

1958

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Recommended Citation

Jucius, Barbara Ann (1958) "Beyond the Bauxite Mines," *Exile*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol4/iss2/7>

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BEYOND THE BAUXITE MINES

BY BARBARA ANN JUCIUS

Benedicta swung her arms slowly with the gate. Cars swept by in front of her, and behind her the Caribbean rolled onto the shore at regular intervals. The beach stretched unhampered in smooth crescents from rocky point to rocky point—a stage, she decided, set and illuminated for the most memorable drama, but devoid of actors. Benedicta looked out at it fiercely, resting her head on her arms.

Suddenly she lifted her head. A sand crab was crawling along the edge of the road, ponderously supporting its red and white body on disjointed legs. She pushed the gate open and knelt beside the crab, obstructing its progress.

In that moment, two bicycles rounded the corner. Benedicta squinted into the sunshine. In the lead was Grant, the yard boy. With him was another, compact, lithe, and heavily bearded. Benedicta surveyed them calmly. She knew that the man with the beard was named Eddy. He worked as a dancer in a nightclub and she'd heard that he could get as low as twenty inches doing the Limbo in his act.

"Look Grant, I caught something for your supper." The crab tickled her covering hand.

Grant knelt to see what she had captured.

"He goes to the sea from the mountains," he said, rising and boosting the crab with a hardened toe.

"And where are you going?" Benedicta stood up, smiling.

"To the town from the mountains," Eddy said.

"You must take me with you." Benedicta spoke as though voicing a line from a classic, and faced him solemnly, a little dazed at her own exuberance.

With much talk of his responsibility, Grant said she should ride on the back of his bike. Without another word Benedicta perched herself precariously on the rear fender, and threw her arms wildly around him as the bike lurched away over stones. Coasting down the long road that sloped into town, Grant raised his shoulders, as if to dislodge a mosquito from his neck. Benedicta became aware of her arms, and shifted her grip until she held only fists of tan shirt.

Suddenly, the day took on form and shape. Grant squeezed between two cars, and Eddy followed close behind. A bantam hen flew back into a niche in the wall, gold feathers settling in the path it had taken as they sped by. Benedicta felt completely disassociated from time and place; in mental aspect she was all situation. It occurred to her that she was not behaving as proper landed aristocracy should, but she was too far away to care.

At least I have as much direction as a crab.

The bike bounced over piled gravel as they entered the part of the road that was under construction. She waved a hand at the man who held the red flag out to oncoming traffic and they sped after an Anglia through a narrow lane. On wheels turned wings, they passed the St. Ann's Weavers, the post office, the theatre, the market place and the Church of England. Grant and Eddie yelled greetings to pointing friends, lounging against the grey stone fences that lined the road, or passing them on the road. Benedicta decided that this must be what it was like to be in a parade. She was creating as much interest as a great rosy snapper on market day!

They crossed the town and went swooping down the long turn to the bauxite mines. They swirled to a stop amid the red dust, and watched the S.S. **George Reynolds** being loaded. Benedicta breathed the rhythm of the giant machinery, and was lulled and intimidated by the masterfulness of derricks and cranes, but just as suddenly she was overcome by the magnitude of the labor of the helmeted, sweating workers, and tugged at Grant's arm.

"Let's go to the White River!" She shook the dust out of her hair as they turned to go, coasting quickly beside the stream that emptied into the Caribbean.

The White River broke every law in its flow. A few feet inland it was cold, saltless and restrained. A few feet the other way and it became salty, wild, and the owner of a sun-warmed body that engulfed the miles. Benedicta placed her feet cautiously on the river's rocky bed. Eddie and Grant waded immediately in, dipping the water up and letting it cool their forearms.

"How can you stand to walk on the sharp stones?" questioned Benedicta, staggering painfully towards the sandy sea.

"Just do it—that's all." Eddy nonchalantly shifted his weight in mimic dance, and Grant lunged towards him in mock attack. Then the two bounded forwards and backwards. From the safety of the sand, Benedicta joined the fray, splashing bravely at them. When the water had numbed their skin and speckled their clothes, they climbed the bank to rest. Then they rode back out into the hot sunshine, towards town.

As they pumped along, Benedicta sensed the eyes of the townspeople on her. She smiled wryly.

I am not, she thought, really the white witch of Ocho Rios, trying

to steal your native boys, ladies. I am just everlastingly tired of watching you laugh and be gay. Today I am one of you. I am the same kind of irresponsible, illogical, sun-drenched person that you are. I am weary of being a princess locked up in a tower, moated by social critics.

At the Northern Emporium, Eddy gave her his hand to help her off the bike, his brown eyes big with knowledge. Benedicta looked down, and concentrated on winding her way amid the piles of tins, bolts of cloth and barrels blocking the entrance to the store.

"Huntly-Palmer," she said, pointing to a box of cookies in the showcase. "Two and three" was the salesgirl's prompt reply. Benedicta held out a pound note.

