
Opening Extract from...

The Last Warner Woman

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The Purple Doily

Once upon a time there was a leper colony in Jamaica. If you wanted to get there today, you would have to find a man by the name of Ernie McIntyre but who you would simply call Mr Mac, at his own insistence and also the insistence of others, including his own mother, who knew him by no other name. Mr Mac was famous for his great big belly, so surprisingly big that the buttons on the one side of his shirt were permanently estranged from the holes they were supposed to be married to on the other; he also had a great big head, and a sprawling set of buttocks, all of which he could somehow manage to squeeze in to the front seat of his Lada taxi, you in the passenger seat, and then make the wild jerky ascent up the red dirt road lined on each side with the broad green leaves of banana trees. When the car reached the crest of the hill, Mr Mac would stop – a welcome break, because if no one had warned you before about Mr Mac's driving, how he would press on the gas from the bottom of the hill and never ease off, not for any corner, not for any dip, not for any rock in the middle of the road, just gas gas gas all the way up, the whole time giving you his own tour guide speech in a strange language which, even if you could understand it, you would not hear because of the diesel engine; and if no one had warned you about all of this and you had made the great mistake of having a full breakfast, then all of that food would have churned up and you would now be feeling close to sick.

On the crest of the hill you would tumble out of the taxi, holding your stomach, while Mr Mac excitedly pointed to something below.

'Look, mate.'

He would say this word, mate, because maybe you are from England and he is trying to impress you, but thereafter his speech would be lost to you.

'Dung deh suh it deh. Yu nuh see it? Dung deh suh! Look nuh! Den wha mek yu a hole on pon yu belly like seh birt pain a hit yu? Look. See de zinc roof dem pint up through de mist. Deh suh we a guh.'

You would not understand Mr Mac completely, but you would look to where he was pointing and some of the words would then come together to make a kind of sense, for indeed, down there in the valley, there were zinc roofs pointing up through the mist. And that's where you were going. Just as the Original Pearline Portious had back in 1941 while her mother stood frozen under a guava tree. Pearline had stood on this same crest of hilltop, except she had arrived by her own two feet. She had also looked down on the zinc roofs and made the decision to walk down to them. This despite her seventeen years of living in these mountains and never before having set foot on the trail. If she had continued to listen to the wise counsel of her family and friends and all those who lived in the mountains, she would not have made this journey, for they had said over and over that down there in the valley was a place of terrible sickness.

But it wasn't curiosity that led Pearline Portious down the trail, unwittingly changing her life: that day she needed to sell a purple doily.

The colour purple was a strange choice for a doily. It was accepted wisdom on the island that anything designed to cover wooden surfaces – tablecloths, crocheted mats or doilies – was supposed to be white. Pearline's determination to crochet and knit in colour – pink, blue, red, green, purple – meant that not a single one of her

creations had ever been sold. The absolute failure of what was supposed to be an entrepreneurial endeavour did not upset Pearline. She considered herself an artist, and of the kind whose chief aim was to please herself. Every unsold item would then truly belong to her and she took great pleasure in finding a place for them in her room. It was a room which everyone in the village had toured and reluctantly admitted, despite being convinced that each individual item was ugly, that the combination was something wonderful. They said it was as if the child lived inside a rainbow.

Pearline's mother, of course, tried desperately to dissuade her daughter from her useless and colourful habits. That very morning she had observed her daughter knitting the purple doily under a guava tree.

'Pearline girl, look on what you is doing nuh! It is just ugly. Nobody is going to buy something like that. You cannot afford to always be making things for yu own self.'

'Mama. I will get this one sold. I promise.'

'Eh! You can't even look me in the eyes and say that. Girl, you is just wasting yu time. Who going to buy that from you? We even looking on the same thing? It is purple, girl. *Purple*. Who you ever see with a purple doily in them good, good house?'

'I say I will get it sold, Mama.'

'Saying you going to get it sold not going to get it sold, Pearline. You is only full of talk. Look at me, girl. Is high time you grow up. And don't puff up yu face at me neither. I saying these things for yu own good. Me and yu father giving you money dat we never just pick up out-a road. And we giving it to you only for you to make these ... these purple pieces of stupidness that not going a damn place except inside yu room.'

