

Extract of Riambel by Priya Hein – published by The Indigo Press, UK:

I'm the great-granddaughter of plantation rape. There's a tinge to my slightly-light-ebony-blackness. I'm the daughter of Creole slaves and something far more sinister. Descendant of domestic servants and white masters who abused their workers. I have white male ancestry in me. Involuntarily. The whiteness I carry was not a choice. The greedy sugar barons took what they wanted – women and girls over whom they had extraordinary power – and then failed to claim their children. How can they deny their morbid past when we – the bastard children of colonialism – are here to remind them of their legacy? We carry the truth. As clear as daylight. The blue sky above is not a lie. We're the living proof of a dark history that cannot be whitewashed.

Look at me and tell me that history hasn't tainted me.

1.

I've nurtured a special relationship with our Indian Ocean. Cradled to sleep by its motion. Wrapped in its vast blanket of blue. I am a creature of the ocean. Its fluidity defines me. The sea pulses through my veins. Throbbing. Keeping me alive. Keeping me sane.

My skin is impregnated with the salty smell of the sea. Tiny grains of sand are permanently trapped beneath my toenails. I tried to remove them, but then I gave up. What's the point? Anyway, I like the idea that I'm carrying a little bit of the sea with me wherever I go.

I've known the ocean all my life. Mama says I was practically born here on this beach. The sea is in me. I feel its deep currents running in my veins. Pulsing and throbbing. Constantly. At night I hear the waves murmuring, and rocking me to sleep the way a mother and a father ought to have. And when I finally drift off to sleep the motions of the sea wake me up – unless the neighbours are having one of their parties.

It's in this fishing village buried in the most southern part of the island that I was born and where I have spent all fifteen years of my life. My village is called Riambel: Ri-am-bel.

Ri
Am
Bel

It has a sing-song feel to it – something that implies summer and laughter. I once asked Mama if the name of our village comes from the words *rire en belle*. To laugh wholeheartedly. Without restraint.

Rire? Laugh? What would I know? There's nothing to laugh about in this life – is there? Now stop all that nonsense talk and help me with the chores before you go to school. I'll be late for work. I can't afford to lose my job. Who's going to feed you?

So that was the end of that conversation.

2.

We live in a *cit * or *kan kreol* (which is how they like to refer to our shanty town). It's also known as Africa Town – a slum where the poor and the undesirables are dumped together in hastily constructed barracks. Like tins of sardines placed next to each other in a higgledy-piggledy way. Whatever's found in the trash somehow ends up in our *cit *, which is nothing but the waste of Riambel dumped together in a heap that slowly rots away. A trash-strewn ghetto where everything is starving and fighting to survive – even the dogs.

It's the smell that you remember the most. The odour of hundreds of men and women living on top of each other in the barracks behind the estates. Huddled together like animals in the dark with nothing but the fermenting smell of the latrine to keep you company. A hole in the ground. There are no words to describe the odour. You once had a look inside with a torch and saw thousands of fat white maggots wriggling about on heaps of shit and urine. There were other things thriving in there. Perhaps snakes. It was hard to tell in the dark. You had nightmares of falling into that hole of kaka. You sometimes close your eyes and see those white maggots burning in hell.

3.

From the outside, our *ti lakaz* isn't so different from all the others. There's a small fence with a rusty gate. As soon as you lift the latch, you stumble into our living room, which serves as a TV-cum-dining room, kitchen and guest room. In the corner, there's a table consisting of a concrete slab attached to the wall. Next to it is a sink with a single tap sticking out of a rusty pipe, which is always dripping. There's also a gas cooker with two hot rings.

Mama sewed together some mismatched bits of flowery cotton – now stiff with grease – to make a curtain to hide the blue gas bottle. Next to the *bobonn gaz*, our few groceries are stored in sturdy jute bags that factory workers from the estates used to carry sugar in. Mama likes to store them in those thick bags which are harder for cockroaches and the likes to penetrate, but they still manage. The nasty little pests still force their way through and encroach, no matter what. Like those horrid leeches around the yard that we can never get rid of.

