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The Same Earth

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Extract

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House in the Middle of the River



September 1983

Imelda Agnes Richardson learned something important on the morning of 29 September 1983; she found out things could change overnight. On that morning she walked out of Watersgate, a single suitcase dragging behind her; in it all the clothes and bed things she could manage to rescue. She could not have known that her favourite piece of clothing, a bright red cardigan bought in England and never worn in Jamaica, was even then ruining all the other damp clothes surrounding it, its dye spreading generously to all corners of the suitcase so that for months afterwards Imelda would be forced to wear the colour red like some kind of Revivalist Mother warding off ghosts and duppies.

Even if Imelda had known about the sweater and its ruining effect, she would not have cared, for it was with an angry heart that she was leaving Watersgate. No one was there to say goodbye. All the windows and doors were shut tight. The only sounds that could be heard were a few birds, the steady roar of the river, and Imelda taking muddy footstep after muddy footstep towards the bridge, then towards the good road, and then (it was generally assumed) onto a bus that would take her to Alexander Town Square. It seemed that it was she alone, she alone in the wilderness.

Of course such appearances were deceptive. In a village like

Watersgate everything is seen, every movement known. There were at least a dozen people who had witnessed Imelda's exodus, but they each felt that the woman deserved this, that it was punishment from God himself, so to call out to her at that moment would be to cohort with the devil and who would want that? For destruction to fall on their houses overnight, as it had on Imelda's?

One week earlier Tessa Walcott had been walking up from the river, and if someone from outside had been watching they might have been amazed or even concerned that a woman of such considerable girth could carry all that weight (not to mention the bundle of clothes atop her head) on such thin ankles. Being an outsider, they would not have witnessed this weekly march before – every Monday to be exact – and would not know that of all the women coming up from the river with wash bundles, Tessa often carried the largest. She not only washed for herself but also for various people in Alexander Town Square, including her eldest son who drove up each Sunday to deliver onto his mother's porch the week's laundry. Under their breath many people accused the boy (indeed, he was now a grown man) of being plain 'wutliss' and lazy. But it was Tessa herself who had made him promise to bring his laundry to her, for in this way he would remain in her sight, and she could continue to look after him. In any case, washing was the closest thing to heaven that Tessa Walcott could imagine. To hear her talk of her younger days working for a magistrate in the town – fifteen years straight without him ever finding fault, and him indeed loving her for her honest ways, because if Tessa found money in any of the magistrate's pockets she would always return it to him in full – to hear Tessa tell these stories you would think that washing was the most honourable profession in the world.

On that Monday, one week ago, as the woman neared Imelda's house she called out *Imelda-ohhhhh!* so that Imelda would stop what she was doing and come outside. Imelda had been waiting on Tessa, perhaps even without realising it. In Watersgate things

became ritual easy, like the rhythm of the croaking lizard found each morning at 10.32 on the croton plant, sunning itself; by 11 moving on to the wall; by 11.44 upside down on the roof. Such was the established order of his day. And while Imelda had plenty of things to do, she was only doing them half-heartedly, her ears in truth waiting for the old woman to call *Imelda-ohhhhh!* at which she would take out a long glass of water, *Here you go, Auntie Tessa*. The washerwoman would rest her bundle, take the water gratefully, gulp down a first bit, then use her thumb to rub the middle of her chest vigorously until a great belch escaped and she would apologise quietly, *de gas, de gas*.

The strange topic of conversation that morning was the state of Tessa's panties – or rather their lack of state – for not one, not two, but three pairs had been stolen from her recently. And though in Watersgate there were those who believed (and Tessa was one of them) that a missing item could be summoned back by repeating its name insistently, it just would not do for a woman of Tessa's age to be going around the streets whispering, *Blue panty! Green panty! Polka-dot panty!*

'Childe, is you one I telling,' the older woman said, 'for it would shame me to repeat this to most people.'

'B-But is a shame, yes!' cried Imelda. Most days she had a very slight stutter. 'What use could anybody possibly have for your p-panties?'

'T'iefing old woman drawers! That is what this world come to. Imagine, this is what I have to live to see! Suppose my Harry was here now, eh? What would he say? And him is a deacon!'

'I remember, yes.'

'I should sue somebody for this!'

Tessa's eyes were raised, and Imelda understood the exclamation was more of a question.

'No, I d-don't think you can sue anyone for your panties. You will just have to call it a loss.'

