The Pirate's Daughter

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Author's Note

Like many tropical adventures, this one begins with a sailor. Errol Flynn, the swashbuckling hero of Hollywood films, arrived in Jamaica in 1946 by accident when his schooner, the *Zaca*, washed ashore in a hurricane. Flynn, whose private life and public image were then in shambles, fell in love with the country and saw an opportunity to salvage himself. He bought Navy Island, an uninhabited islet off the north coast, and built a home there. This story is inspired in part by the years Flynn lived in Jamaica. As I looked more closely at this northeastern region of the island, certain facts piqued my interest – for example, that Captain Bligh of the infamous *Bounty* had visited Navy Island two centuries earlier. Also of interest was the fact that this quiet coastal region drew other luminaries around the same time that Flynn was there: Ian Fleming settled there in the 1940s and began writing the James Bond novels. Noël Coward lived nearby. As the title suggests, I also drew upon a childhood fascination with pirates and with the romantic adventure narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*. There weren't any Jamaicans in those stories, and like the proverbial stone that the builder refused, their absence became the cornerstone of this story. While I make use of certain facts, this is a fictional work. All the characters, aside from Flynn, and most of the events related

here are imagined, and while I've tried to render, as far as possible, an authentic sense of time and place, I have altered some facts for the purposes of storytelling.

Prologue

The Island that was Errol Flynn's

The stories my mother told me weren't the ones I wanted to hear, stories about the man she said was my father, stories that seemed to come not just from her but upon her, unguarded and effusive, or as we say in Jamaica, 'Mouth open, story fly out.'

I loved stories about the pirates who used to rove among these islands. True Accounts of Sea Robbers, Treasure Island *– these were the books I read over and over again until I knew whole passages by heart. And then at some point, with all those lofty phrases in my head, I began making up my own story. I called it* Treasure Cove.

That was also the name I'd given to a place here on the island, a cove where a coconut tree leaned out crookedly over the water. You could sit on the tree trunk and imagine it was a ship at anchor. A white bougainvillea grew on the slope above, and I used it as a landmark—

She can see it all from the veranda – the cove and the white bougainvillea that once served her so well. For a moment she sees herself too, a boyish-looking girl running across the lawn to the sea.

The lawn is overgrown now and nameless bushes have sprung up around the bougainvillea. Lizards have taken over

the garden and the derelict tennis court. Even here on this upstairs veranda they no longer run away from her.

At twenty-six, May is a tall version of the girl she used to be. She still keeps her straight brown hair very short, and she has the same valiant curiosity she had at the age of ten. Gold hoop earrings and numerous bangles help to feminize her. She's become what people call 'a handsome woman.'

She's spent most of her life here on Navy Island, a place so small it's not on any map, not even maps of the West Indies. It's an islet really, about a mile off the coast of Jamaica ('a piece of Jamaica that drifted away,' she used to tell people).

Every day she sits at the wrought-iron table on this veranda, typing on an old manual Underwood. She's not sure why. She could say, like the hero of *Treasure Island,* that someone persuaded her: *My dear friend Nigel Fletcher, having asked me to write down the events that occurred here from beginning to end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen* . . . She knows that she wants to do this now, not wait until things have become memories of things – nutmeg-smelling rooms, the rasping sea, how quiet it is on this veranda after a downpour.

Her father, the man who is said to be her father, bought the island when there was nothing on it but trees. People say he won it in a poker game, but her mother, Ida, remembers him paying cash, the money he made starring in *The Adventures of Don Juan* ('He had to take that money out of America quick-quick before the first wife found out about it; he wanted a house pink like the sunset,' Ida said). He built the house, pink with white jalousies and white railings, and named it Bella Vista. A good name, she's always thought. Bella Vista is a ruin now, a desecration; there's almost nothing

that isn't broken or torn, but she can look out at the sea from every room of the house. From this veranda, she has the best view of all – the sudden descent to the whitewashed boathouse, then the turquoise water fluttering between the two shores.

Jamaica, or 'land,' as they say, is ten minutes away by taxi-boat. She can see the harbor town of Port Antonio across the water and, beyond its Anglican steeples and corrugated rooftops, the Blue Mountains. Sometimes she hears music from the town across the water, reggae pounding from the rum shops and passing cars. But it has been quiet of late because of the curfew and the soldiers and the fear: it is 1976, and Jamaica is in a State of Emergency.

Some soldiers paid her a visit.