Since we don't own a fridge, the jute bags are sort of our cooler. Grand-père borrowed one or two from the sugar factory before they had to shut it down. On top of the sink, there's a wooden shelf with hooks where Mama hangs her few blackened pots and pans. It's not much of a kitchen, but that never stopped Marie from whipping up a mean curry!

Tifi-la ena bon lame kwi. The girl's got magic hands in the kitchen, Grand-mère would say, not without a sparkle in her eyes.

Mama's room leads to the outside toilet and bathroom, which is nothing more than a tiny cubicle made of coarsely plastered bricks and a creaky wooden door. On one side there is a hole in the floor, and on the other are a metal tap and a steel bucket. Once the bucket is filled, we use a small jug – *lamok* – to pour cold water over our bodies and hair as we squat on a small plastic stool made for a child. If we want to wash with hot water we first have to heat it in a big pot in the kitchen before carrying the pan outside. The whole procedure is cumbersome, but then again we don't exactly like to linger in there.

I prefer to bathe in the sea and let the ocean wash away the daily grime of the *cité*. It feels good to float in the lagoon. To let go and enjoy the sensation of being carried away by the waves and feel free, if only for a few minutes.

If I need to use the toilet at night, I have to cross Mama's room to go into the backyard or wait until the morning (especially if she has an uncle visiting). Once, one of the nicer uncles brought us a bottle of Fanta, a rare treat. Unable to resist, I added some salt to it. I watched it sizzle before gulping the whole bottle in one go. That night, I desperately had to pee. So I peed into the empty bottle with hot fury and threw out the warm orangey liquid first thing in the morning, so that I wouldn't get caught.

4.

I always find it strange how there's only one road that divides us from them. Us. Them. *Zot. Nou. Gran Dimounn. Ti Dimounn.* Big people. Small people. On one side of the winding coastal road there are the *kanpman* and the estates of the *blan* that reek of old money, alongside the properties of the *nouveau riche* which face the ocean. Old summer retreats with their former slave quarters turned guesthouses. But you only have to cross the road and you'll get to see the real Mauritius. Merely a few metres away. The side they won't show you on the postcards and the glossy brochures that are used as bait to lure excited tourists to our paradise island, to unleash bundles of euro notes from their chunky wallets – not that we ever get to see any of it.

For as long as I can remember, Mama's been working as a maid in one of those houses across the road. Serving the same white family as her parents. The De Grandbourg family – white Franco-Mauritians who like to boast of an ancestry that goes all the way back to a château in Brittany. De Grandbourg. Ha! Even their name denotes big. Grand.

My favourite teacher says that the Mauritian *blan* probably descend from peasants, mere blacksmiths and lowly sailors. Franco-Mauritians like to tell little white lies about their seemingly blue blood, having made their fortune from the slave trade. To wash their bloody hands. But will they ever be able to clean their tarnished souls?

Grand-mère used to say that dark deeds always come to light.

5.

There are some small differences that set our *ti lakaz* apart from the others in the *cit e*. Mama occasionally brings little trinkets home from work. Nothing that would raise suspicion. She would never steal and risk losing her job. No. Just small things that no one will miss. A sliver of lavender soap from a chunky bar of *savon de Marseille* that she surreptitiously slips into her bra when no one's looking. The odd can of corned beef, or a handful of Prince Lu biscuits wrapped in old newspaper sheets that mysteriously find their way into the depths of her pocket.

They also give Mama things they no longer have any use for: some colouring crayons for my deformed sketches. Scraps of paper for my scribblings, a rag of words. Torn copies of tattered *Paris Match* issues with outdated pictures of European princesses waving at an adoring crowd, which I devour. A teddy bear with a missing eye. And things that are still serviceable in our household: a slightly stained tablecloth. Old cotton bedsheets frayed along the edges. A dainty teapot that has lost its handle. A wooden cupboard without a door. A colourful dress that has shrunk in the wash. These little 'gifts' make our *ti lakaz* by far the nicest.

6.