Tessa made a sound of disapproval in her throat. She had briefly been excited by the vision of a grand court case. It was her custom to watch the Perry Mason show on Saturday evenings,

and so she had imagined a quick-mouthed lawyer from Kingston putting all of Watersgate on the stand, catching one of them out on a lie, then browbeating the culprit until she bawled and confessed. Apparently this was no longer possible. Tessa looked at Imelda hopefully again.

'You think this have something to do with The Problem With Mr Solomon?'

Imelda sighed. More and more of the villagers had begun to speak like this. In truth, no one knew if Mr Solomon had a problem. They didn't even know Mr Solomon – and this, indeed, was their own problem. That a man should be practically living in the midst of them, and that they should know nothing about him, filled them with concern and suspicion. Now, whenever something went wrong, you could count on someone to say, 'I wonder if this have something to do with The Problem With Mr Solomon?' Imelda doubted it and said as much to Tessa who frowned and shook her head.

'The place is becoming just as bad as the city. Slowly but surely.'

It was an overstatement. The theft of a few pairs of panties could not be compared to the political violence that was sweeping over Kingston, leaving more young men dead in concrete alleys than had died in the cane fields of former years. Yet, Imelda thought, the washerwoman had said it right: *slowly but surely*. The stolen panties were a sign of things to come, of things worsening. Long after Tessa had taken up her wash load and continued towards her own house, Imelda was still by the gate. She was a resourceful woman by nature. If something had to be done she would do it.

The next morning the sun rose bright over the village – though in 1983, with paved roads just beyond the bridge and JPS poles spaced evenly up and down the street, their untidy wires legally and sometimes illegally snaking into each house, it didn't feel quite right to call Watersgate a 'village'. It was true – they didn't yet have running water in the houses, but there were two

standpipes, and when this last obstacle to modernisation was fixed five years later, the people would indeed stop calling it a 'village' and promote it in their talk to a 'district'.

Watersgate wasn't so much a sleepy community as one that was just waking up. With better roads, Alexander Town Square was no more than ten minutes away and the city of Kingston under an hour. A few men and women now began to commute to Kingston for work and brought back not only the new slang and a slightly more aggressive demeanour, but also cheeseburgers and slices of pepperoni pizza for the children, thereby introducing the village to – no one would say a better, but – another kind of life.

Imelda woke up that morning with the satisfaction of one who had gone to bed with a question and had risen sure of the answer. She tidied herself, put on her trainers and went outside into the lime-grass scent of the morning.

Watersgate was loosely a one-road town. There was indeed only one road, but there were houses built behind houses, and houses set against the side of the hill, and you could only reach these by little dirt paths that broke off from the main road which started (or ended) at Imelda's house on the bank of the river. From there the road rose steeply but evenly for almost half a mile, one side set against the hill, the other looking over towards the river. Along its sides were mainly houses, but also two shops, a basic school and a church. At the top of the road was an iron bridge which went over the river and when cars crossed, it sounded like a great zipper being pulled up. Beyond the bridge, the 'good road' started and the village officially ended.

Two houses in Watersgate were different from the others. The first was a small hut set high up on the hill. To get to it, you had to climb a rough path which smelled strongly of kerosene, as if you might throw a lit match onto it and it would blaze up magnificently, a road of sudden fire. The hut was painted red, green and gold and made of bamboo and it belonged to the village's Rastaman, Joseph. He sold kerosene which the villagers

often spilled on their walk back down, as if to anoint the ground, giving it its permanent smell.

The second house was not officially in Watersgate. It stood just across the bridge where the good road began – a two-storey concrete house, painted honey-white. The owner, Mr Solomon, was a tall, slim gentleman who was always seen wearing finely tailored suits. He built the house, moved in, but spoke to no one. He left early in the morning in a blue BMW and returned late at night. Watersgate people were not used to such a phenomenon – a neighbour who was not their intimate.

Imelda's objective that morning, however, was neither of these houses, but a quite ordinary one near the top of the road. The woman who lived here was Miss Millie, a thin woman whose smallness of frame was inversely proportional to the loudness of her mouth. Miss Millie had unusually large ears and crossed eyes which were strangely furtive, as if she were always trying to look at three different things at once. Her face was a landscape of constant activity – she looked, she listened, but most of all, she gossiped. Like all persons talented in such a maligned habit, however, Miss Millie did not believe herself to be a gossipmonger. She was the most devout of churchgoers, but her loud, impassioned prayers were the best source of information on latest scandals in Watersgate, and even some of the surrounding communities. It was Miss Millie, for instance, who found out that the man who lived in the concrete house was named Mr Solomon, and that he worked in Kingston as something called 'an actuary'. Indeed it was Miss Millie who had prayed one Sunday about 'The Problem With Mr Solomon,' after which the whole village had taken up the phrase.

