

The Vanishing Princess

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A bar, wherever it is, is no good without a mirror, she thought, as she sipped from the dusty bottle of Belikan, longing—deeply longing—for a piná colada in the damp, cool, air-conditioned bar back in Miami where the waiters wore bow ties and polished bar glasses to a silver-white sheen. There she could cross one long, lean silky leg over the other, scoot a little closer to the bar, lean on her elbows, and see herself framed by some of the best liquor in the world.

But this was Julio's Bar, Belize City, and there were no mirrors, only a dirt floor, a palm-frond roof, a flourescent light dangling from an extension cord, and a circular, open-air bar. Julio sat in the middle, resting an elbow on a shelf of dusty bottles, watching *Praise the Lord* television come quivering in from Miami, dancing monochromatic images on a static-speckled screen; little rays of tattered gray, filtering down the dark, dark night: "Praise the Lord, Sister. Praise him for his mercy."

A couple of American construction workers—shirtless, fat and sweaty as Midwestern hogs—talked of Cadillacs and Jimmy Buffett. They did not notice her make her entrance—her Julio's Bar debut—or how she clutched the bottle between her hands, neither woman nor saint.

From a shack a few feet away, a toddler with a ragged gray t-shirt ran to Julio who did not glance from the black-and-white screen. Through the dark night the message came trickling down, down, down the TV antennas right to the heart of Julio's Bar, Eve Street, right on the black Caribbean, the message came home: "Praise the Lord, Sister, and he'll wash you whiter than snow."

Phyllis Whitefield glanced at her own pale arms, riddled with insect bites, and smiled at the little girl who sucked on a grubby finger. A halo of mosquitoes swarmed about the child's head. The city was

full of many dark children with thin arms waving like palms in discordant choruses of "hosanna," their cries the sound of disease and malnutrition, the sound of poverty, black as the night that curled about you as you slept.

A rat, big as a cat, scurried across a shelf of bottles. The baby watched and pointed, her little brown finger stabbing the air. Phyllis thought of holding her, but instead she drank deeply. There was always another child, and another and another, spindly black or brown arms raised, swaying like palms along the beach, voices calling to the white, white moonlight, "Come, wash me whiter than snow."

The dream had come before. She was naked and the sun was glinting off her pale skin—her translucent white armor. Overhead, there were crows calling, circling, john crow—the carrion crow—poised and patient. All about her were silent dark faces; warm bodies imbued with the scent of the earth; yards of black hair uncoiled; hands reaching, floating out like sea-drifting tentacles on the hot, moist air. She was fading, sinking among them even as she tried to reach out to heal, to caress, to make gentle bridges, to leave her own faint signature. And all along, the people sang, lifting voices and arms, singing and dying, singing and dying at the orphanage, at the hospital, in the streets, singing and dying with a completeness she did not know.

She opened her eyes to the stark, green walls of her room, the humid, tropical air, the jangle of the patella vendor's cart in the street below and Cook's voice, lapsing into Creole, as she bullied the Girl Guides, scouts who earned merit badges for cleaning the manse.

"I wonder what john crow do before the jackass died?" a young voice asked.

"I do the Lord's work," Cook said. "Lord make me worthy. People never stone empty mango tree."

"Old mango tree got nothing I want," the Girl Guide scoffed.

"New broom sweep clean, but the old one knows the corners," Cook answered.

She was otherwise known as Miss Daisy Parsons, Sister Daisy, as members of Ebenezer Church called her. She played the wheezing old organ and sang in a voice clear as tropical rain. But for the last twenty years residents of the manse—who came from the states or Canada—simply called her Cook because that's what she did. She performed her task with the diligence of Martha and the devotion of Mary, Phyllis thought.

She listened to their banter as she lay in bed in the pre-breakfast

hours. Her head ached from the night before and there was Regina to contend with.

In the small bed across the room, her niece slept calmly at last. The girl had tossed all night, complaining of the heat that made even the sheet unbearable. Her hair was dark, limbs the sun had turned the color of coffee with cream, eyes the color of fireweed honey in the sunlight. She was June's child, grown up, married, something the family wondered why Phyllis had never done.

Phyllis had her suitors then, back in the war years when she was known for her tawny hair, her Garbo-esque face and her long, long legs that slipped so elegantly into fashionable "Princess Margaret" trousers. Admirers brought her crystal atomizers filled with perfume, silk scarves, gold locket and gardenia corsages. She was beguiling like a queen of the silver-white screen, they told her. But she rejected them one by one and instead dedicated her life to the mission field. It was easy then, inside the cool, dark interior, kneeling in stained-glass pools of gold and ruby light—to believe in divine solutions, a heavenly crown, a radiant whiteness granting justice for all.

"Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world," she sang from her perch on the seawall, her utilitarian khaki skirt tucked beneath her and her bare, brown legs swinging free as she drained a bottle. The breeze ruffled her cropped, tawny hair, moonlight blanched her skin. "Red and yellow, black and white. They are precious in his sight," she sang.

"Precious, precious," she whispered to the baby she found in a refuse pile not far from the orphanage. There were so many cast-off children of many colors, one for every bottle of beer she tossed into the waves each night.

"Talk to her please, Aunt Phyllis?" Regina asked that morning. She had flown several thousand miles to solicit support in hopes of mending faltering family bridges. "You know, Mom. She'll listen to you. I love him so."

How do you tell someone the war is long over? That your aristocratic Eden has ended? That Jesus loves the little children? It wasn't Regina's fault her love was color blind and there was a baby on the way, too. Fair, sweet Regina, naive Regina, Phyllis thought, so far away from her Pacific Northwest home and carrying her first child, dreaming of colorful worlds of perfect unity. She had packed a suitcase full of toys for the orphanage and another full of summer things for herself, six hundred dollars' worth, she said, cotton safari skirt, white lace nightgown, crisp little bermudas. She wanted to look

nice for the orphans, wanted to sprinkle a little goodness everywhere.

"Tell me everything about your work," she told Phyllis over coffee that morning. "Tell me about the children. I bet they are just darling." She wanted to look nice for the orphans, wanted to sprinkle a little goodness everywhere.

"Come with me to the orphanage this morning and you can see for yourself. Then we'll stop at the market and you can see the city," Phyllis said.

The orphanage was encircled by a stucco wall and an iron gate that slammed shut behind them. Phyllis walked briskly across the courtyard of bare earth. Regina followed, dragging her sack of toys, stopping to pluck a battered pink rabbit from the branches of a hibiscus tree.

"Miss! Miss!" a small boy, with an amputated leg, called as he swung forward on his wooden crutches to greet Phyllis. The other children followed in a curious wave of dark eyes, tattered shirts and outstretched hands. There were others missing limbs; a 12-year-old girl with a dwarf's toddler body; a blind boy who fondled Phyllis' skirt.

"Hello, Alfredo, Arturo, Margaret," Phyllis said, gliding through their midst. "Carmensita, what an interesting picture you've drawn. You must show it to Regina."

"Regina, this is Carmen," Phyllis said, thrusting a six-year-old into Regina's path. "Her mother died when she was only two. She draws pictures to tell us what she's thinking. The only sound she makes is the call of crows."

"Poor baby," Regina said, her words lost in the clamor of young voices. The child handed her a crayon drawing of a sky peppered with black birds.

"These are children no one wants. They are orphaned, or abandoned too sick or too young to take care of themselves," Phyllis said. "We find new ones here every morning, infants laid by the gate, older children sometimes tethered to the tree."

"I have some things they will like," Regina said, pulling a blond, high-fashion doll from her sack and handing it to Carmen, who apprehensively touched the blond hair. "Go ahead, it's yours."

"Look!" another child squealed, pointing to the doll. "What is it?"

"I have some for everyone," Regina said as she pulled toy cars and dolls from the sack. The children mobbed her. Uplifted arms swayed before her, little hands tugged at her clothing. Once Phyllis saw her almost lose balance and fall among them. Regina looked over the dark heads to Phyllis who avoided her eyes and walked away. Regina could handle them, pat their heads, pretend she was giving papal blessings.

The white, stucco building reeked with the wet-lemon smell of disinfectant as Phyllis entered. Down the hall a child screamed as a committee of nurses shaved and scrubbed his head to kill lice.

Phyllis pushed open the door to her office. The shades were drawn but the window was open and she listened to the children in the courtyard and the drone of Regina's patient voice. It was a simple room with a poster of a smiling Christ carrying a lamb and Phyllis' certificate of commission and dedication. Beneath it was a cumbersome metal desk cluttered with papers. As her eyes grew used to the dimness, she could see a doll of some sort between stacks of adoption records and her Bible. The children have been in here, she thought with irritation, and they've left some kind of plaything. As she reached to pull it from the desk, from somewhere deep inside her a scream rolled forth, echoing through the hallways.

"Rosa! Esther!" she shrieked. From down the hall the nurses came running.