Mama doesn't like it when I walk barefoot outside the house. When I was about eight years old I used to love playing with the earth – digging and stabbing the mud with a bamboo stick – and climbing trees. One day, I clambered onto the branches of the zanbalak tree, trying to reach the roof of our barracks. But just before reaching the top of the tree, I felt something dangling from the back of my short cotton dress. I absentmindedly brushed it away, but it started to crawl on my skin. Thinking that the ribbons of my dress had come undone, I tried to reach the back in order to tie them. Instead I felt something warm and slippery in my hands. As I pulled I felt a slight pressure on my lower back – something moist sliding out from between my buttocks.

Marie looked at my hands and started screaming on top of her lungs. I was holding a long, slippery pink worm that was still alive. Terrified, I tried to let go of it by throwing it away but it still hung from my itchy butt, wriggling against my thighs. Mama ran out to see what was happening. Taking one look at me with my legs spread wide apart, she quickly turned me around and lifted my dress. I was wailing and shaking as she pulled the dangly worm out of my arse. It was almost one metre long.

I still have nightmares of long pinkish creatures coming out of my intestines to wrap themselves around my neck. Like angry pink hands. Sausage fingers. Strangling me. Closing my windpipe until my throat judders. Tightening like a choke collar, silencing me. Suffocating me. Choking me to death.

Help, Mama! I can't breathe.

Kat-Kat Maniok (Cassava Stew)

So you want to know how to make a dish like the ones the former slaves would eat? My *gran mama* used to make the best *kat-kat maniok* on the entire island – back in the slaves' barracks, her coarse hands raw and wrinkled from years of laborious work.

Once you've pulled your cassava plants from the earth, choose two to three decent-sized roots and wash all the dirt off. Peel and cut into chunks, before putting the pieces in a big pan of water to cook over the fire. Add some sea salt and leave to simmer until the cassavas are tender. Make sure they are thoroughly cooked, otherwise you'll upset your stomach. Remove from the fire. Drain and leave to cool. Meanwhile, fry some chopped onions and crushed garlic paste in a little bit of oil. Add the cassava pieces to the pan with chunks of fresh tuna or marlin and fry gently for a few minutes. Throw in some fresh curry leaves and stir. Pour some coconut milk into the pan and let it simmer until creamy and the cassava pieces start to melt into a thick sauce. Sprinkle with salt and crushed black pepper and a bunch of thyme. Add in a handful of wild red peppercorns that grow abundantly in the forests near Le Morne Brabant mountain where the runaway slaves – *esklay maron* – used to hide from their masters. Serve on its own as a stew or with bread.

7.

Grand-mère used to sing us lullabies passed down from her mother. Her voice was as soft as the murmur of the waves. When she sang her skin would gently ripple like wind over water.

Mo pase larivier Taniers
Mo zwenn enn vie gran mama
Mo dir li ki li fer la
Li dir mwa li lapes kabo
Wai wai, me zanafan
Fo travay pou gagn son pin
Wai wai, me zanafan
Fo travay pou gagn son pin

(I pass by Taniers river
I meet an old grandmother
I ask her what she's doing there
She tells me she's fishing
Alas, alas, my children
We must work to earn our crust
Alas, alas, my children
We must work to earn our crust)

8.

Mama worked all hours of the day and sometimes also at night, when they had one of their famous soirées where high society, the white Franco-Mauritians, gathered.

Marie and I were often left alone, so we wandered along the beach. To watch the fishermen or to play with the other *cité* kids. We would swim in the sea every day, and if we didn't we were like fish out of water.

Look at you two! As if your hair isn't dry and frizzy enough as it is. All that salty water and sea breeze will only make it worse. Your hair's like dry coconut strings.

Marie and I couldn't care less about the state of our nest-like hair that would break combs if we tried taming it.

Not even bad weather could stop us from submerging ourselves in the lagoon and let ourselves be carried away by the sea. Unless the man we used to call Père or Per gave us a good beating with his belt. We patiently waited a few days before letting the waves wash away the pain of our freshly torn skin before running into the ocean again with new scars. We would rush into the lagoon with our arms outstretched – about to hug the water. Like a reunion with a long-lost friend.

