

Ole Year's Night

Shut your mouth, go away / Mama look a boo boo dey.

—From “Booboo Man” by Lord Melody, Trinidad, 1956

Just past midnight and the adults were finished with praying on their knees and wishing each and all a blessed New Year. The children were wet with parental kisses and embraces and incomprehensible predictions about the future from aunts, uncles, and family friends, most immediately about succeeding in the upcoming grade or even attaining a Dr. before their name. No one said anything like that to me, of course, about being a doctor or someone upscale, but I got a few warm hugs, as well, and felt the magic. Mostly because I was wearing a nice frilly dress and carried a little purse that contained a hanky, a small comb, and a pack of gum. That's all, but the purse was a sign of grown-upness. It was plain winter-black faux leather with a gold clip to lock it, and it had two handles that fit neatly over my thin arms. I wore black pumps, also faux, which I put on after

removing my boots. My hair was well curled, likely from the paper twists Mummy used at Easter and at Ole Year's. Twice annually my hair received this paper curl treatment, including plenty slathering of rancid coconut oil direct from the islands. All of this would occur just after a good dose of castor oil to clean the system. My winter coat was from the year before, but Mummy, a well-respected seamstress in the community, had lengthened it, so it still fit this year. It would be years before anything I wore needed letting out width-wise. I left the purse on the bed in the room where all the other ladies left theirs. Occasionally I would visit the purse to dab my nose or refresh a curl, the kinds of things big ladies would do. I opened the gum and shoved a piece into my mouth, a kind of pre-souse palate cleansing. I was feeling strong for my nine years, yuh know, in tune with the adult excitement. Something was definitely in the air, and all present in Mistah Joseph's steamy and large lower eastside apartment were dedicated to fêting the night away, including me.

The trip over to the Joseph apartment from the various neighborhoods in Detroit—east, west, south, north, all over—was a difficult one that year for the assorted Islanders gathering for souse and dancing. The trees were laden with icicles and the roads were like ice-skating rinks. They nearly didn't make it to Mistah Joseph's. If you could only know how really cold and icy Detroit was that winter, especially for these people who were only freshly adapting to the climate. The men were better at engaging the weather, especially as they had to go out in it to work. My daddy worked at a gas station at the time; he was really out in the elements. The women more tended to hang on to sun and memories of it and beach excursions; few of them worked outside of the house. So for them, Detroit summers were easier to negotiate

with their gardens, birds chirping and all. For them, winters were monstrous.

The ride over to Mistah Joseph's house was unbelievably slow. If it was anything like my family, all the daddies driving that night didn't recall any time before then that the roads had been so scary, as if they had been in Detroit for ages. They gripped their steering wheels, all the while commenting on how bad the driving, especially the side streets. Various Mummies, like mine, assured the car occupants that everything would be OK, Just take your time, Daddy. I wondered why my family was on the road in that kind of weather, but it was Ole Year's Night, after all, and who wanted to miss the fête at Mistah Joseph's? Not us. Not anyone. Not me. It was a big deal: the souse, meeting up with everyone all together, not just one by one occasionally throughout the year. It was a time to catch up as a group, exchange information about what was happening in the islands, some of which were slipping away from colonial control. The men gathered in corners to talk about that and pontificate over nips of scotch, the preferred drink of many island men—don't let them fool you about the rum and Coca Cola thing—about the leadership of each independence movement, what it meant, and so on, as if they would directly be affected anymore. After all, they were in Detroit. No independence movement here. They were just trying to make it in their new circumstances. That's all any of them were trying to accomplish. This Ole Year's, every Ole Year's, was the only party in their control, and the revelers would arrive almost as a cluster, no matter inclement weather.

The women discussed how their lives were going along. Oh, yes, there was a Missus Joseph, but she only intermittently appeared and not as a full participant in the fête. The women had a way of talking

about her as if they knew her but then really didn't talk to her, except as pleasantries.

How you doing, Missus? Her name was Elizabeth, but hardly anyone addressed her as such, except for her sister-in-law.

Oh, I'm holding on, she would say. Yuh know. And she would look at you and hunch her back, shake her head, look down and begin rocking right there on the edge of the bed. I don't know what kind of information these ladies were deciphering from these few movements. Sometimes I think they faked understanding her for conversation's sake. Yuh know? But who was I to know then? Now, as I am grown, I have an idea that they understood more than I realized and knew how best to communicate with her.