Pearline's ten fingers began to tremble. They became useless, unable to continue the knitting that had happily occupied them moments before. She kept her eyes fixed to the ground, not wanting to look up. Her mother was also trembling in anger. She had not

intended this confrontation to become so big a thing, and yet she knew it had to become bigger still. Having embarked on this road, she had to walk its full length. So she stepped out of her slippers and on to the earth so her daughter would understand that the next words out of her mouth were serious.

'All right, girl. All right. You say you is going to sell this one? Well fine. Go and sell it. And I swear to you I will stay here on this piece of ground until that happen. Come thunderstorm or sunhot, I not moving. You hear me, child? Jesus Son of Mary would have to come down off him cross to move me. Cause is like you take me for some kind of poppyshow.'

Pearline finally looked up, astonished. She knew that this threat was real, for mothers were always doing things like that. Her mama would stay right there. She would not go inside to sit or to cook or to sleep. She would not go to the farm ground to work. She would make the neighbours pass and see her as rooted as the tree she was standing under, and she would explain to them that it was her daughter who had made her into a poppyshow. She would stay there, even for days, until Pearline had either sold the doily or come back to apologise saying *Mama, you were right. It is time I grow up.*

So the Original Pearline Portious went off to the market, desperate to do what she had never been able to do before.

The market on a Saturday morning is always a brand-new city that rises, as if by magic, with the sun. Its newness, however, does not make it clean. It is a hot, stinking place full of that special breed of fly that remains unimpressed by the hands that constantly swat at it. The city's lanes overflow with chocho, pumpkin, gungo peas, green bunches of callaloo and pods of yellow ackee. Women shout from their various stalls, their foreheads glistening under their

bandanas: *Yam! Dasheen! Cocoa!* – each one holding out a scale, weighing a pound of this or a half-pound of that, always careful to give a little extra so that customers, convinced they had secured a bargain, would come back. The fish-women gather around concrete sinks and run metal files up and down the bodies of snappers and mackerel; bright silver scales jump into the air and land softly on the women's heads like confetti. They call out, *Snapper! Sprat! Goatfish!* And an Indian man standing by a cart of cane, a sharp cutlass in his hand, sings out *Sweet sugar cane!* – though he isn't quite as musical as the tall gentleman, his head wrapped in a turban, who walks up and down the lanes singing his one long note, *Brooomie, brooomie*, a faggot of brooms stretched across his shoulders like he was in the middle of his own crucifixion.

It was amid such a cacophony that the Original Pearline Portious tried to advertise her purple doily. *Pretty doily for sale! Pretty doily for sale!* She pleaded and she jostled and she pushed it into people's faces. *Ma'am, just take a look nuh. Look how it would look nice in yu house. Pretty doily for sale.*

But no one paid her the slightest mind.

The market on a Saturday afternoon is always a quieter place than in the morning. The crowds have thinned. The lanes no longer overflow with produce. The ice from the fish stalls has melted and even the annoying flies, finished with their own shopping, it would seem, have taken off. The vendors are more relaxed and throw their words easily at one another instead of at the customers. The best of their goods will have gone, and even they have a kind of pity for stragglers who are only now coming to shop and have to search through the best of their blighted goods.

But on the Saturday in question, there was one young woman still trying to make her first and only sale. *Pretty doily for sale! Pretty doily for sale! Please ma'am, sir, just take a look nuh. Look how it would look nice in yu house. Pretty doily for sale. I selling it cheap, cheap.*

Still no customer paid her the slightest mind and it was instead

the somewhat infamous shoe vendor, Maizy, who finally took notice.

Like many Jamaican market women, Maizy was a creature for whom derision was an art. So committed was she to this practice that there were days when she counted it a greater success to have landed the most insults than to have sold any pairs of shoes. To Pearline's great misfortune it was this Maizy who now took notice of her, and of the ugly doily that swung dejectedly from her fingers.

Maizy nudged her neighbour, Flo. With a pout of her lips she pointed out the pathetic figure of Pearline. Flo grinned.

'Darling, is the same doily you have there selling from this morning, or is a wholeheap of them that you did bring? Please tell me is a wholeheap you did bring!'

'But Flo' declared Maizy on cue, 'you is a wicked, wicked woman to wish this child did make wholeheap *more* of that thing she have there selling. I can't even call it a doily. You have no idea the damage that thing can do?'