In the corner was a boy seated on a stool, his black head bent over a ledger. Staring, absorbing his swarthy image, Benedicta felt slightly giddy. It was such a perfect set-up! She walked over to the corner, and started to talk to him. He met her glance with a broad smile.

So, my surreptitious flirting has had an effect. Even under the restraint of nosy brothers and parents. But today, the frontal attack! I shall be a cunning, devastating 1958-type Desdamona. But what does a vamp do in such an instance? Come right out and say "Well now, and just what time do you get off the books?" She opened the cookies and passed them around. Grant, Eddy and several others in the store came and sat down.

They sat and talked about American dollars and American ice cream. An old man leaned his machete on the floor in front of Benedicta's feet and told them about the great earthquake at the turn of the century in Kingston. They discussed Federation, and the Honorable Norman Manley's position on the Matalon industries.

Then they all worried about the droughts that Savannah-La-Mer and Port Antonio were experiencing. Benedicta felt herself one of them, but she still wondered how they felt about her. The guise in which she was there suddenly occurred to her. Slumming. She rose hastily and put the box of cookies in the working boy's hand.

What did I want you to do in my dreams? Take me back to the stock room and kiss me? Teach me that a black man's tongue and teeth are no different from a white man's? You were my negro David, one who could teach me that we are all God's children. Oh Benedicta, Benedicta, stop it! The only thing to do is enter a convent, she thought firmly.

She turned towards the sunshine, but glanced back and imagined that resentment crossed the salesboy's brow.

You see it now, don't you? You'll never be my special grocery-store friend. We do live in different worlds.

Benedicta forced her attention to the cricket game being played

on the field across the road from the Emporium. Small boys and older men played together.

Within yourselves you have a wonderful oneness. That's why I envy you. Why, I tell myself, that I am spiritually one of you. Yet I am as guilty as others of flaunting superiority. I felt very brave about my embarkation this morning, and thought of how you might have taken advantage of me. Yet, I have only used you to reinforce that imagined superiority.

The pitcher bowled the ball. The batter swung on it so that it was tipped backwards. A small boy ran to get it as it rolled near Benedicta. She was acutely aware of her own youth, the sun burnishing her light red hair, and the transparency of her tan that had hitherto made her an islander. The elements were supposed to have made her one of them.

A half hour or more had passed before Benedicta noticed that the sun was going down. When the game was finally ended, and all conjecture aired as to the possibility of the West Indies winning at Lord's Saturday, night had fallen.

Night! night! Make me one of yours and one of them. Enfold me, cover me.

She followed the crowd to a dimly lit, shelf-bedecked cafe. A group of people were clustered together in the dingy room. How many times had she passed and longed to be one of the laughing crowd? Someone pushed a plate of fish, ackee and plantain towards her. A bowl of rice and peas was circulated around the table. Benedicta was caught up in the earthy congeniality.

Last night, and unaccountable other nights, I sat on the porch of our house and listened to this calypso, this song of the island. Now I am in it, and part of it. She had half-eaten her plate of food before the fly-infested kettle on the stove in the back of the room caught her eye. She saw a hundred un-washed brown hands. They raked their fingers through grimy black hair, and then tended the stove. She turned from the food and concentrated on the music.

Somewhere she was turned out with the foggy, brimming crowd into the night air. Near the market place a religious-calypso ceremony was going on. Pokomino, or white magic. She turned her head.

Give me good old fashioned myal. Honest black magic.

They were all in the square, the Chinamen from one of the small shops, the slanty-eyed Indian boys that all looked like Kims, and the natives. It had turned out to be a sort of ethnic sorcery session. Benedicta reeled sleepily.

How am I representing the white race?

There was a fury in the air, and a deep rhythmic beat of life. All that is memorable in the warm night was there, with a certain intensity and purpose added. Weird and candle-flickering, the night became strangely devastating. Benedicta decided that it must be completely simple to be initiated.

Grant and Eddy stood on either side of her, Grant with a cigarette hanging on his lower lip, and his khaki cap pushed back on his head. Occasionally one of the men would strut in an impromptu dance with one of the village girls, inspired by the insistence of the drum and the magic of the guitar. People crowded and milled. Benedicta stumbled in the press of damp bodies. As she lurched forward to regain her balance, she became aware of Grant's arm supporting her. She nodded and smiled, and edged from the crowd.

She woke up the next morning in her own room. Everything was in its place, even to the delicate edge of the Pointsiana bush showing through the window. Once she was dressed she wandered out onto the porch with a half-peeled banana in hand, put her free arm around one of the columns and rotated slowly. Her glance took in the familiar fauna of the garden, the lemon trees, and Hannah, the yard dog, stretched out in the sun.

She caught sight of Grant, sitting in the walnut tree. She continued her circle around the column, then met his look and said as politely as she could,

"Good morning, Grant." And then to herself, "I don't think I'm extra good or extra bad. Just one of the petite bourgeoisie, and that simply means tempted."