No matter, she was a curiosity to me, a woman who couldn't handle her business. She didn't even cook. Where I got that notion back then that cooking was essential to being a woman is beyond me, since up to this day, cooking is not one of my favorite things to do, and to tell you the truth, I have a few dishes I can well organize, but I'd just as soon not. Cooking or not, house cleaning or not, you had to feel sorry for her. Something was wrong with her. All she could do was be sad. Given this basic understanding, the women and girls would always peep in on her just upon arrival. Her room was directly across from the room where the women put their purses and coats. That room was the spare where Mistah Joseph's sister, the woman they called Miss Nurse, slept sometimes after her shift at the hospital. She wasn't really a full nurse, but Miss Nurse worked at the hospital as some kind of an assistant. She knew a lot when you combined the modern medicine she learned from the hospital and old island remedies. So she was Miss Nurse to all of us and always dressed in white and always with a little

smile. Maybe that's what she needed to deal with the patients in the hospital. But she was attentive to Missus Joseph, as well, whom she always called by her first name. Elizabeth, how yuh going along gyul? Not like us, useless and phony, at least in my opinion. She could really communicate with her sister-in-law, comb her hair, massage her neck, and hug her. I think she was the only one to make Missus Joseph laugh a real laugh. Yes, the only times I saw her laugh were when Miss Nurse came around. Elizabeth, tell me a little joke, nuh, and Missus Joseph would mumble something and Miss Nurse would laugh and I would wonder what the hell she said. What was the joke? But Mummy and the other women would laugh; so I would laugh as well.

Miss Nurse was an important member of the community. She at least could relate to Missus Joseph in a real way. Like my mother the seamstress, she was often called on by the community for assistance. When people needed clothing or mending, they called my mother. When they needed something medical, they would contact Miss Nurse before calling the doctor. Both of them possessed respected areas of expertise.

The men put their coats in Mistah Joseph's room, which was down the hall from his wife's. Remember, this apartment was the largest of the apartments they had lived in, and it was gorgeous. Missus Joseph would almost always be sitting on her bed rocking and then weakly move her mouth once we entered. I don't think it was an attempt at a smile, but an acknowledgement of our presence or maybe an attempt to communicate. The women and their daughters would go into the bedroom where Missus Joseph lived and try to comfort her craziness. Even the little girls knew that something was wrong with her. She was a frail, gray-haired, wrinkled woman with very dark skin, but not as dark

as the Mistah. He was tall and round-headed and bald. His stomach bulged over the belt, and he always had a stogie in his mouth. Who knows how he ate the souse or anything for that matter, considering the stogie and all. But he was jolly and full of laughter. To this day I don't know his job of work, how he made his living. Even years later, after Missus Joseph had died and Daddy and I would go visit him, I couldn't figure out his line of work. And, of course, you wouldn't ask that kind of thing, even of my father. It would be inappropriate.

When we peeped in on the Missus, she would only talk about her head hurting and her beautiful home near the beach back in the islands and how she was stolen away from there and brought to this country. I would sit on the bed on the other side of her from Mummy. Sometimes when Missus Joseph was too weird, I would sit by Mummy and lean over to listen. Mummy would offer advice about this and that, how to tie head with Limacol or the best way to lock up things from tief, because Missus Joseph always complained about tief coming for her jewelry. Now and again Mistah Joseph would pass by the bedroom door and shake his head. You could see that he was sad, but there was nothing he could do. Now and again you would catch a conversation between the men and women about her. Still, it was difficult to fathom why she spoke only to the women who came to see her in the bedroom and why she didn't come out to join the fête. Even after the Ole Year passed she kept in her room. It smelled musty in there but not stink, just thick and close with problems. Her hair was always in gray, crinkly braids. The ladies would stop in one by one, sometimes two at a time to wish Missus Joseph Happy New Year. But by this time, I was always too caught up in the excitement of a whole year gone by and a new one arriving. Especially that year

because some new cute boys were among the guests, and the girls were already vying for their attention.