Last we heard, Per was on the island of Rodrigues fishing octopus. He had managed to escape there on a boat before he got arrested for some crime that Mama doesn't like to talk about. He'll be sent to jail if he comes back, so he's better off there hiding among the fisherfolk somewhere near Port Mathurin.

Good riddance, says Mama whenever she talks about him, with a look of disgust on her face. Now I don't have to hand over all my earnings to that *vilin soular bonarien*. Good-for-nothing.

I never again want to see him swagger into our room reeking of cheap rum and tobacco while undoing his belt.

9.

Since Marie left us I have no one to bathe in the sea with. The days feel longer without her. After school I like to sit on the shore, reading and staring at the ocean. I watch how the sea breeze makes ripples in the ocean. It doesn't make big waves, but just a gentle stir on the surface of the water. Like a candle being blown. Quiet but still noticeable.

Sometimes when I look out into the ocean, I want to swim as far into the horizon as I can manage.

Even at night you're not free. There are regular visits from the masters and their sons. They come in and point towards a girl or a woman. She's expected to follow Ti Patron or Gran Patron in the dark – subdued. Like a lamb. One night, a little girl of about ten is picked. Her eyes still sleepy, having been snatched from her childish dreams.

Hours later – at the crack of dawn – we hear her limp back into the barracks. She has no clothes on. There are fingerprint bruises on her neck. And red rings around her wrists and ankles, as if she'd been tied down. She whimpers in the darkness like a wounded animal. The practice of breaking a young horse, training it to be ridden, to make sure it knows how to be responsive to its owner. A trail of blood in the dark. A broken hymen.

10.

Mama says I should stop daydreaming and give her a hand with the household chores.

Madame asked me to come extra early today, so I could really do with your help. I'm talking to you, Noemi! she says pointedly, while eyeing the dirty mess in the sink.

With a sigh I open the rusty tap and let the water run over the greasy dishes.

You'd better do it quick before they turn the water off. Otherwise you'll have to wait until the evening and the *kankrela pou donn enn bal*. The cockroaches will throw a party.

As if they haven't already, I mumble.

What was that?

Nothing.

I squirt some green detergent which Mama dilutes with water and fresh lemon to make it last longer. And I start sponging off the chicken gravy from last night's dinner. A rare treat given our usual lentils with *rougay* and rice. I try not to think about those little *kankrela* feasting on the bits of carcass stuck to the dirty dishes.

Now that school's almost over you'd better stop all that gallivanting on the beach, Mama says, as she opens her compact powder and dabs a sponge all over her face. The whiteish powder looks like ash on her nose and cheeks.

I asked Madame if you could come and give a hand during the holidays. She said you could help in the kitchen. With the help of a tissue, Mama brushes away the excess powder and then adds some blush to her cheeks before applying lipstick. I could really use the extra cash to buy a fridge, now that the abominable December heat's approaching. They'll be on sale just before Christmas. But no need to wait for the school break. You can already start tomorrow.

I shrug my shoulders and place the clean plates upside down on a blue plastic tray that's seen better days.

Her daughter and family are coming over from Australia for her seventieth birthday, she moans. It's going to be a big celebration. You know what they are like! There will be so much to do in that big house of theirs! She doesn't even wait for an answer. The gate creaks behind her as she practically runs down the road holding on to her *panier*.

What could I say? As if I had a choice. I pick up my bag and lock the door behind me. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother, when anyone with a hairpin could pick the flimsy lock, but then again, who would steal from us? What's there to steal from a single mother and her lanky teenage daughter? An ancient TV? Our broken furniture? Oh no. They are better off breaking into gated *pieds dans l'eau* properties after being tipped off by insiders. Once or twice, a gang tried to blackmail Mama into giving them information about the De Grandbourg family, but Mama wouldn't budge. There's something that ties her to them. She'll always remain loyal to that family – no matter what. So in the end they got the information from their security guard instead. Strange, that the ones who're supposed to be guarding their bosses' properties are the first ones to talk – as long as they get their share. You can buy just about anything around here.