

The Yellow Rowing Boat

by MaryPat Campbell

“Long practice has taught me that one pleasure leads to another,” was my aunt Bella’s favourite way to start one of the many stories about her childhood long ago in Mauritius. In my house it was one pleasure, an extra slice of cake, or a trip to the seaside, if you were lucky, and that was that, count your blessings, they don’t come in multiples. Bella’s low voice when she told her stories was warm with a gleam of sunshine and ceremony about it, to be repeated and treasured again and again, which amounted to yet another pleasure for her and for anyone who listened.

“When I was a girl of 9, or was it 10?” That’s how at least three of my favourite Aunt Bella stories started. Sometimes I wondered if they were true, but even if they weren’t they should have been. Most involved her life between the wars, when she lived with her parents in the deep south of the island. Heat and sun and dappled moonlight often figured, the smell of the hot red dusty earth, the ice-cold sound of mountain streams, the call of tropical birds and the deep blue ocean.

Aunt Bella’s childhood was a million miles from anything I had ever experienced, and I loved to sit at her feet by the fireside as she relived it. She didn’t go to school much, and did exactly what she wanted when she wanted to. She had her own small yellow rowing boat, which she unmoored and pushed out into the estuary most mornings. She fished for the family’s breakfast, and I could just smell the squid and flatfish as they roasted on the griddle in the shade of her parents’ house by the sea. Pineapples were involved, and coconuts too, I could hear them fall from the trees in their juicy, milky ripeness as they landed with a thump on the sandy earth beneath.

Bella's life was not curtailed by parental demands, or those of polite society, she chuckled as she told us this. As a young girl she swam and sailed and fished in the ocean just a short walk from her house, and was proud of the haul of crabs, brought home to be cooked on an outdoor fire.

I watched her old-lady features closely, imagining what it must have been like to grow up like this. A poor family, at the same time rich in the experience of living island life in the Indian Ocean, is what I dreamed about. Bella and her large family of brothers, sisters, parents, and numerous cousins, all scattered now and most of them long dead.

Bella's face lit up when she told us her stories. She became animated and joyful again, not heeding her aches and pains and various elderly ailments, which on other occasions, she complained about continuously.

If only I had been born in the 1920s, if only I could have lived a life like hers. When I told her this, her eyes softened and she spoke to me as if we were both Mauritian island children again, skipping down to the shore in the early morning, climbing into her yellow rowing boat setting sail for the East African shore.