She was out on the veranda and heard noises inside. There were two of them looking around the ransacked living room. One of them had sunglasses resting on top of his head. He was examining the photographs on the sideboard, picking them up one at a time: one of her mother, Ida, as a young girl on horseback, another of May by the swimming pool with the two dogs. Then something caught his attention. He called the other soldier over to look at it – a publicity photo of her father as Captain Blood. It seemed to amuse them.

The soldiers were surprised to find May there. 'We have to search the area,' the one with the sunglasses said. She wondered if they really had any authority to do so or whether, having heard about the place, they were simply curious, drawn to the relics of an extinct glamour.

When she walked down to the boathouse an hour or so later to get some kerosene oil for the lamp, she saw more soldiers on the pier. They were taking a break, drinking sodas

and chatting. A song, something from childhood, bobbed around in her head:

Fan me, soldier-man, fan me, fan me . . .

She was eating an Otaheite apple that she'd picked on her way down the hill, and she remembered her mother telling her, *Don't eat in front of people unless you have enough to share.* These men were not enemies, she told herself, and the Otaheite apples were spoiling on the trees. So she called to them, saying they could help themselves to as many as they wanted. They glanced in her direction but didn't answer and went on talking and laughing among themselves.

When she got back home she found the soldier with the sunglasses sitting by the empty swimming pool. He had picked up a fallen umbrella and arranged the patio chairs around the table as though he were expecting company – her company. He asked for a glass of ice water. 'No electricity. No ice,' she told him.

His smile was obstinate. 'Why you stay in this mash-up place?' he asked.

Mash-up place. Maybe. But for the time being it is *her* mash-up place.

Across from her now, she can see the empty swimming pool, grimy with rotting flowers and leaves. Crabgrass is taking over the patio tiles. There used to be poolside parties, her mother, Ida, had told her, with calypso bands and limbo dancing. Her father got so drunk once that he drove his car into the pool. Marilyn Monroe danced here. And so much champagne spilled, May always thought that was why the tiles smelled yeasty.

Sometimes she dreams of her father walking ghostly in the dew. There are times lately when she has begun to feel like a ghost herself, when the bamboo creaking in the wind and the moths hitting the jalousies sound more real than her own footsteps.

Five thousand miles away in Switzerland, a graying man who is not her father sits in an opulent room, thwarted and quiet. A stack of papers lies on his desk beside an electric typewriter. On the shelves around him are photographs of himself with famous friends, some of them taken during what he calls his 'tropical years.'

He hopes for one thing: to hear from the young woman on the island, to get a letter saying that she is safe and well and thinks of him and even – here the hope dies, and, missing her, he feels again like a man grown small in the distance.

Sunset. Shadows approach the veranda. May gazes across the lawn and for the second time that day has a vision of herself as a child. She's climbing up from Treasure Cove, her clothes messy with wet sand, and she hears laughter coming from the house. Her mother, Ida, is on the veranda with party guests; her dark hair streams down her back, shining and beautiful, and she wears a red dress as bright as a hibiscus. She turns her head and sees May, the daughter so unlike her, and tosses her a smile.

The evening shadows widen on the veranda, and May can smell the night jasmine now. Mosquitoes will soon be after her. She wants to write as much as she can before dark.

Part One

Of his early life and motive for turning pirate we are as yet ignorant. He declared himself an Irishman by birth, but his real name and place of nativity was, he said, a secret he would never disclose. To the windward of Jamaica his ship ran afoul.

Treasure Cove

I

Shipwrecked

If her father had not been a justice of the peace, Ida might never have come to know the movie star.

On a sunny morning in 1946, Ida Joseph stood outside her house in Port Antonio, leaning against her father's car. She was glad to be thirteen because it meant the end of childhood and the beginning of womanly responsibilities like picking out her own shoes. Her shoes that day were white and went well, she thought, with her pink-and-white dress. It was good to be outside after three days of rain. Looking around, she saw no sign of the bad weather. The ground was dry. The early sun revealed a patch of mountainside and warmed the car behind her.

The street she lived on, Plumbago Road, was in the hilly part of the town, foothills of the Blue Mountains. From where she stood she could see the sea. Any minute now the ship would appear on the horizon. It was Saturday and that meant she would drive down to the harbor with her father.

Eli Joseph wasn't paid for his services as a justice of the peace. He earned a living operating a small taxi business. There were two taxis: a hired man drove the old gray Morris,

and Mr Joseph drove the black Chrysler that Ida now leaned against. Most Saturdays she would go with him, first to the courthouse to see if anyone needed him to notarize documents. After that they made a few stops, maybe at the pharmacy or the Cricket Oval. Then they would drive to the harbor to pick up passengers.