'What you saying to me, Maizy?'

'Mi dear! It is sake of a purple something look just like that that cause my neighbour hog to drop down dead last week.'

'No!'

'Flo, God's truth! If I lie, I die! My poor neighbour, Miss Esmi – the same one with the twist-up mouth – well, she come home last week and find a purple doily just like that one, fling down pon her table.'

'But how something like that get there?'

'Must be her husband, missis! You know he blind from morning. Well must be him did buy it and put it down there fi her. Or else somebody was trying to work obeah against her. Well anyhow, Miss Esmi was so frighten when she see it there, she just pawn it up and dash it out the window. And that is how her hog get it and try fi eat it. Mi dear, as to how Miss Esmi tell it, the hog barely

take one bite and, just suh, it collapse, keel over and dead! Imagine that, the hog dead from purple.'

'Lawd-have-mercy-sweet-Jesus, Maizy! You mean to tell me this girl here is selling a powerful Hog-Killer?'

'That is what I telling you, Flo. If she make any more all the hog in Jamaica bound to be dead by next week.'

Duly satisfied with their own wickedness, Maizy and Flo held their equatorial bellies, slapped their thighs and began to laugh. Between gulps of breath, Maizy managed to turn to Pearline and say, 'Mi dear girl child, I think is best you try your hand at something else, because . . .' she started laughing and hiccuping again, 'it don't look like sewing is fi you at all, at all.'

Pearline slouched and dragged her feet away from the two laughing women. But she continued to call out, with even less conviction now, *Pretty doily for sale. Doily for sale.*

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The market on a Saturday night was a lonely place. The crowds had vanished and the blue tarpaulin that had once been like a sky stretched over the lanes had been taken down and folded up. By then, the vendors had exchanged their mangoes and sweetsops and melons and whatever it was they could not bother to take back home, and one by one, they climbed aboard rickety buses and departed. Pearline alone remained, the salt wind from the sea whistling through the now empty stalls. A dog with pronounced ribs walked around the market sniffing out morsels of food. He approached Pearline and eyed her with suspicion. *Pretty doily for sale*, she pleaded. But even he turned up his nose and walked away.

And so it was Pearline had come to the end of her childhood. Her mother was right; she had really believed that just saying she would get the doily sold would have got it sold. She thought it had been her attachment to the items that had shielded them

from the desire of customers, but now she was forced to face the truth: not that her creations were ugly, but that the world was not a thing to have faith in. She understood it now for the blind, deaf and uncaring thing it was. For had she not called out to it for a whole day, called until her voice was gone, and the world had not heard her. And had she not shoved the purple doily into the world's eyes, but the world had not seen it. So it was with these thoughts that Pearline did exactly what her mother had wanted her to do: she grew up.

But maybe she was not ready for so sudden a growth. The poor girl's mind short-circuited, shut itself down, and when she finally left the market she was in a deep trance. Her walk was a peculiar one, catatonic, and it led her down roads she had never been on before. She was like a ghost haunting the island, her head tilted to one side, her mind to another, and her feet simply following the road, marching in the direction of darkness which is, of course, no direction at all.

She passed several hours like this. Dogs barked at her. Thieves avoided her. And then the sky, which had mostly been a deep navy blue, turned black, and then just as suddenly the darkness began to fade. It became silver with pink edges. Roosters began to crow, and this is where it happened, the Original Pearline Portious found herself standing on the same crest of a hill to which, in later years, Mr Mac might take you. She looked down on the zinc roofs pointing up through the mist and made the decision. Despite what everyone had told her, she took the trail down towards the terrible place of sickness, a place she had never been to before.

The leper colony sat quietly and undisturbed in a valley between the Stone Hill mountains of St Catherine. It was surrounded by a mile of green chain-link fence, ten feet high, which was supposed

to be there for security. In another colony in another part of the world, thirty-two patients had crept up to their guards one night and in the ensuing battle of sores and nails and teeth and batons and limbs and guns, ten patients were killed, four wounded and one guard infected. When news of this episode spread, leprosariums all over the world began to build fences. The one which surrounded St Catherine, however, was pointless. The fence was not topped by barbed wire; there was no guard patrolling its length; there were several trees which grew right beside it; but most significantly, there was a gate and it was always kept open.

