

Jamaican Dreams

BY CYNTHIA REYES

"I vowed then I would visit my family frequently. And I meant it. But once again the demands of my own life got in the way, and I forgot my vow."

I have lived in this country for half of my life. I came here a Jamaican. But with each passing year I have become more and more Canadian, less and less Jamaican. If you were to ask me, I would probably say I am now mostly Canadian. That is how I see myself, most of the time. But my past has a way of tripping me up. One night about four years ago, I had a worrisome dream. I dreamed that all my teeth had fallen out.

My friend, born and raised in Canada, blamed my dream on indigestion. "Upset stomach," she declared. "Gives you nightmares." My husband, also raised in Canada, had another explanation: "You forgot to brush your teeth before going to bed. That's what your subconscious was trying to tell you." I laughed out loud, not bothering to remind him that I never forget to brush my teeth before going to bed.

A feeling of unease gnawed at me.

I called Pat, my older sister, who also lives in Toronto. My sister has managed to become a Canadian without rejecting Jamaican traditions, cures and dream interpretations. "I dreamed that my teeth fell out," I told her.

"Uh-oh," she said. "You know that means death."

"Well, I know it means death if you live in Jamaica. But does it mean the same if you live in Canada?" I made a feeble attempt at laughter. My sister didn't laugh back. I hung up and reminded myself that the last time my

sister dreamed about fish, no one she knew became pregnant. It's a Jamaican belief that if you dream of fish, someone you know will get pregnant.

I tried to keep my thoughts away from the dream, but my mind kept shifting gears on its own. I called my sister again: "You heard from home?"

"Not since Momma phoned," she replied. "That was three weeks ago. She sounded great, and said everyone was fine. Try not to worry yourself."

If I were as Canadian as I claimed, if I had really dismissed those Jamaican beliefs, I would have dropped the whole thing right then. But I didn't. As I folded the laundry, another thought popped into my head. Why had our mother phoned? She had only phoned me once in all the time I'd been in Canada. That was right after she received my letter telling her I was pregnant with my first child. My mother didn't even have a telephone in her house. She lived on top of a hill outside the town, and the telephone company had said it was "not economically feasible" for them to run a line that far. So why had my mother walked all the way to town to call us? She told Pat she had tried to reach me first, but I was out. Just to say everything was fine? Or had she also been dreaming of death?

Maybe it's time to go home, I thought. But then, the automatic reply: you can't afford to. They need you at work. It's just cost a thousand dollars to fix the car. Now the insurance is due.

It didn't occur to me to pay for the trip with my credit card. Mounting debts have the same effect on me as a cross reputedly has on a vampire. This problem had once been diagnosed by a friend as an immigrant condition. "You don't feel secure enough to go heavily into debt," she said knowingly.

"Nonsense," I replied. "I took out a mortgage. I bought a car. Now that's a lot of debt."

But it just didn't feel right to leave for Jamaica then. For one thing, you can't show up in your hometown with your "two empty hands"—when you go home you feel compelled to bring gifts for every relative, friend, and kindly neighbour. Going home is not as simple as it sounds. Every logical bone in my body said there was no reason to visit Jamaica. But, like the atheist who half-believes in God at night, I was unable to shake the dream of my teeth falling out: What if the Jamaican interpretation of my dream was a warning from up above?

An unbidden memory kept creeping to the edges of my mind. Another time, another dream, another justification for not going home. Something terrible had happened.

The person at the heart of that memory was Ken, my mother's younger cousin. He was tall, handsome and stylish. He was also a bright well-read man who challenged me with provocative arguments. Ken told me wonderful stories about our multiracial, multiclass, multireligious family. With a hint of pride and great relish, he would divulge the details of ancient family scandals. He would give a hilarious twist to tales our family elders had tried so hard to keep secret.

There was no question that of all the people in our huge family conglomerate, Ken and I were each other's favourite. One anecdote said Ken had fallen in love with me when I was barely 2 and he was 21. It happened the night he accidentally got me drunk by leaving his wineglass within my reach. Ken loved to tell the story of the drunken 2-year-old who staggered around repeating something that sounded suspiciously like a Jamaican cuss-word.