Imelda had woken with an idea and she knew if it was to spread through all the village, Miss Millie was the person to share it with.

'M-Millie-ohhhhh!'

Miss Millie poked her head out from around the back. 'Imelda? Oh, is you.' She emerged fully, a pot of peas in her hand. 'Come mi dear, let we sit and talk. You can help me shell these peas.'

The two women sat on Millie's small veranda, a soft wind rattling the sheet of zinc roof above them, their fingers absently delivering peas from their pods into the pot. Miss Millie sighed.

'What a thing though, eeeh, with that girl Sandra getting' pregnant. Oh Lord. Her mother send her to school in Kingston so she could improve herself and look what she gone do!'

Imelda nodded. 'What a thing.'

'Well, I hate to be the one that say it, you know, Imelda, but, like mother, like daughter. Miss Pearl was'n much older than little Sandra when she first get belly.'

'I remember.'

'The good book say it. The sins of the parents is visited upon the child. Imelda, let me tell you as God is my witness, is more than one time I sit out at front and see Pearl coming from underneath that banyan tree out there, every time a different man behind her.'

Miss Millie pointed with her chin to the famous banyan that grew outside her gate. 'You know they call it the *Sex Tree*? Imagine! The good green tree that Father God make, people take it and use it for sin. Pearl couldn't expect no better from her daughter. But Imelda mi dear, let me tell you something, you can't escape from God, you know. You just can't escape from God.'

Millie took a breath, changed gear, then started again. 'And you know who I hear was in Alexander Town Square just the other day? You remember that awful girl, Cutie Taylor, who go to Kingston and come back with her bad ways. Of course you must remember. You and she was friend and combolo growing up. Well, you wasn't here a few years back when she come mash up the people dem funeral with a gun! Eh! Poor Pastor Braithwaite did catch himself an awful 'fraid. I hear him did even pee-pee up himself . . .'

'M-Miss Millie,' said Imelda butting in, 'isn't it just a raas shame how this p-place is getting more and more like the city?'

The gossipmonger flinched. She didn't like Imelda's habit of cursing, and she didn't like to be interrupted. But being

comfortable in any talk of apocalypse and calamity, the flinch transformed itself into a vigorous nod.

'Yes, Imelda. I was saying the same thing just the other day to Brother Norman. The young people today just getting badder and badder!'

'B-Before you know it, crime going to be just as bad in these p-parts as it is in the city.'

'Don't even talk it!' Miss Millie shivered. 'But you right. You is so right.'

'And the constable, him only c-coming here once or twice a week and is straight to the rum bar. I admit, a nice gentleman that Young Constable Brown, b-but him is of no real use to us in these times.'

'Not an earthly use.'

Imelda made a moment of silence stretch between them. They continued to shell peas. Miss Millie pouted her lips and shook her head from side to side.

'But you know . . .' Imelda said at last, 'when I was l-leaving England, they had something they called *Neighbourhood Watch*. Don't you think we c-could do with something like that here?'

'But of course!'

It was accepted on the island that whatever came from abroad was bound to be superior, so Miss Millie agreed emphatically that a Neighbourhood Watch would be a good thing, although she quickly realised she had no idea what it was. She leaned over, biting her lips in concentration.

'Explain to me again how it work. It was long time ago I hear about it and you know the old brain ain't so good these days.'

'To b-be frank with you, Miss Millie, for us, it would just be a way of holding on to some old-time values . . .'

'Amen!'

'We would organise it that everybody look out for everybody. Even when people gone into town or such. We would k-keep a good eye on the lookout, and d-don't allow this damn thing to happen where we don't even know who is living b-beside us . . .

like The Problem With Mr Solomon. That is what it's like in the city.'

Miss Millie was won over; being a nosy woman by nature, the opportunity to legitimise such practices was welcome.

'It really wouldn't be anything drastic for us,' continued Imelda, 'Just a way to ensure . . .' she had to swallow before adding a bit of scripture, 'a way to ensure that we remain our b-brother's keepers, so to speak.'

'You take the words right out mi mouth!' declared Miss Millie. 'Our brother's keepers. Is exactly what this community need. A Neighbourhood Watch. Yes, yes, yes!'