However long it took the revelers to greet the New Year, probably no more than fifteen minutes by my sense of time after someone—I don't know to this day who announced the ball dropped, and I don't know how they knew since no TV was on—everyone exclaimed excitement about the calendar change, the pot cover lifted, and fragrance from the souse escaped and made its way to a large, almost bare room that maybe was the dining room, but for tonight it was going to be the dance floor. Only a couch in a corner by a window and a few folding chairs provided sit-down huddle space for the children who had come with their parents and would be lucky enough to stay up for the whole night, or as long as their parents remained at Mistah Joseph's. You could feel the excitement, the change of time, the possibility of new, the hope. Except for Missus Joseph. You were never sure if she understood what was happening. I always felt a little sadness somewhere as the New Year became more of a fact, after that initial excitement because I could feel her loneliness and lostness as if she was sitting on my shoulder. Like she was trapped between here and there or something like that, not with us but not gone.

Maybe about an hour before the New Year kicked the old one out, a crew of adults would huddle over the pot of pig feet to determine the next step: when to convert the feet that had been cooking on slow fire for hours into souse. They had to figure the logistics of moving pig feet through a series of clear water rinses and the exact right moment to add the onions, green pepper, and cucumbers. Then the delight of

biscuits, the kind that came in the packs that you shoved into the oven for a few minutes. The biscuits had to be hot, hot, butter dripping, even though the souse was cold at serving. It was in this process that the adults reacquainted themselves after a year away from the group. Too, there might be new fellow travelers for the evening. The children, as well, tried to figure out who was who. It wasn't easy to sort each other out because some parents were not consistent in coming to the Ole Year's night fête. You may see the child as a baby, and then several years later when it was talking in full sentences and then when it was almost high-school age. To the best of my knowledge I don't think the Josephs ever had a child. But you never know how these things go. I used to hear a rumor about Mistah Joseph having a son. He may have been at one of the parties. By the time I reached the age of better wisdom than I had the night in question, I still wouldn't have asked for those kinds of particulars. It wouldn't have been appropriate.

My parents and I were regulars. Every year we were wherever the fête was, no matter the apartment Mistah Joseph and his wife were living in. They changed a few times over the years from a dingy two-bedroom place to this final place for Ole Year's, a large three-bedroom with lots of windows and wood trim and wood floors and a big enough space for real dancing. That was where I danced for the first time ever with a man, Mistah Joseph, because Daddy didn't dance, and, of course, I was too young for boys.

Once the pot cover came off the pig feet, it was almost time to fête and for the real magic to begin. Now the adults moved as a gaggle. Soon bowls of souse and biscuit appeared out of nowhere, landing in the hands of the children, who were settled into the corner couch and folding chairs. Then the adults reassembled in the kitchen for

additional shots of scotch for the New Year and to dish out souse for themselves. Each year they fussed over the quality of the pot and each year voted it excellent by the depth of their bowls. The children were left on their own in the living room. That year none of the children really knew each other, but the older ones struck up conversations about the usual topic, school or a movie or a song. I usually didn't know much about the American songs or movies. My family only listened to calypso and Tito Puente. They didn't allow me to go to many movies.

In my humble opinion, there is no smell like the smell of souse. The combination of lime, cucumber, and raw onions overtakes the freshness of the pig feet. And then the texture of the feet stiffens in reaction to the lime (some use vinegar, most in fact, but Mistah Joseph also added lime, which I have grown to prefer), while the bones are curiously soft and responsive to chomping and sucking after the meat is gone. To this day, it is still one of my favorite foods, especially with the hot biscuits that come a dozen in a pack. I think back then they were made by Wonder Bread.

We were settled with our bowls of souse when one of the cute boys raised a piece of meat on his fork and screwed up his face. I thought to myself that he must not like the feet; he didn't look islander anyway. So I immediately concluded that he was scorning the food. I was ready to scorn him, even though he was the cutest of the crop, when I noticed something slimy dangling from the meat he held up. Now pig feet can be messy and sticky when first cooked, but the sousing process eliminates that. So I truly was confused by the slime until the boy said, Ugh my brother sneezed. I don't know that I would have responded with humor if someone had blown snot onto my food, but laughter it was from all the rest. Not me. I was horrified and wondering what

would happen next. We all sat there, them laughing, me not, until the boy's mother came over, retrieved the nastiness, and replaced it with a fresh bowl. By this time the moment was spoiled. I couldn't properly eat the souse or enjoy the company of the other children. The cute boy wasn't cute anymore, and I was just trying to get away from this crew.