As I grew older, there seemed another reason why Ken and I got along so well. We were both oddities in our family. Ken belonged to the mostly Chinese branch of the family, but unlike his parents and many of his siblings, he had light-brown hair streaked with blond. I too differed from my parents and siblings. I had brown hair streaked with a coppery red. Our looks were easily explained as a product of our extended family's racial confusion. But we stood out nonetheless.

Ken and I shared something else. We dared to dream of things way beyond the scope of our small-town upbringing. We dared to ask questions of things that current wisdom deemed unquestionable. Together we would debate politics, the authenticity of the Bible, even the existence of God. Together we dreamed of travelling the unknown of foreign lands, of writing the great family chronicle.

Birthdays always brought a special gift from Ken. My first camera. My first set of dangling gold earrings. My first pair of sling-back shoes with a matching handbag, both in yellow patent leather.

But on my fifteenth birthday, Ken showed up mysteriously empty-handed. "Get dressed," he said. "We're going into town." And so we did. He pulled up in front of the local branch of the Royal Bank of Canada in nearby Mandeville. Once inside the doors, Ken stopped and turned to me. "In a couple of months you will be graduating from high school," he said. "Every young lady should have a bank account." Then he entered the bank manager's office and started an account in my name. Initial deposit: \$1,000. It was a small fortune, as the Jamaican dollar in the late sixties was worth

about \$1.25 (U.S.). Around Ken I had always been a chatterbox, but now I was silent. My gratitude choked me up.

"Use your money wisely," was all Ken said as we left the bank.

Suddenly, the day seemed shiny and bright with promise. To a 15-year-old girl feeling trapped in a small town, a thousand dollars buys a lot of hope. And now my dreams of going abroad to study didn't seem so impossible.

I brought that money, plus interest, with me when I left for Canada in 1974. It would help send me to journalism school at Ryerson.

I left Ken behind in Jamaica with a promise that I would "do something meaningful" with my life. I made another solemn promise: that I would return to help him write that book about "our crazy family."

I would, to some extent, keep the first promise to Ken. I got my degree and became a television news reporter with the CBC. I did voluntary work on behalf of immigrant and minority children. But the second promise lay in the recesses of my mind, almost forgotten. I had originally planned to go home and work on the book with Ken right after graduation. But schooling expenses had worn me out. The CBC job offer came just in time.

It seemed there was always a commitment, always an expense preventing me from going home to keep my second promise. And, to tell the truth, I was getting caught up in my own obligations. I had already started a family. I thought less and less about Ken.

Then, one day while I was preparing a story for the late news, the phone rang. It was my husband.

"Call your sister in Jamaica," he said. "Something about Ken."

I called right away. "What about Ken?"

"He's sick. All of a sudden, he lost the use of his legs. The doctors say they've never seen anything like it."

I was in Jamaica within two days. The trip took all my savings, but that didn't matter at all. By the time I got there, Ken had been moved to the University Hospital in Kingston. He squinted at me as I approached his bed in the intensive care ward. I rushed to hug him. He didn't hug back. Within minutes I realized he had lost the use of his arms too. "Scratch the top of my head for me," he asked in a weak voice. I scratched his head and dampened his soft hair with my tears. Huge, unstoppable tears that burned my eyes and cheeks.

Ken had never been sick in all the time I'd known him. Or perhaps he had, but he'd never let me see him when he was ill. He was the most fiercely independent person I had ever met. I knew without being told that Ken would sooner die than not be able to care for himself. These thoughts went around and around, even as I held Ken's useless hand between my own hands.

The doctors had still not diagnosed his illness. But whatever it was this disease moved swiftly, mercilessly.

Then, one week later, Ken started to improve. He was still in bed, but he could sit up. His colour came back. He spoke clearly now. His sisters and brothers who had flown home from other countries were delighted with the improvement. There were so many other relatives around that I felt sure Ken wouldn't miss me if I returned to Toronto.

As I said goodbye, I promised Ken I'd return. But this time I put a deadline on it: six months, a year at most.

I told Ken I was sorry I couldn't afford to stay. He remarked, without bitterness, that "now would have been perfect. I'm not going anywhere in this condition."

But he did. Ken did not last a year. He didn't even last six months.

On a Sunday morning in the spring, the phone rang. It was Ken's sister Glenna, who had stood with me beside Ken's hospital bed.