When the United Fruit Company ships arrived, all the life of Port Antonio drew to the harbor. They were huge, sleek ships, part of the company's Great White Fleet, and they impressed Ida. Her father, who often went aboard, told her that above deck was 'luxury, pure luxury,' with air-conditioned lounges and spacious rooms for the American passengers. Below deck, the real business of the vessel took place: bananas – thousands of them, loaded into the refrigerated holds for the ship's return voyage to America. The loading of bananas always took place at night. During the daytime bustle of arriving and departing tourists, the banana workers were practically invisible. Instead, there would be cart men selling coconut water and souvenirs, straw weavers with jipijapa hats, calypso singers with maracas and guitars; the crazy man who called himself King George the Fifth would be there too, and taxi drivers would guide the passengers through the crowd.

'Ida!' she heard her mother calling from inside the house.

Ida turned to face the car window, where, after a quick approval of her reflection, she took in the beige seats of the Chrysler. It was a big car with room for four passengers in the back. One of the things she liked best about driving in the taxi was the way the foreigners smelled. She wasn't sure what it was exactly – it wasn't on them; it was around them and around their luggage as if they'd brought some of the foreign air with them.

It was unusual for a man like Eli Joseph – a white man and a Syrian – to drive a taxi. He was actually Lebanese, but in Jamaica they were all called Syrians: the Jews, Lebanese, Arabs, and actual Syrians who had come to Jamaica and made fortunes, all of them except Eli Joseph. A man of great ideas, he was often heard saying, 'If I could just raise enough capital.'

He was considered a 'character,' not so much by the people of Port Antonio as by his family in Kingston, the wealthy Joseph-Hanna clan who owned the beer and soda business. To the black people of Port Antonio, the fact that he was a Joseph, a white man, and a justice of the peace guaranteed him a certain amount of respect; that he played dominoes and drank rum with them earned him their affection.

'Ida! You don't hear me callin' an' callin'?'

Her mother, Esme, had come outside.

For a moment the mother and the daughter stood and eyed one another.

Esme was a stout black woman whose overweight body moved with surprising grace. She had small Chinese eyes and a saintly expression that concealed how strict a parent she was. Her daughter looked as if she belonged to a different race: fair-skinned with long black hair pulled back from her forehead with a tortoiseshell bandeau. Her dark eyebrows drew attention to large, expressive eyes. It was hard to describe her as anything but beautiful. But Esme, who did not want her to grow up vain and stupid, made little of her daughter's good looks.

'You out here idlin' while you father waitin' for the newspaper?'

Ida had forgotten that this was why she had come outside.

She picked up the *Daily Gleaner* and walked up the paved path between the gate and the trellised veranda. There was a row of conch shells on either side of the path. Her grandmother, who had put them there, said conch shells protected homes from natural disasters. They were pretty. The little garden was pretty too but crowded; her mother worked hard to contain the lush flowers in the small space – bird-of-paradise, heliconia, bougainvillea, and tree-orchids – vibrant things that clawed, latched, and climbed if they were not constantly pruned.

Inside, the house smelled of buttered toast. It was a shining, clean house with furniture that was too large for the rooms.

Her mother looked at her and frowned. 'Why you let out you hair? Go plait it,' she said and went into the kitchen.

Ida's father was drinking his coffee and listening to the radio. He took the newspaper from her, not seeming the least bit annoyed about having waited. He was a slender, unmuscular man, with deeply tanned skin that sometimes led people to think he was Indian. Like his daughter, he had large, dark eyes, and he had long eyelashes that might have made him look effeminate if he hadn't had such a wide, square jaw.

He was still wearing just his undershirt, and Ida could see the gold Virgin Mary pendant he always wore.

'Eh-eh, Ida. Look here,' he said, opening the paper. 'Errol Flynn is in Jamaica.'

She looked over his shoulder and saw a picture of a man with wavy hair and a sword. She read:

WORLD'S HANDSOMEST MAN IS HERE
Actor Errol Flynn Arrives in Jamaica Unexpectedly

'He's a big movie star,' her father explained.

Ida had seen only one movie, *Tarzan the Ape Man*, when someone had donated a projector to Father Reynold's school down the road.

Eli called to Esme back in the kitchen, 'You hear that, Esme? Errol Flynn in Jamaica!'

Flynn leaned against the railing of the hotel balcony, letting the sights and sounds of the tropical morning minister to him. The sun warmed his face and the green hills unrolled before him to a bright and tranquil sea.

