

THE CARIBBEAN WRITER



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THE COMMUTE

By *David R. Siwisa*

Roberta walks out of her apartment in Hull Bay past the crackled gray iguana and stray cats towards her jeep. The uneven stone steps are green with thin, velvety moss. It is one of those tropical mornings that is slightly damp. One of those mornings where you could feel both the breeze and moisture from the nearby ocean, but are not oppressed by true humidity nor subject yet to the burning sun. On one side of the stairway leading up from the house is a thick planting of lemon grass, mint, and other bush tea. On the other, is a wild hibiscus bush in desperate need of trimming. Several lizards hurry along the low wall, doing their up and down dance.

The slight incline to the car is always a challenge for her too many pounds. Its uneven, pitted stone walkway is imbedded with footprints left years ago in wet cement. The tree-lined driveway is rich with half-tall trees; and Max, the building's adopted mutt, lays happily in the dirt. Roberta reaches her jeep and looks back, as always, at the dull, nondescript beige house and more importantly to the glorious view of the bay beyond it. She can hear the crashing surf and smiles at the sound. She has parked, once again, too close to the side of the road and she has to step in the dirt next to the thorny shrubs to open her car door. She struggles with tote bag, purse and the mug of bush tea she will drink on the way to work.

What then of the uniform brownstone buildings and sidewalks of the city and the lack of either iguana or crooked stone steps or green moss?

She waves to her neighbor, who is just driving off. He waves back, smiling and his three sons all turn back in their seats to wave as well.

Fifteen years in the same building in New York and I knew my next-door neighbor's name only from what I read on the mailbox. Smiles considered a rude, suspicious intrusion on city folk's privacy.

The winding, steep, narrow private road that leads up to the main thoroughfare heading towards town is lined as well with trees on each side. One hanging tree limb with soft leaves brushes her car. The tops of two houses peek out from down the hill and a drab green one is at the top of the hill across from the mailboxes. She turns left onto the road towards town. She passes Bryan's Bar and winds her way towards E & M, the small North Side grocery. To her left, the blue ocean, the always present blue ocean, lays flat and peaceful, with houses dotted about in deep foliage on the hillsides. She looks up the hill to her right at just the right moment, towards her favorite house-----a peach two-story building with cloth porch awnings. Such awnings are not commonly used in the Virgin Islands. A small herd of goats is making its way down the hill. They move in synchronized rhythms to loud goat talk and secret goat body language.

Was there ever any building that caught my attention in that other place, among the stone and cement and soot? Was there a peach building or soft cloth awnings that I missed? I know I never saw a goat there, traversing boulevard or sidewalk.

At the intersection where the north road meets the cars heading from Drake's Seat or the Sibilly School, she stops at the stop sign for the heavy traffic that converges at the corner. It is heavy only because there has been no other car in front of her until this point. Now, she stops as four cars with the right of way pass in front of her own. She looks down to the left and notices three mangoes on the ground. The tree from which they have fallen is heavy with more mangoes ready to drop. *If I reach out my hand, perhaps I'll get lucky and one will fall into it and I'll have breakfast.* The right-of-way cars pass and there is one car behind her. The temptation to jump out and pick up the mangoes or wait for one to drop into her hand gives way to the beep from the car behind her. She drives on, but the taste of mangoes is now on her tongue.

There were trees on that one block where I lived in Harlem. Narrow, unnatural, out of place looking things with wire around the bases either to keep the dogs from pissing on them or children from digging at the roots. Which? I never knew. Does a skinny tree in front of all that stone and tar help? It grows eventually, sometimes to huge heights. Yes. It happens. But mangoes never drop before you.

She drives on. This part of the drive is her least favorite, the winding road right before Drake's Seat that should be one way but is two. The trees are thicker here and the air like that of a tropical rain forest. It is not a road for tourists or the faint of heart. You have very little room for error when there is oncoming traffic. It is best to get familiar with the potholes, the section where the little ankle-biter dog runs out, and the hidden driveways.

When she reaches the overlook at Drake's Seat, she slows down, as she does each morning. This is part of her daily grace. Two or three vendors are already setting up. But she can see the huge, perfect arc of Magens Bay, one of the 10 most beautiful beaches in the world. It is her most beautiful beach from afar and near. It is here she says her morning prayers--thanks God for sight and life and being a witness to this beauty and His majesty every day. She drives on, rounds the curve, always feeling blessed after passing this point.

The "A" train. The smells. The cramming. The lack of grace. The groping hands. The vibration and the suddenness of moving, then stopping, then moving and the mass of humanity that shook your presence before your first cup of coffee. Everyone looking away, avoiding eye contact. Thanking God if you exited the train unmolested.

At the next intersection, the real traffic begins. Here, where the road turns down to Magens Bay at the Louisenhoj Castle, there is heavy traffic. Cars are coming up from town and more joins slightly ahead at the intersection going towards Skyline Drive. She allows one or two cars to cross past her over to Magens Bay Road.

There are several cars behind her, but she has time to allow memories to surface all the mornings she'd driven down this road to the beach, of making love in the water and his deft hands chasing the sand flies away from her thighs. She looks to the castle and fantasizes, as she does each morning, about what it must look like inside and who the people are who own it. How, she wonders, does one come to have enough money to build a stone castle on a tropical island at one of the most scenic points on St. Thomas? Of course, they must know that thousands of people pause to ponder the very same thing she ponders at each passing. She wants to live there or at least be invited to tea or for a weekend. But her reverie is broken by the need to move on to the next brief interlude before Skyline Drive.

She leaves castle thoughts behind.

To read the entire story you may *purchase* a copy of Volume 14 of The Caribbean Writer. CONTACT: qmars@uvi.edu

The Caribbean Writer, published by the University of the Virgin Islands, is an international anthology with a Caribbean focus, publishing poetry, short fiction, personal essays, one-act plays, translations, book reviews, and interviews along with special sections on such topics as Columbus in the Caribbean, Cuban poetry, Cricket in poetry, Surinamese short fiction, Hurricanes, Poetry and Fiction from Belize, Poetry from the Bahamas. Our Advisory Editorial Board consists of established Caribbean writers, namely, Opal Palmer Adisa, Kamau Brathwaite, Alwin Bully, Edwidge Danticat (**finalist for National Book Award and Oprah book club author**), Zee Edgell, Merle Hodge, George Lamming, Laurence Lieberman, Earl Lovelace, E. A. Markham, Caryl Phillips, Olive Senior, and Derek Walcott (**Nobel Prize winner**).

The Caribbean Writer has won a **Pushcart Prize**, a prestigious international honor, for a poem which appeared in Volume 14, 2000. The poem, "Inheritance," by Kwame Dawes will appear in *The Pushcart Prize XXVI, Best of the Small Presses, 2002 Edition*.