

The Banana- Stains

By Hazra C. Medica (Antigua)

“The Prime Minister is holding talks as the banana industry begins to decline in the aftermath of the 1992...”

My mother is annoyed. The transistor radio sits sombrely near the washtub which sits between my mother’s legs. Her hands move rhythmically and angrily in the white suds. She battles against the stain. She pauses to glare at me: “Don’t you know how hard it is to remove a banana stain?”

There are many stains on my dress- as many as there were on Mr. Massiah’s clothing. Mr. Massiah, I had heard the grown-ups say, had drunk *”banana wine.” The inspector had rejected all but twenty of his three hundred boxes of bananas: “bruised”...”too small”...”too big”...”too green”...”too ripe”, the inspector had said.

Mr. Massiah had stood silently- his lips would purse every now and then as each box was rejected.

“It’s people like you killing the industry. You want to send bad fruit to England?” the inspector demanded almost as if speaking to a child.

Mr Massiah stood in his much worn and severely stained white shirt, khaki brown pants and white hat. Banana stain from the green fruit is a curious sort of stain- it’s brownish-looking- not dark brown but it has staying power. “No sir,” he almost whispers. Only twenty boxes find favour with the inspector.

Another farmer, Mr. Zune strides up to Mr. Massiah. He does not know of Mr. Massiah’s twenty boxes. He had sent his eldest daughter before the inspector. She had kept her eyes averted and smiled shyly as the inspector teased her gently.

Mr. Zune slaps Mr. Massiah on the back. He does not understand that Mr. Massiah did not send his pretty daughter before the inspector. Mr. Massiah quietly declines MR. Zune’s invitation to have a drink with “the fellows”.

Mr. Massiah doesn’t drink with “the felloew” anymore- not since he had to sell a lot of things in his house when men in the rum shop, with tough faces and soft insides, began arguing about Europe, and the death of preferential treatment.

Mr. Massiah’s eldest son Joey drives a cab now- there is money driving tourists, Mrs. Massiah had said proudly. Mr. Massiah had said: “better to be your own master than someone’s slave.”

I see my father motioning for me to come to him. His face is grim- the inspector had not been kind to him. On the drive home I think of Mr. Massiah and his stained clothing. Mr. Massiah has calloused hands. His hands make me think of the banana trunk in my dream.

In this dream, I crouched close to the trunk of a huge banana tree. My father is leaving for the U.S as he had talked about for months. The banana trunk is smooth in some parts- calloused in others- calloused like Mr. Massiah's hands.

They shout my name as they search the plantation. I know father won't return. Cousin Zelda didn't return. Mother says Cousin Zelda is not "straight" with the immigration department.

Something cold drips onto my arm. It's the juice from the stem of the banana tree. The bunch of banana had been freshly cut from the tree. The drops multiply. I knew if I lay perfectly still the stains would hide me. I would not be found; there would be no more of me- just all banana stain.

"Don't you know how hard it is to remove banana stains," I could hear my mother fret. Father's jeep broke down. I couldn't tell Massiah the secret to avoiding the "banana wine".

*A pet name for the weedicide Gramazone.