"I'm sorry, miss," Esther said breathlessly. "We didn't think you'd be in today."

"Baby die, señora," Rosa added, the only words she knew in English.

"Doctor said we needed the bed for the new ones. The baby came here sick yesterday. Died last night. The undertaker should be coming soon," Esther explained.

"Get it out of here," Phyllis demanded.

"To where, miss? The house is full," Esther explained. "Morgue too."

From the desk, the shrunken face with skin tautly stretched stared back at Phyllis. It was impossible to tell the child's age. She appeared to be a miniature old woman. She had a clump of black hair, missing teeth, hip bones pushing at the skin. A tag fastened to the wrist listed the cause of death as starvation. The child's age—five. Weight—fifteen pounds. Phyllis had seen the mark of malnutrition before, it rattled and raked through her consciousness.

She shuddered and pushed her way out of the building into the courtyard where Regina was helping a Creole child dress a Malibu Barbie in designer swimwear. Regina looked up and her smile faded slightly as she saw Phyllis' face.

"What happened?" Regina asked. "I heard someone yell."

"A baby died," Phyllis repeated tersely, gripping the girl's arm and pulling her up.

"Poor thing. That's too bad," Regina said. The children once again crowded about her as she stood and prepared to leave.

"Oh, they were so precious. They're everything you said they were," Regina said as they walked through the streets, dodging stray dogs and the reclining bodies of beggars who slept in doorways. "I wish

Jeremy could see them. I hope our baby is just like them—those big eyes.’

Phyllis was silent as they walked. She studied the cheekbones of the Wheelchair Lady who sat in the sparse shade of the city park where the homeless washed their clothes in the fountain and hung them to dry on its green-painted cement walls. There were many like the frail old woman. They were missing limbs or crippled by disease. Some had high Mayan cheekbones, the dark feline eyes of the Creole, skin in shades of black and bronze. They melted into a Belizean blend of color—the poor and the poorest—clustered in the city streets under the white heat of the Caribbean sun, selling peeled oranges, peanuts, sandals made in Mexico and tamales at noon day.

Inside the market strings of peppers and garlic and stacks of tomatoes gleamed beneath the bare light bulb—haloes of light ringed the shadowy interior. There were bins of dried beans and herbal cure-alls for bed-wetting, frigidity and the bite of a hangover.

“Señora, for the baby,” a woman with a basket of herbs called. She shook a small package in Regina’s face. “Make good fat babies. Or maybe you don’t want baby,” she said, taking another package from the basket and shoving it at her. “Make baby come out real fast.”

“No, no thanks,” Regina said politely, dodging the hands that plucked at her. She followed Phyllis down the rows where the sellers called to them, leaning over the bins and waving merchandise, singing its praises.

At the dock, lean, bronzed men pulled giant sea turtles from their nets. Phyllis grabbed Regina by the shoulders and nudged her into the arena.

“This is Belize,” she whispered.

“Hello, miss,” the seller called. “Some of this, eh? Nice and fresh.” Regina turned away and looked ill as a massive creature faintly paddled the rank market air and the men sliced through its pink-white meat.

Phyllis led her back to the manse. Regina lay in front of the electric fan, her skin flushed, arms folded across her chest and eyes closed. She appeared fragile, an endangered species, Phyllis thought, but more likely it was the nausea that came with her fourth month that had repressed the irrepressible Regina. Downstairs Cook sang in the kitchen as she shelled shrimp for jambalaya.

By evening, Regina had revived and lay in a hammock on the veranda as Phyllis and Cook reclined in folding chairs, Cook fanning herself with a newspaper and talking about the revelation. Phyllis sighed. Of course, it had come not to the bishop, the parson or the missionaries, but to the cook personally, a winged message from a god in whose

eyes she was favored. Phyllis' eyes burned and her head throbbed. She had heard about the dream too many times and now it was about to be recounted to Regina who politely listened.

"It was ten years ago, but I'll never forget it. I dreamed I was walking along the beach with crowds and crowds of people and a voice behind me says look up to the sky," Cook said, her melodic voice singing. "I looked up and the sun was coming dazzling down, down and all of a sudden the sky opened up and there was a cross surrounded with rainbows. It was the most beautiful thing. I said, 'Alleluiah! Praise the Lord!'"

"That's beautiful," Regina said. "What do you think it meant?"

"It told me that the cross was not just for dying. It's a road to a better place. Praise the Lord! A better place for all colors of the rainbow," she said.

