

# It Happened on Good Friday

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JANET TYRELL

*L'auteure nous raconte les joies de son enfance le Vendredi Saint dans les Caraïbes quand elle faisait voler les cerfs-volants selon la tradition de cette journée très spéciale. Ses frères l'avaient aidée à fabriquer le sien qu'elle faisait voler elle-même, tout excitée d'être la seule fille à le faire.*

I was born on the island of Nevis, West Indies, in the north-easterly chain of islands known as the Leewards. I was the last of six children, born prematurely, and weighed three and a half pounds at birth. I am told that I resembled a little doll and that everyone was fascinated with me. I guess that is why I was pampered and spoiled by my older siblings but most of all by my three older brothers, who, after pulling and tugging at me and making me walk at the age of seven months, saw nothing wrong in constantly “stealing” me out of the house to accompany them on little errands (and sometimes not so little ones). And so they turned me into a regular tomboy. I could climb nearly all the fruit trees around to gather English plums, mangoes, genips, and soursops. I never really mastered the art of climbing a coconut palm tree except for a miniature one that I managed to climb only once. I knew how to bait a mongoose trap and to check it to see if it had caught any mongoose. These animals were introduced into Nevis at the turn of the century to kill all the poisonous snakes and turned to killing chickens after they had eradicated the snakes. The government was at the time paying a bounty on mongoose under a pest control program and my brothers threw themselves wholeheartedly into catching mongoose as a lucrative pastime.

Good Friday was one of my favorite days in the Anglican Church calendar. I loved the tradition and mystery asso-

ciated with this holy day when Christ died on the cross. I loved the cassava bread that Mom made only on Good Friday as we were not allowed to eat leavened bread. And so, just as I always had to wait a long time for Christmas or my birthday to arrive, I had to wait in anticipation of the tasty bread for a whole year. I now realize that the operation was so labour intensive that she couldn't afford to do this more often.

My mother would rise early on Good Friday, peel, wash and grate the cassava, sans food processor, squeezing the pulp through a clean towel until almost all of the bitter juice had been squeezed out. She would sift the meal, mix it with a few pinches of salt and let it dry in the air for about 15 minutes. Then she would put a “dish” (our local skillet) on the fire to heat and on it she placed a small, round, metal hoop reserved for shaping the bread. Into the hoop went one thin layer of cassava meal, followed by a layer of freshly grated coconut mixed with sugar, and topped off by another layer of cassava. When one side was brown, she removed the hoop and turned the bread over to brown the other side. On completion, they resembled a stack of pancakes and were put out in the sun to dry in a large wooden tray. They would be ready for us to eat when we returned from the Good Friday morning service. I also loved the Good Friday dinner of salted codfish or mackerel soaked overnight, stewed and served with dumplings and vegetables.

Mysterious “things” were supposed to happen at midday. If you dribbled the white of a freshly laid egg in a glass of water left in the sun to heat, you would be able to predict your future from the shape it formed in the water. A coffin would indicate a death of a family member or a close

friend, a church would indicate an imminent wedding and a ship would mean that travel was in the immediate future. It was all open to interpretation and people had fantastic interpretations for the shapes they had seen in the water. If you found a piece of coal at the root of a thistle plant and put it in your purse you would become rich. If you cut a pigeon pea tree it would bleed. I never tired of a story that Mom always related to us—the story about a mysterious stranger who had entered the Basseterre, St. Kitts Sugar Factory one Good Friday, at midday, long

a plane and dominating the scene. It would be the only aeroplane kite in the village for my brother, Gilbert, was the only one around who had perfected the art of making them. What was even more exciting, I would be the *only* girl with her own kite.

About two weeks before Good Friday, Gilbert went off to collect enough sugar cane arrow bones—the stalks that bore the sugar cane flowers. The arrow bones would make a light fuselage and the aeroplane would be easy to launch. Next he shaved some leaves off a few green coconut palm

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**This Good Friday, my kite would be an aeroplane kite flying high up in the sky among the others, droning like a plane and dominating the scene. It would be the only aeroplane kite in the village for my brother, Gilbert, was the only one around who had perfected the art of making them. What was even more exciting, I would be the *only* girl with her own kite.**

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before we were born, and dipped a silver cup into the boiling sugarcane juice turning it to blood. “And that is the reason,” she said, “why the Sugar Factory stopped the practice of making sugar on Good Friday.”