Eating finished and soon calypso took over. By this time another few shots had passed lips, and the predictions about the status of island politics grew even more furious. Mistah Joseph had all the hot tunes and all the calypsonians to sing them: Kitchener, Invader, Sparrow. The first strains of music began to take over a few bodies. My mother was among those moving. Daddy didn't dance, but she did. She danced when cooking, when washing dishes, when cleaning house. It was she who got me into dancing. I think this is how she put herself back home, through moving to the music. Soon a little enclave of women began to shuffle and swish around, their slippers (you always brought some kind of flat shoes to replace the boots and for dancing) making a rhythm on the wood floor. Now I was wandering between the women and shifting my bottom as they did and moving my legs side to side. When the music took a break, I decided to visit my purse again, freshen up, and grab a stick of gum. O Lawd, no gum. I was confused. What happened to my gum? A few women were in the bedroom, one of them with her three-year-old daughter, who was clutching the remains of my pack of gum in her hand as she chewed away on a stick. Look, I was horrified. This was worse than slime on pig feet souse. I didn't know what to do, especially as this little cupid girl was grinning like a pig, happy with her tiefing and oblivious to

my consternation. If you could only know instant hate as I felt it then. Instant, instant. I wanted to choke the little girl. I wanted to yell like murder. And most of all, I was hurt and felt violated. I felt powerless. I went by my mother on the dance floor still, and whispered, She take muh gum, that girl over there. I don't think Mummy quite heard me, especially as the woman with her offending daughter came over to speak to Mummy just then. They were Islanders. I could tell by the accent, small island. They began laughing and talking about what I don't know. By this time I had shut down, especially as the music had stopped while someone changed the record. I was disconsolate; the party was over for me.

You could feel the intensity of the atmosphere in the short break from dancing. I don't know quite how to describe it, but the place was really steamy and the smell of souse pervading. Everyone was smiling except me and, I suppose, Missus Joseph. I think that now, but then I didn't care one bit about smiling or her misery, only my gum and this little cupid girl in my purse. Then the music started up again. People were dancing and I was in the middle of the floor feeling lost. I can only imagine how my face must have looked angry. From nowhere Mistah Joseph, stogie and all, came over and bent low in front of me. May I have this dance? His voice was always low and slow, small island with a bit of rasp, maybe from the stogie and scotch. I didn't know how to respond when he held his hands out, but I took them. He was a giant in every way compared to me, for sure. He smiled and I couldn't help smiling back. I understood that I was going to experience something beyond a damn missing pack of gum. The music began. It wasn't the first time I heard the Booboo Man song. We would get the calypso tunes whenever someone went home and brought them back. "Booboo

Man” lingered in our Detroit community maybe longer than over there, maybe because we had to hold on to everything that came our way from back home. They could refresh over there with each Carnival. We had no Calypso Lords to make sense of Detroit.

Lord Melody—there were so many Lords over there interpreting the culture—but this Lord began

*I wonder why nobody don't like me
Or is it a fact that I'm ugly?
I wonder why nobody don't like me
Or is it a fact that I'm ugly?*

And you could feel the sway, but under these new circumstances, my hands held high by a giant, I couldn't quite figure out how to move my body. He moved one leg and the other in time and I followed. You can well imagine my arms by my neck; I was almost not breathing while trying to follow. Soon Mistah Joseph was gone from me, his eyes closed, big smile on the face and stogie hanging loose. The room was shuffling along, except Daddy and a few others. The floor was thick with feet brushing the wood. I didn't look for anyone anymore, not the cute boy, not the chupid girl, not Mummy. Not Daddy. Then we arrived at the chorus.

*Mama look a booboo, they shout
Their mother told them, Shut up your mouth
That is your daddy. Oh no, my daddy can't be ugly so.
Shut your mouth, go away
Mama look a booboo dey.*

There's a point in the song when the band sings pampalam or something like that. And the whole contingent of Lord Melody dancers on the lower east side of Detroit were pampalammung and now stomping their way into the second stanza of the song.