The two women continued to shell peas. Eventually Imelda looked up at the sky and said her goodbyes.

'Miss Millie, I think I b-better go and put some things on the line now that the sun is out fully.'

So she went back down the road and had not even rounded the corner before Miss Millie was leaning over the hedge to her neighbours' house, repeating the words that Imelda herself had stolen from Tessa.

'Lord, Lucinda. It sad how this place getting as bad as the city, eeeh? And when Lucinda confessed that indeed it was sad, Miss Millie barrelled on, 'I been thinking. What we need is a Neighbourhood Watch.'

The story jumped from woman to woman, from fence to fence, tumbling all the way down the village, from the bridge to the river, so that an hour later, as Imelda hung clothes out on her line, her neighbour leaned over and said, 'Miss Imelda, you been hearing talk of this Neighbourhood Watch? I hear it is the newest thing from foreign!'

Imelda said yes, she did know something about it, but they, as neighbours, would have to meet and form a charter; they would also have to go to the man who made signs and ask him to weld a big yellow one which would be planted at the bridge, and it would be like the angel with the sword who stood guard at Eden, confounding evil people and forcing them to turn around and walk briskly away. This new information made its way back up

from the river to the bridge, and then back down again, and for the whole week the Neighbourhood Watch was discussed in this way. It was decided that everyone would meet on Sunday to make things official.

It being a Saturday and all, Joan Braithwaite knew to keep out of the way of her husband, the pastor, and to guard his privacy vigilantly, shooing away anyone who might call. For it was on this day, she would explain, that her husband would wait to hear from the Lord, waiting for a vision to come straight down from the throne of God, which the good pastor would then share with his people in church the next morning.

Pastor Braithwaite, on the other hand, had been behind the pulpit too many years to believe everything he said had been straight down from God. Yes, even the business of preaching, it seemed to him now, had its Tamarind Season – a time to struggle and invent and grab at anything that would help compose a lively sermon for the expectant congregation. Nineteen eighty-three was still a couple of years shy of the great explosion of dancehall in which artistes like Shabba Ranks would sing how he *loved punany bad* and Lady Saw would tell about a hood lodged so deeply and tightly in her hole that it could not be taken out – a culture so degenerate and colourful it would provide plenty of venom for sermons. But on that Saturday, Douglas Braithwaite was still in the midst of a Tamarind Season. He had no inspiration, no sermon left in him. His ears were therefore particularly keen to the news that had been spreading around the village: *Neighbourhood Watch! Neighbourhood Watch! What we need is a Neighbourhood Watch!*

The pastor was certain that this talk could only have been started by Imelda Agnes Richardson – the heathen – a woman he secretly despised. She had returned to Watersgate almost four years ago with her head shaved low like a man's, and by the way people told the story, you would believe she had stepped straight from the plane and into the police station where she broke open the jail bars with her two bare hands and took that no-good boy

Zero out of his cell. He had heard the whispers that followed the incident – *no, not even Pastor B. ever have de power or de guts to do something like that. She's a good woman, that Imelda*. All these years he had resented her. All these years he had thought of how to put her in her place.

The sun seemed to set early that evening. Clouds gathered over the hills like it was set to rain in the mountains above and the next morning was dark and miserable. People went out of their houses, an umbrella in hand just in case, and marched solemnly to church.

Though the church was registered in some official book as the denominationally confusing name, Ark of the Valley Apostolic Baptist, the original painter of the sign which stood in front of it, having a reasonably good grasp of phonetics but not of spelling, had simply spelled it the way most people said it. So it became Hark of the Valley Apastalic Baptis, a mistake which the village teacher, Sarah Richardson, used to point out with pedagogical disgust to her pupils each year. The church was a beautiful, small wooden structure with a high steeple. Inside were crude benches which prevented the children from falling asleep, and looking on these humble pieces of furniture you could still make out the shapes of the trees from which they had been cut. It was one of those churches that got going like a slow engine. It started out softly with just a hum, but by the middle of the second song everyone would erupt, spontaneously and yet in beautiful harmony, in a refrain common to all churches in these parts, '*Laaawwwd you're wurddy, wurrdy, wurrddy! Give Him praises He is wurrddy, wurddy! Hallelujah He is wurddy*.' By the sermon, the congregation would break out into ecstasy, with fervent shouts of '*Oh yes!*', '*Preach it!*', '*Hallelujah*' and then other untranslatable words; all in all a few hours spent one day each week to give the people enough faith and stamina and courage to make it through the other six.