But what I loved most of all was watching the myriad of kites made by the neighbourhood boys, which flew overhead with gay abandon. They were of varying shapes and sizes. Some were named after their shapes—box kites, star kites, diamond kites, hexagonal kites, locally known as six-sided kites. Others, flown by the younger boys, were named after the materials from which they were made—bookleaf kites, seaside grape leaf kites. They gave the feeling of freedom and joy. Some would dance and shimmy in the wind, some pranced about, some were regal and stately, just giving their tails a little shake every once in a while. But, regardless of the type of kite, they would sing and make joyful “w-o-o-o-ing” noises way up in the sky. And they were nearly all dressed up in tissue paper in a kaleidoscope of vivid colour combinations: mauve, pink, yellow, blue, green and red. Just imagine the beautiful picture they all made against the background of the blue tropical sky!

Girls never flew their own kites. If they were interested, they would help with their brothers’ kites. I was around eleven years old when I decided that I had had enough of holding my brothers’ kite tails on Good Friday. We, kids, believed that you had to whistle to call the puff of wind that would take the kite up into the air. Well, I had had enough of helping them whistle too. If I was going to whistle to launch a kite, it would be my very own. This Good Friday, my kite would be an aeroplane kite flying high up in the sky among the others, droning like

fronds down to the midrib. These were locally referred to as “coconut pointers” and were flexible enough to be bent into forming the wing tips and the tail. He laid the frame out on the verandah in the shape of an aeroplane and our family members and friends automatically knew that kite-making was in progress and that the verandah was out of bounds. For the next week and a half, while Gilbert worked on the kite, I talked constantly about its progress to anyone who would listen—my Mom, Dad and siblings, my friends, both at home and at school, and the neighbours. I existed only for the kite that was under construction. I watched it taking shape. Gilbert pinned the arrow bones together with straight pins; he formed the wing tips and tail with the flexible “pointers;” we boiled a thick glue paste from laundry starch and dribbled in a generous amount of juice from an aloe vera leaf to protect the paper from insects. He cut brown paper and stuck it on to the fuselage with the paste. Then we stuck an assortment of purple, pink, and blue tissue paper on to the brown paper covering, making patterns as we went along. There were even extra pieces of tissue paper along the front (or the nose). We called these “bawlers” as they would drone and produce the wooing sounds as they fluttered in the wind.

By Maundy Thursday night we had produced a masterpiece and everyone in the family got caught up in the excitement. My brother Lloyd who, by this time, had already left school and was working provided me with a hefty ball of cord. (Nylon string had not yet “made it” to the Caribbean.) I had a kite, I had string with which to fly it. All it needed was the tail. This is not to be confused with the tail of the aeroplane. It is the material

tied on to the back of the kite to stabilize it in the air. I was raised on a reading diet of Enid Blyton's novels and had seen pictures of kites with tails of ribbon with bows placed at equal intervals. If my kite tail could be similar, that would be the crowning touch. However, we didn't have the luxury of ribbons for tails but, rather, an odd assortment of material. Gilbert and I raided Mom's bag of rags and tore strips from old bed sheets that had been washed and bleached in the sun so many times that they had outlived their use; old school tunics and blouses, old

tears. Today, it was the same. I felt his intense pain and agony as he was crucified. I sang with the congregation:

*"Glory be to Jesus,  
Who in bitter pains  
Poured for me the lifeblood  
From his sacred veins."*

As I sang I looked up at the stained glass window in the altar. There, high above Fr. Thomas' head was the

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**High above Fr. Thomas' head was the picture of poor, tortured Jesus hanging on the cross with his head bowed to one side, weighted down by the crown of thorns they had made him wear. Today, however, was a little different, for through the tears in my eyes, I could see an aeroplane kite perched on his head.**

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cast off shirts from my father and brothers. We next moved to Mom's scrap box and cut some strips off the material left over from the clothing she had made for the family. We knotted all the strips haphazardly together for a tail and attached it to the kite. My tail might look ragged but my aeroplane would certainly be an eye-catcher. I could hardly wait for the next day to arrive. We had to go to the early Good Friday service and would be back home by eight-thirty.

Good Friday dawned fair, not a cloud in the sky, which meant it would be good weather for kite flying. Mom made us some herbal tea and sent us on our way to church. We would get our cassava bread and milky tea when we got back home. On the way to church all I could think of was the kite. When I got back from church I would eat breakfast, launch my kite, tie it on to our golden apple tree in the front yard for all the passers-by to admire—an aeroplane kite flying way up in the sky among all the others and everyone would know whose kite it was!

Then around eleven o'clock I would fill my glass three-quarters full of water and leave it in the sun. Since all the hens were laying, Mom had already promised me a freshly laid egg, the white of which I would dribble in the water and get a glimpse of my future. My sister had done it the year before, had seen a ship and had gone to the neighbouring island of Montserrat by boat to an inter-school netball competition. Would I, too, sail on a boat to one of the neighbouring West Indian islands or would I go by plane?