*I couldn't even digest my supper
Due to the children's behavior*

By this time I was in full swing. I had found my legs, skinny as they were, and was well meeting the rhythm of "Booboo Man." All my frilly dress flipping from thigh to thigh and curls flopping from right side of head to next side were in full orchestration. You see the song starts out slow and ends fast so I had time to rev myself up. By the time we reached to the next chorus of shut your mouth, Miss Nurse was on the dance floor moving her arms up and down with a big smile on her face and her eyes well closed. Mummy, of course, was in another world. She had a scarf—I don't know to this day where she got it from, maybe it was the one she wrapped her neck with against the cold —and used it to connect her hands above her head in full mas mode, like she was parading round the Savannah in Port of Spain. I could feel the music lifting my feet left and right. And at the last chorus everyone, even those off to the side, even Daddy because he loved to sing, everyone in that room sang to the top:

*Shut your mouth, go away
Mama look a booboo dey.*

Then the record stopped, but the singing continued:

Shut your mouth, go away

Mama look a booboo dey

And they continued and continued gently stomping all of them and me singing till my lungs could barely push out another note, and I was laughing so hard and Mistah Joseph had somehow gotten rid of the stogie without me noticing. Mummy and several other women were right close pampalammimg. Everyone was moving. I looked over to see what Daddy was doing and here he was dancing with Miss Nurse. O Lawd, how did that happen? You know how you can be taken with surprise to see your daddy dancing with another woman? I don't know if could say I was amused or what, especially since neither of them could really dance. Miss Nurse was jerky with her movements and comical, her eyes closed and head nodding as if she was giving a lecture. Daddy was even funnier because he had a big belly, and I think that's all that was moving, and he was going up and down on his toes and shifting the belly side to side. It's difficult to explain, but look, in the final analysis I was happy. My mother was dancing away and so was Miss Nurse. You could see joy in her face. And surprise of all, Missus Joseph was leaning against the door to her bedroom, which was right off the living room; so she could see everything. She was leaning and smiling with head nodding in time to the music. I'm pampalammimg myself, left foot then right stomping, wondering if people in the streets could hear us with our pampalam pampalam. Daddy and Miss Nurse were right by Mistah Joseph and me, moving the same as we. I think everyone noticed Missus Joseph at the same time, and their feet stomped even harder, and hands clapped to the pampalam, except for mine because I was still holding on to Mistah

Joseph for dear life. Except for the Missus because she was leaning against her door all by herself laughing, yes, laughing. And except for Miss Nurse because she was holding on to my daddy's hands. He had a serious look on his face because he never danced. This was the one and only time ever I saw him move to any kind of music ever, except for when he swayed to his singing, but that doesn't count as dancing. To this day I wonder why he was dancing with Missus Joseph and not with Mummy. But Mummy wasn't clapping either because of the scarf and her hands in the air and stomping like she was trying to wake up some booboo man jumbie somewhere. Oh, even maybe she found herself back home right then.

Who knows how these kinds of fêtes end? The music stops but the rhythm lingers, for whatever remaining pig feet to dance in the pot. The ride home for my family was fun and fine, no worries for as long as I was awake, but days later Mummy and Daddy rehashed the evening, amazed at Missus Joseph. My family takes everything as a sign of something. So, I think they spent weeks evaluating every moment of that Ole Year's night for a signal about the times. You know what I mean? How would politics go back home? What would happen with us here? And all of it had to do with Missus Joseph coming out of her room and participating even at that level for the first time ever as far as we knew.

No matter how the adults would later interpret that moment, I understood something else. Because at the most profound booboo chorus, when pampalammings was at its height and the wood floors were vibrating and the whole lower east side of the city was melting from Lord Melody in full swing, just then I noticed the little cupid girl sitting in the corner with her lips poked out and tears forming

in her eyes. My feet continued to stomp right left, right left in time to “Booboo Man.” Chupid little girl, I said to myself, I’m dancing; look at you. Now that I look in hindsight, she was probably sleepy. She was so young, not like me. What did she know of souse and dancing? She didn’t know about weather. She didn’t know about the ice and snot that night in the city. Still, I threw my most wicked, wicked grin over by her just as everyone was stomping on the last line of booboo dey. Even now I tell myself, good for you.