Phyllis silently stared into the distance at the faint line of the seawall, her white fingers knotted together. Her fatigue was beyond rainbows.

Without warning, Cook rose and slid into shadows as dark as her skin. "Shhh," she whispered. "I don't want him to know I'm here."

Phyllis listened. Down the road from the Voice of America headquarters came the light laughter of party-goers—tinkling like champagne glasses raised high in toast—the rumble of cars cruising up the circular drive past the guards at the spiked iron gate.

Then she heard the soft footsteps and the jangling of the iron gate below. "Miss Daisy? Sister Daisy?" a man called up through the darkness.

With a sigh "of resignation, Cook retreated inside and reappeared a minute later. "I gave him a bun. I don't want to give him money, he'll just go to Julio's and buy Belikan."

"Full belly tell empty belly, 'Keep heart,' " the man whispered in the dark.

"I wonder where a beggar goes in the nighttime?" Regina asked sleepily. Phyllis had shown her the city with its families living in tiers, one in a ramshackle structure built on stilts to catch the sea breezes and another living below on the dirt. Regina had seen the open sewers, the rats, the morning bucket parade as families dumped their refuse into the sea. She had stepped daintily, compassionately over the old man sleeping in the doorway of the shop where she went to buy film and souvenirs.

She had seen the school children attending classes at the old church built from hurricane debris, heard their voices singing on the afternoon breeze: "Ebenezer. Ebenezer, God has blessed us." She saw the poorest sip the thin cereal given free because it was porridge day.

A car engine hummed as it rolled past the manse, followed by a pack of dogs barking and yipping.

Later that night, Phyllis went out alone. On the road to Belmopan, crosses from the cemetery gleamed bone-white in the headlights. She recalled an infant's funeral, the tiny wooden casket that refused to be buried, later floating to the surface as the water table rose.

The night was dark, mazes of truth and contradiction in black and white and gray. Phyllis pulled to the side of the road and removed a bottle from under the seat.

The night before Regina left, Phyllis took her to the carver's house on Water Street. A small crowd of tourists gathered outside. The word was out about his low prices for creations from black-and-white-mottled zericote wood. The carver was dark as the carrion crow as he sat in the small room, paring two-tone features of a woman. A bare lightbulb swung over the table with a display of black-coral beads, carvings of sharks, comic dolphins and seductive shapes of Mayan women. His wife made change. A green parrot squawked and chattered in a cage. Regina ignored the carvings—the tourist trade—and poked her fingers through wire loops to touch and croon to a soft black rabbit.

"I can't wait to tell mother all about your work. You've done so much for these people," Regina said on the morning she left. "I'm so glad you'll write that letter. You know how to love all people. I'm sure mother could learn to love Jeremy."

Phyllis had tried to write, sat in her room night after night, waiting for the revelation that could heal wounds. "Dear June," she began. "We are all dying, fading into one melting pot of color. Only John Crow remains to clean the bones. He doesn't care about the color of his meat. I have learned white is not right. It simply does not matter."

In her despair, traces of a distant world named Miami called to her. Was it eight years ago that she was last there? Had she really been here 20 years? She thought of champagne cocktails, lobster thermidor, key lime pie, Nieman Marcus, chocolate-covered fortune cookies, the Fountainbleu Hilton, plumed parrots in gilded cages. She thought of John Crow and the dying.

"John Crow sings when the jackass dies," the Creole say.

She would forget the call of the carrion crow, the rattle of dry bones, and wallow in civilization. She had brought the misery of the poor to America, slapped it in the face of her horrified sister when she displayed photographs of starving children during June's Christmas Eve buffet. For years, Phyllis had shrieked of dying, but they had not heard, had not seen her wounds, her noble empty cross. She had

carried it along the streets of self denial and paid and paid and paid. If you pay enough you can isolate yourself from anything—but time. Now she trembled, and from her aging, slender throat her voice faltered at the pure-white “Faith of Our Fathers.”

In the dark sea, she sought her reflection, her gardenia-white skin, an affirmation of being that echoed back the promise of a heavenly crown and the price she had paid.

In her dreams the trace of the perfume from long ago lingered and crept about her. The night air caressed her as a lover and the silk breezes brought visions of new worlds.

She dreamed of Regina and Jeremy back at their new home. She could see his dark features, their low, rambling house ringed in fragile Kwansan cherry trees; how he worked to tear away the brambles and vines; how his fire crackled, blackening the ground, purging the old. It was March and the wind socks on the front porch of the house would whip purple, red, yellow and green in the wind. Regina would be growing round as a globe.□