The Good Friday readings were always the same, focusing on Jesus' crucifixion. I would suffer silently with Jesus as I listened to the readings, surreptitiously wiping away

picture of poor, tortured Jesus hanging on the cross with his head bowed to one side, weighted down by the crown of thorns they had made him wear. Today, however, was a little different, for through the tears in my eyes, I could see an aeroplane kite perched on his head.

The morning prayers seemed longer than usual and by the time church was over, the sun was already high in the sky with the promise of Good Friday heat. There was already an array of kites, bobbing, waving and dancing in the sky with the "bawlers" singing "woo woo" and I could hardly wait for mine to join them.

I rushed into the house, changed into my shorts and sat down to eat my cassava bread breakfast. I wolfed down the bread hardly savouring the treat for which I had waited so long. It was now time to go and fly the kite.

Gilbert and I picked up the kite from the verandah and rushed down through my Dad's sugarcane field. The canes had been freshly cut but the ratoon shoots were just tall enough to make the going slightly difficult. Gilbert carried the kite and string and I carefully held the tail away from the young cane shoots. I whistled "phewoo, phewoo" to call the wind that would take my ragged princess high up in the air, above the fruit trees, above the hydro lines, so very high, in fact, that the bawlers would drone with delight.

The gust came and Gilbert tossed the kite up in the air, at the same time running backwards, gently tugging at the kite and gradually releasing the string. "Let go of the tail, Jen," he shouted. But it was an aborted attempt. The kite fell. I whistled again to call the wind and again Gilbert tossed the kite up in the air. At the appropriate moment I released the tail. My joy and excitement mounted as the kite gradually rose up, up above the soursop tree,

above the mango tree, above the hydro lines, ducking and weaving from side to side like a drunk trying to walk a straight line. "It's dancing too much," said Gilbert. "I'll put some more tail on." I realized that the kite needed to be stabilized and for me, that was no problem. There was plenty more tail where the first set came from, even if it meant tying on a piece of the cane trash to the odd assortment of rags. I had seen the bigger boys do that when they were flying their kites too far away from home to get more tail for their kites.

Gilbert began to reel in the kite and it continued its drunken dance, weaving dangerously close to the hydro lines. Suddenly my heart lurched with fear and apprehension, for as I looked, the tip of the tail was getting even nearer to the hydro lines; then, in a flash, the drunk paused for breath, clinging to the lines. My fear turned to horror and pain for Gilbert was tugging harder, and the more he tugged, the faster the kite stuck. It did not take long for me to realize that the kite would never let go of the hydro line.

The pain was tearing at my insides—my heart, my head, my eyes. The tears were rolling down my cheeks, blurring the picture of the kite stuck there forever. Jesus nailed to the cross could not have felt the intense pain that was consuming my whole being.

There was now no need for me to break my freshly laid egg to see what my future held. The future was now rolled into the present and staring me in the face in the form of an aeroplane kite wrecked on its maiden flight.

*Janet Tyrell is a retired librarian and is currently enjoying the courses offered at the Academy for Lifelong Learning in Toronto. This piece is the result of an exercise for her "Memoirs" class at the Academy.*

## RENEE NORMAN

### Last Summer of Childhood

we are watching What Not to Wear  
in pyjamas and old shorts  
this her last summer of childhood  
before university begins

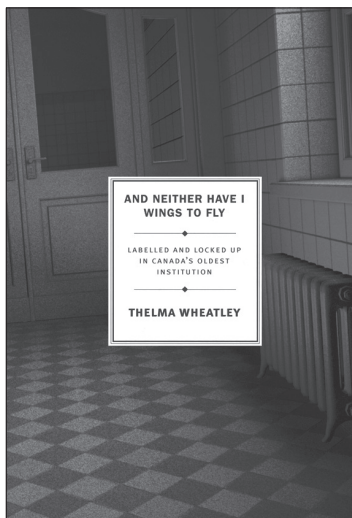
soon enough she will be writing papers,  
walking on campus in the rain,  
wondering where summer went  
and holding her damp coat close  
to keep warm

this is my last baby  
the one I rocked slowly  
savouring, savouring  
her faded cotton sleepers  
smelling of sisters,  
old milk

when we shopped at the mall  
our own episode of What Not to Wear  
again and again she emerged:  
a white eyelet skirt,  
a rust tunic  
my eyes on her becoming  
the transformation taking place  
behind a curtain of clothes

we are watching What Not to Wear  
this *our* last summer of childhood

*Renee Norman's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*



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