"Hya?" she called me by my Jamaican pet name in her unmistakably Jamaican lilt.

"Don't say anything, Glenna," I whispered. "I don't want to hear."

"I'm really sorry," was all she said.

"I promised to go back, Glenna. I thought we had time." I was babbling on, but unable to cry.

I had a lot of time for memories on that four-hour flight to Kingston. Sweet memories of Ken. But one memory belonged to a much more recent past. A memory of a dream I'd had just one week earlier. In that dream, I was in my mother's garden. I was picking green fruit from my mother's orange tree and digging up yams from the ground. Jamaicans will tell you that such a dream warns of great disappointment and death. My sophisticated Canadian self had told me to ignore it.

The funeral went the way of Jamaican funerals. People wore their most dignified black or purple clothes. Everywhere you looked, there were somber, tear-stained faces. A priest stood at the altar and said wonderful

things about the “dearly departed,” in this case a man he barely knew, since Ken never went to church.

At a get-together after the funeral, people swapped warm memories of Ken’s life, and shared dreams that had foretold Ken’s death. I could hardly bear to share my memories, and I didn’t share my dreams. I returned to Toronto racked with guilt.

Then, one day, a chat with a neighbour turned into a discussion about what it means to live so far from your family. My neighbour had come to Canada from Italy many years before. Year after year, she saved a bit of money toward her planned trip home. Finally, she had saved enough. She could hardly wait to see her parents. But just two weeks before her planned visit, the phone rang. Her mother was dead.

“It is the curse of being an immigrant,” said a Scottish-born neighbour who had joined us. “You never have enough money to go home. Then someone dies and somehow you find the money. I have been home only twice. Each time it was to bury somebody.”

I vowed then I would visit my family frequently. And I meant it. But once again the demands of my own life got in the way, and I forgot my vow.

Then, several years later, came the dream about losing teeth.

I told myself I didn’t really believe in dreams. I told myself the dream had only served to remind me of my promise to return home. Still, I took some overdue vacation, booked a flight, and started packing. Whatever was scarce in Jamaica could be found in my bulging suitcases: rice, soap powder, garlic, running shoes, money.

Once there, I scrutinized everyone with a worried eye. My mother seemed a little shorter, a little older, her hair a little more grey. But her smooth brown skin was radiant, and she seemed strong and healthy. My stepfather looked exactly the way I had left him. His dark-brown face seemed to glow with good health. No one seemed ill or in danger of imminent death. It was wonderful to be home.

By the time I returned to Toronto, the bad dream was forgotten. I was so broke I didn’t even have enough money to buy gas for my car. But going home had recharged me. My mother, as usual, had loved and inspired me.

They say superstition is born from people’s deepest fears. Bad dreams, I think, must come from the same place. My deepest fear about my loved ones in Jamaica is that they will die suddenly, giving me no opportunity to say goodbye, no opportunity to fully repay debts of kindness. Perhaps that is why today, even while I shrug off many of the beliefs with which I was

raised, there are some dreams that have the power to shake up my new life and remind me of the life I left behind.

These days, I have started to see the dreams in a different light. I see now they give me an occasion to linger awhile in memories of the life I left behind. They remind me to cherish the people and places in my young life who helped make me what I am. And they remind me to write home more often.



Name: _____

/18 marks

Understanding the Narrative - "Jamaican Dreams"
ENG 3UI

Please complete the following questions in full sentences. Be sure to use examples in support of your ideas.

1. Provide two reasons explaining how the essay "Jamaican Dreams" fits the definition of a narrative essay. Be sure to add examples from the text for support. (2)
2. What is the thesis of this essay? State it in your own words. Give a quotation from the essay that supports your choice. (2)
3. Find a paragraph where the author uses many short sentences and name it. Quote an example of a short sentence that stands out to you. What is the effect created by the use of these sentences? This is your opinion, so positive or negative results are acceptable. (2)
4. Please discover and quote examples of each of the following rhetorical devices:
 - Flashback
 - Allusion
 - Simile
 - Anecdote

Next, explain why each device is used effectively (8).

5. Can you relate to the author's situation? Why/why not? Does her writing convey a sense of emotion to you? Explain. (2)
6. Name two ways the writer creates a sense of EITHER unity OR coherence. Be sure to add exemplification to your answer. (2)