban women used to put out with the best of them,' his friend said, remembering the internationally famous backslides of the island's beauties.

This nostalgic reference to the Batista era was not to Carmelo's liking, and the drift of the Dominican's conversation was getting under his skin.

Out of nowhere he parried with: 'Anyway, how is Santo Domingo looking after the hurricane? People say no-one can see any difference.' He capped his dubious joke with a laugh that could be heard back in Guantanamo.

The Dominican went pale, no mean feat for him, but chose to contain his wrath in deference to the Cuban's formidable biceps, the result no doubt of all that cursed cane-cutting.

Masking his change of mind he reached for the canteen. The sea was in open revolt, the boat rocking like a mambo's hips in a Dambala ceremony. The canteen rolled to Antenor's unfortunate feet. The Dominican lunged for it. Antenor grappled with him. The Cuban smiled, following the struggle with the benign condescension of an adult watching children squabble.

A fine rain began to fall. The wind, waves and this great Caribbean brawl in the ill-fated boat rekindled the shark's hopes. Miami was as far off as China.

The Haitian threw the canteen into the water. Sooner die than quench the thirst of a Dominican cur. Diogenes started up, aglaxt. That's so you'll remember we invaded you three times, Antenor thought, baring his teeth to his fellow islander.

'Trujillo was right,' the Dominican roared as he charged at the Haitian's belly like a raging bull.

The boat was swaying like a saint's day float on the loose. Carmelo finally shrugged off his indifference to warn them: 'Easy does it, gentlemen; c'mon, goddammit, we're going to capsize the boat.'

And capsize it they did, exactly as the future Miami businessman had prophesied. Capsized, soaked by the rain, with wind and thunder for background music and the healthy enthusiasm of the sharks.

But just as our heroic emigrés were about to succumb to the perils of the Bernuda Triangle, there came the rasping wall of a horn, like the chant of a priest at a politician's requiem.

'A boat!' Carmelo shouted, waving his arm wildly in the air like a sadist with a cattle prod.

The three unfortunates joined their voices in a long, shrill, hopeful cry for help.

Some time later, and don't ask me how the hell they kept the sharks at bay - it must have been a miracle jointly organised by the Virgin of Altigracia, the Caridad del Cobre, and the Seven African Powers - they lay exhausted but happy on the deck of their rescuing boat. On the deck, that is, of an American boat.

The captain, an Aryan, Apollo-like seadog of ruddy complexion, golden locks and the bluest of eyes, came over for a quick check on the disaster and said: 'Get those niggers down there and let the spikes take care of 'em.' Words which our untutored heroes did not understand as well as our more literate readers will. Whereupon the Caribbean brothers were taken, *sans* tender loving care, down to the ship's hold. There amidst wooden crates and mouldy trunks, they exchanged their first post-wreck glances: a mixture of fright and relief, sautéed in some lightly browned hopes.

Moments later, the Dominican and the Cuban had the pleasure of hearing their mother tongue spoken. A little fractured, but unmistakable. Even the Haitian welcomed the sound. He seemed to recall it from tenderest childhood, and was beginning to suspect he would hear it for the rest of his days. The parched lips of each of the trio were curving upwards into a smile, when a Puerto Rican voice growled through the

gloom: 'If you want to feed your bellies here you're going to have to work, and I mean work. A gringo don't give nothing away. Not to his own mother.' A black arm thrust through the crates to hand them dry clothes.

Translated by Mark McCaffrey
From the collection Encarnación y Otros Cuentos de Naufagia.