

# **My Life Among Earthlings**

## ***True Stories***

### **I Come From The Islands**

[excerpt]

One oil painting I inherited from my mother she brought home from a trip to Haiti, when I was very young. It's a two foot wide, foot and a half tall vision of life in the Caribbean. A museum curator or an art historian might call the painting crude, or more politely 'folk art'. But I don't mind that the perspective is slightly off, and that the lone figure of a large breasted, black-skinned woman in the foreground seems to hover just above the plane of the earth below her feet.

A bright yellow, one story house with vermillion-red doors and shutters stretches most of the way across the canvas. Peeking out above the thatched roof is a thin strip of blue sky feathered with white clouds. But, it is the lone figure of the woman that still, after all these years, commands my attention. She wears a royal blue, knee-length dress. Her featureless face is framed with short, white hair, or perhaps a white fabric head wrap. Either way, it is in such stark contrast to her skin. She pulls me back to conversations with my mother about her own island experiences.

"Some of your Trinidadian relatives were so dark, they call them blue-black," Mom would explain, her eyes widening

with awe. She'd go on, "Your father's auntie, the one who raised him, she was that dark." Then, Mom and I would gaze down at my skin to consider its color, to discover it again and again. When a white German and a black Trinidadian make love, it's anyone's guess what color the baby might be.

I've seen photos of myself only days old, and I was pretty much pink. My parents were kept guessing for several more days until my medium-brown pigment finally emerged. Until then, the suspense must have been killing everyone, including the mid-wife who had delivered me because the doctor had been absent, occupied elsewhere on the island of St. Croix. (It turned out he'd been playing golf.) Mom would relay to me the exchange between her and the mid-wife as she filled out Mom's hospital chart.

Mid-wife, in a thick Caribbean accent: *How old are you?*

Mom, in a thick German accent: *I'm forty-four years old.*

Mid-wife: *Really. Are you sure?*

Mom: *Yes, I'm sure. Would you like to see my passport?*

Mid-wife (exiting, shaking her head, and muttering beneath her breath): *Old woman...having a baby...and white to boot.*

So, unlike me, the black-skinned woman in the painting seems to be of pure African descent. She carries a large

basket of tangerines and oranges balanced atop her head, holding it there with one arm. As a child I'd stare at the painting wondering where she's going with the fruit. To feed her family? Or to the market to sell? Either way it struck me that she's working hard, while the islands seemed better suited for the images I more often saw – on TV and in movies. There, happy tourists sprawled about on beaches, sipping colorful drinks garnished with big wedges of fruit and those tiny umbrellas.

But in Mom's first estimation, the islanders appeared to work little, and slowly. Attempting to illicit an explanation, on one occasion she said to a Cruxian local, "You islanders, you sit under the palm tree, waiting for a coconut to fall and hit you over the head."

The local replied, referring to white folks from the States who move to the Caribbean. "You Americans, you come down here and rush around. You're always in a hurry. You're always having heart-attacks. It's too hot here to move so fast. "

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