When Pastor Braithwaite climbed up to the pulpit that morning, the first bit of thunder rolled across the valley, making the congregation shiver; it seemed now that whatever he was

about to say would have the weight of heaven behind it.

'Oh my people.' He pursed his lips and shook his head from side to side. 'Oh my people!' A little louder this time, and the church responded, 'Yes, Pastor, yes.'

'OH MY PEOPLE! Lift up yourn eyes. Look to the heavens. Who has created all these things?'

'Jehovah ! Jehovah has!'

'Do you not know? Have you not seen? Have you not heard? The Loooord our God is God and God alone!'

'Hallelujah!'

Pastor Braithwaite paused and licked his lips. 'In the Book of Matthew, chapters 10 and verses 29, it says are two sparrows not sold for a mere farthing? And yet not one of them shall fall on the ground without your father.'

'Yes, Pastor!'

In a magnificent quaking voice he continued, 'But the very hairs on your head . . .'

'. . . is numbered!' the church cried, completing the verse.

'FEAR YE NOT! YE ARE OF MORE VALUE THAN MANY SPARROWS!'

'Oh yes! Preach it.'

'The songwriter says, his eye is on the sparrow, but he watches over me!'

'Mmm!'

'Our God is watching over us! My people . . . my people . . . Nobody cannot watch you like Jesus.'

'Oh, no.'

'Yu mother cannot watch you like Jesus. Yu father cannot watch you like Jesus.

'No way, Pastor! No way!'

'Yu boyfriend or yu husband or yu wife cannot watch you like Jesus.'

'Say it, Pastor!'

'AND NO NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH GOING TO WATCH YOU LIKE JESUS!'

For the first time, the pastor was greeted with silence. The

silence of fear, of a people suddenly finding out they had eaten a forbidden fruit, worshipped a golden calf; that they were displeasing the very God they lived their lives to please.

'Oh yes,' Braithwaite continued, 'I been hearing the talk. And the Lord wants to ask you today, who do you put your trust in?'

'In God!' This from Miss Millie, quick as always to recover.

'I say, WHO do you put your trust in?'

'In Jesus!', from the whole church now.

The pastor smiled. 'Amen, brethren. For some trust in horses, and some trust in chariots, but . . .'

'. . . we shall remember the name of the Lord our God!' The church said this at different speeds, so that it sounded like a mighty echo resounding and resounding. They went straight into singing that very song, and they worshipped and they spoke in tongues, and each man and woman felt blessed, as if they had been made right before the Lord once more, had turned away from their wicked ways, back into the sweet enfolding of their Saviour's arms.

Imelda would know none of this until later that evening, for she was one of the few people in the village who hardly ever went to church. Indeed, after the service, Miss Millie had felt compelled to set the record straight; that the idea of the Neighbourhood Watch had always been Imelda's to start with, and she, Miss Millie, had told her, 'You can't escape from God!' 'Straight to her face, I tell her. Right there on my patio. I look at her and I say, "Imelda, you can't escape from God." But you all know how she is – her mouth is very foul, and her heart is very hard. Mmm. I pray for that child every night.'

That evening, Imelda waited in vain by the one-room building which was in turn a basic school during the week and a meeting hall on weekends. But there was to be no Neighbourhood Watch meeting. No one turned up, and this caused Imelda to reflect once again on the strange silences and upturned noses that had greeted her all day. She knew for certain now that something was up.

She walked back to her house and was about to climb the three steps to her own patio when the neighbour's little boy called out from the yard in which he had been playing.

'Miss Imelda, is true that you going to hell?'

'Say what?' Imelda turned to him.

'Mama say if people like you don't give them life to God, you going straight to hell.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, Miss Imelda,' the boy said proudly.

'And what else M-Mama say today?'

The story came out then, and Imelda got a good idea of what had occurred in church that morning. In fact the boy was still chatting away when Imelda suddenly turned her back on him and marched into her house, slamming the door, but not before the words *Fuck fuck fuck!* had resounded like thunder throughout the whole village.

Imelda shed a few tears, but only a few. She was a resourceful woman who could not linger long in the land of griping. She knew this was how life was in Watersgate. In the morning she would visit Pastor Braithwaite and appease his pride. She would explain to him that she was not trying to replace God. For who is like unto the Lord, she would say. This Neighbourhood Watch was just a way of building community spirit, promoting community action – which is something she was sure God would want to see, for didn't he send out his disciples two by two and not by themselves? This was what she planned to say and more. That was her strategy. But Imelda would soon learn that things can change overnight.