He was almost forty and looked all right, he thought, in spite of the extra pounds around his waist. Yes, he looked all right but felt like a man who'd reached the end rather than the prime of his life. If only it worked like a sandglass – life, the accumulating years – now would be the time, he thought, to turn the whole thing upside down.

He'd made more than twenty films and was proud of only one, *Gentleman Jim*. His second marriage was doomed, just as his first had been. He had a son and two daughters he never saw; in fact, he had no idea where they were. And he'd been tried for rape! The statutory rape of two girls he swore he'd never even seen before they appeared in the courtroom. He'd been acquitted on all counts, but the long, highly publicized trial had dragged him through a stench that still lingered. How had he, Errol Leslie Thompson Flynn – son of the respected zoologist Professor Thompson Flynn – gotten himself so deep in the muck? He wouldn't have known what to do with himself if it hadn't been for the *Zaca*, his schooner. Its name was a Samoan word for 'peace.'

In an earlier century he would have been an explorer, he thought, like Magellan. Maybe a poet too. He'd always loved

the sea, dreamed of a life at sea, and often felt nostalgic about his childhood on Tasmania's coast (darting in and out of the marine lab where his father had studied the platypus – an animal without a scrotum!).

A month after the trial, he'd set sail with his man Ramon, a first-class Mexican sailor, steering the *Zaca* through the Panama Canal, heading for Haiti.

At night watch he'd lain on his back on deck, looking at the stars, feeling like a weightless speck on the planet, or a kind of deviant Ulysses willing to sail anywhere but home. His house on Mulholland Drive was about as appealing to him as a pile of unread newspapers. Good Lord, anywhere but home.

One night during his watch the air grew unusually still. The next day the sky turned red like a puffy wound. The barometer fell. The radio signals went. Then the hurricane winds hit suddenly, unlike anything he'd ever seen or heard, ripping the storm sail. They'd put out the heavy anchors but even then the boat had skittered across the water. Then the galley put out, washing away all their supplies, their maps and passports.

There'd been hours when he hadn't been able to distinguish between the elements – black sky, black water. Strangely, the thought of death hadn't crossed his mind. Death wasn't action, and this was action: straining muscles and nerves. It had revived him. Yes, it had taken a hurricane to lift him out of his middle-aged slump.

The storm passed quickly, but for two days they'd drifted in a shark-filled sea with no radio, no supplies, and no idea where they were.

Then he saw a body of land in the distance, a hazy outline of mountains against the sky. They drifted toward it,

almost running aground at a small desert island along the way. It was another hour before the current pushed them close enough for him to make out a harbor town nestled below the most serene mountains he'd ever seen.

As he got closer, he grew puzzled. He knew he'd never been to the place before, but there was something familiar about it, especially the stone fort at the edge of the water with its black cannons pointing to sea.

There were some boys sitting along the fort's wall watching the *Zaca* drift in.

'What is this country?' Flynn shouted across to them.

'Jamaica.'

He laughed. Jamaica!

'Onward to Jamaica and to victory!' had been his battle cry on the set of *Captain Blood*. His first leading role, it had made him a star. Of course, the whole thing had been filmed at the studio, not on location, but hadn't he defeated a Spanish fleet here – not once but twice – and saved the island? And won Olivia de Havilland's admiration to boot?

Some fishermen towed the boat in. They seemed unfriendly, and particularly suspicious of Ramon, whom they mistook to be Cuban. 'Cubana? Turtle? Tortuga?' they kept asking Ramon, who looked at them, baffled.

Flynn saw a sign that said, 'Welcome to Port Antonio.' A coastguard officer led them to a small wooden office that looked like an army barrack. Like the fishermen, he seemed agitated by Ramon's presence. Later Flynn learned that there'd been trouble with Cuban fishermen stealing sea turtles from Jamaican waters.

The coastguard officer telephoned his superior: 'I have a Cuban here, sir, and he's with an American named Earl Flint. What should I do, sir?'

Flynn found a scrap of paper and wrote out his correct name, and the man spelled it out over the phone. 'Awright, sir, yes.'

Flynn looked around. The boys who had been sitting on the seawall had gathered outside and were peeking in the doorway. No one seemed to know who he was. For a moment he had an odd feeling, like a man suddenly aware of himself dying, that something real and unfilmable was happening to him.

'Police car comin' to take you to Kingston,' the coastguard officer said.

Flynn asked if he and Ramon could have something to eat, and they were taken to a cart man selling food and soft drinks along the pier.