Some will say that a river that changes course is a river remembering itself. Rivers having, as most of them do, histories longer than the civilisations that spring up around them are likely, now and then, to recall a different time when they chose to run in a different way.

Geologists and meteorologists would give a more sober explanation as to why Imelda's house ended up in the middle of

the river on that dark morning of 29 September 1983. It had been raining heavily in the mountains above, cloudburst after cloudburst. The weatherman had given flash flood warnings if anyone had cared to listen. There was just too much water coming down the hill. The river swelled. The banks flooded. Then the whole thing turned. Smooth as a train changing tracks, it had diverted to a course it had run a long-ago time.

Perhaps it was the sound of the river coming into her house that seeped into Imelda's sleep, for that early morning she dreamed that she was going to the fridge to pour herself a glass of water, but the water in the bottles was dirty. She went to the sink to collect more water, but the water from the tap was also dirty. It gushed out, splashing her and soiling her white night-gown. She woke with a start but could not have imagined the destruction foretold in the dream of dirty water would turn out to be so literal. The river had reached the level of her bed, but she could see nothing – only hear the current all around her. When Imelda swung her feet off the mattress and they sank into the cold bite of water, she was certain for a moment that she was still dreaming.

She got up and sloshed through the water, managed to find the front door and opened it. The water gushed out of the house, taking with it three pairs of shoes, a lamp stand, dishes and cups, a garbage bin, a chamber pot and whatever else had been lying on the floor. Outside and all around was river. Imelda waded back to her room, knelt in the water and pulled a suitcase from under her bed. She packed what she could find quickly, including the red cardigan, and discovered how easy it was to leave almost everything behind. She understood how people could walk across whole continents with barely a change of clothes in their bags.

Back on the patio, Imelda knew it would be dangerous to step into the dark water, and it wouldn't be wise to go back into the house. She would not call out to any neighbour because she knew they would laugh at her – they would say she deserved this because she had tried to replace God. She looked up to the hill

above her, to the spot where the red, green and gold bamboo hut was located. She could not see much in the dark but she knew it was there. *If only I had a drum, I could beat it and he would come down to rescue me. He wouldn't care what anyone said. He never did*. But she had no drum, and besides, there was something she felt towards the Rastaman that would have prevented her from beating a drum, even if she had one. And it was this thing too that made her leave Watersgate – just as much as the bad-mindedness of the villagers, just as much as the disappointment in the failed Neighbourhood Watch, just as much as the disaster of the river swallowing her house, it was this other thing. Love.

She was always running away from men who loved her. She didn't think of it this way. But if she had had a drum, and if she had beat it, and if Joseph, the Rastaman, had come down the hill to rescue her, then they would have had to face each other in a new way, in this world suddenly changed around them, and they would have had to answer a question it seemed they had been avoiding for more than three years, about their love, and the shape of it, and its future. She knew that she loved him; she wasn't sure any more that he loved her, and if she had called him that morning, this question would have been answered. But not even Imelda was strong enough to face the possibility of being crushed twice in one morning, so she stood on the patio waiting for the day to brighten, and as she waited she tried hard not to cry again.

When the first traces of the sun rising came from behind the mountain, she stood up tall in the greyness and marched down her patio steps into the river. She tried to float the suitcase in front of her as she crossed. At its deepest point the water reached up to her ribs.

Imelda was so focused on crossing the river without slipping or drowning or losing hold of her suitcase that she did not see three strange objects suddenly surface a short distance above her. She did not see them float down towards and then past her, ominous as Spanish ships. One of them was blue, the other green and the last one pink with black polka-dots.

Tessa's panties had not been stolen. Walking up from the river one day, the old woman had tilted a little too much to the left and the three undergarments had simply fallen from her load into a shallow puddle of water. They lay there baking in the ground just outside Imelda's house, and for each person who passed they were pressed more deeply into the earth, camouflaging them. There they remained until the river changed course, dissolving the mud which had encased them, and bringing them back up to the surface.

This was the second time Imelda had left Watersgate. But this time, she thought, she was never coming back. Imelda crossed. She reached the road, and from there she walked out of the village, muddy footstep after muddy footstep.

'Why-o, why-o, why-o,' the people would sing, that's how she come over.'