And it was there, out on the pier, that he was recognized by the Indian ladies selling bangles and khus-khus perfume. The usually demure sari-clad ladies became agitated. One of them ran down the pier shouting, 'Errol Flynn . . . oh, God!'

Soon there was a small crowd around him – tourists and Jamaicans, including the previously distrustful fishermen. The harbor's infirmary nurse appeared because in the commotion someone either fainted or fell. The coastguard officer was overwhelmed as the crowd started getting bigger. Finally the police Jeep arrived; Flynn and Ramon were given raisin buns and sodas and taken to Kingston.

The *Evening Star* reported:

FLYNN'S FANS FAINT
Women Fall Unconscious at Movie Star's Feet

It was not the sari-clad ladies who had fainted, and actually, the report was wrong: only one woman fainted, an English

tourist buying straw baskets. She looked up when she heard the commotion and saw him – disheveled, unshaven, but unmistakably her matinee idol. ('Chu!' Esme said when Eli read this out loud, 'it was probably the heat why she fainted.' 'No man, is how the women go on when they see him,' Eli said.) After this report in the *Star*, fainting became epidemic among the young women of the island whenever they glimpsed Errol Flynn, or thought they had. Some pretended to faint so they could say they had seen him.

Ida and her father visited the harbor to look at Errol Flynn's wrecked boat.

'If his boat is here, he must come back for it sooner or later,' Eli said.

A policeman was guarding the *Zaca*. He seemed disgruntled, and Ida could see why. He'd enjoyed some fame after appearing in a newspaper picture guarding Flynn's damaged boat from onlookers. Now, a week later, people had lost interest in the wreck, and he had nothing to do but sit all day, waving away flies.

All the attention had turned to Kingston, where Flynn was being royally entertained and courted by the country's richest families. He stayed in their mansions. The British High Commissioner had a dinner in his honor. He had numerous invitations and met with all kinds of Jamaicans – radio-show hosts, the Jamaica Nurses Association. People sent him baskets of tropical fruit, rum, and native artwork. The admiration was not one-sided. Flynn told reporters, 'Jamaica's more beautiful than any woman I've ever known.'

A wealthy Jamaican named Aaron Levy invited him to stay at his beach hotel in Ocho Rios. As Flynn was being driven across the island to Levy's hotel, he was aware of a

lightheartedness he hadn't felt in ages. Jamaica reminded him of the most enjoyable years of his life, the carefree, spirited years he'd spent in the South Seas before he'd become an actor. It occurred to him as he drove through the mountains, looking out on a landscape so rampantly green that the soil never showed, that he could be happy again. Here was everything he wanted: warm climate, wonderful food, deep-sea diving, sailing, peaceful countryside – and the people spoke English. He'd spend four or five months of the year here. It would restore him.

'This must be the Paradise written about in the Bible,' he said on a local radio show.

These words of appreciation delighted everyone and were quoted in local newspapers, living rooms, and tenement yards. 'Flynn Fever' broke out, as one newspaper put it. FLYNN FANS FRACAS, another headline stated, describing the disorder that broke out at a cinema during a showing of *Objective Burma* when members of the audience thought they saw Errol Flynn sitting among them. The article was written by the same reporter who had devised the erroneous headline FLYNN'S FANS FAINT. Another of his headlines, in fact his last on the subject, was:

> FLYNN FAN FALLS DEAD
>
> An elderly female died of an apparent heart attack as she walked out of the Cross Roads post office around 2 p.m. yesterday. Bystanders claim that they saw a vehicle with someone who looked like Errol Flynn going by. The Chief-of-Police issued a statement saying: 'There seems to be no relation between the two incidents.'

But there was still the problem of Flynn's passport having been lost at sea. Ramon, who had gone ahead to America, had experienced trouble getting back into the country without identification. The World's Handsomest Man actually had no proof that he was Errol Flynn. His wife in California sent him the only identification she could dig up, a copy of their marriage certificate. But since it was only a copy, he needed to have it notarized.

Aaron Levy remembered that his cousin, Eli Joseph, was a justice of the peace. Port Antonio was forty miles away, and Levy could easily have gotten someone closer to notarize the copy, but this way, he thought, Flynn would be able to see how the repairs were going on his boat, and Port Antonio would make a pleasant day trip for the movie star. 'Eli's a bit of a character,' Levy told Flynn, 'but he'll take good care of you an' show you 'round.'

Out on the hotel balcony now, Flynn looked at his watch. It was time to get ready. He looked forward to checking up on the *Zaca* and to once again seeing Port Antonio, the little town where he'd come ashore after the sea-storm.