In the history of the leper colony no one had ever tried to get out, and before Pearline Portious in 1941, no one had tried to get in.

The three zinc roofs belonged to three wooden bungalows. They faced away from the gate, so that when Pearline arrived all she could see were three broad wooden backsides turned dismissively towards her. But a man was kneeling in the dirt before her, muttering as his blue-veined hands slapped broken eggshells into the soil. Pearline walked over and her shadow fell on him.

'Yes, Miss Lazarus, what now?' the man snapped without looking up.

His voice was old. Pearline would find out later that his name was Albert Dennis and that he was unfriendly to almost everyone. But no one received the brunt of his bad temper more than Agatha Lazarus. The woman frequently snuck up on him like this, making herself known only as a shadow across his gardening, or a combination of smells he had come to despise: oranges she had just squeezed, lemon-grass tea she had just brewed, and talcum powder she had just patted on to her breasts to keep them cool. So when the present shadow did not make a sound – no request for eggs, milk, bottles of disinfectant, bandages – Albert looked up and found instead the Original Pearline Portious, shivering.

Now Pearline's mother had been quite serious. She was going to stay under that guava tree come rain or sunhot. But before such forces could arrive and test her resolve – indeed, within just an hour – a more pressing matter from within her own body had presented itself. It was 9.30 in the morning. She had eaten a rather heavy breakfast one and a half hours earlier. Now, like clockwork, she needed, badly, desperately, to shit.

Her sphincter muscles contracted in and out; she tried to fan herself; she sang a hymn; she farted loudly and pungently. *Oh Lawd, Oh Lawd*, she thought, until finally she shouted to her husband inside.

'Devon! Devonoooohhhh! Grab de chimmy pot from underneat de bed! Mek haste!'

Devon appeared in the doorway of the small house and stopped to scratch his dark balding head. He was confused. He considered the form of his wife, muttering and fanning herself under the tree. He was going to ask her sternly, *Dorcas, why in God's green earth you want the chimmy pot? You is really going to doodoo out there, in the broad and living daylight, for the entire world to see?* But one look at her face, the mixture of anger and strain contorting it, made him swallow his questions and scamper inside.

This then, was the surest testament of a mother's love for her one daughter – that in the broad and living daylight she had shat under a guava tree, her only privacy the floral skirt she was wearing that fanned out covering her lower parts and the chimmy pot she was stooped over.

What a conundrum of colours Pearline had suddenly found herself in: she was afraid because the man kneeling before her was white;

she was afraid because now that he was looking up at her, with even more annoyance in his eyes than there had been in his voice, she saw that those eyes were blue; she was afraid because she had been walking all night and her own eyes were surely red and she was suddenly conscious of her whole dishevelled appearance; she was afraid because the doily in her hand was purple and she wondered whether this would offend the man as it had apparently offended everyone else. She wished now that the doily was white so she could hold it out to him like a flag of peace.

'I never mean to disturb you, Mister Man Sir. I have this doily here selling. I was just wondering if I could interest you in it. I am ...' and the words stuck. Pearline began to doubt herself. But finally she finished the sentence, ' ... I am very good at knitting, sir.'

Albert Dennis got to his feet, taking hold of the purple doily in his slow climb towards the sky. His lean height now made her feel small and instead of looking down on his stooped figure, she now had to shield her face from the sun. Pearline was familiar with men of the clergy – deacons, reverends, pastors, parsons and lay preachers. They were part of her village, and she had seen them during the week in their dirty water-boots just like everyone else. She had also seen them on Sundays, freshly scrubbed and wearing their one good suit. But Pearline Portious had never before seen a priest, though they had been described to her in detail: *mi dear, dem wear a big ugly frock just like woman, and one something on top them head that you can't even call a proper hat, and to hear them on Sunday is like torture, for is a long-drawn-out sermon in Latin or what-have-you because that is how high-standing people believe the Saviour himself talk.*

Albert Dennis was not in a frock or a strange hat but Pearline still knew he was a priest because of another distinguishing feature that had been described – a large wooden cross dangling from their necks, and on that cross a tiny crucified Christ.

Monsignor Dennis kept his eyes on Pearline but his fingers were

inspecting her work, pulling the doily, feeling its surface. She awaited his verdict.

'My dear young lady,' he said finally, 'you indeed are very good at knitting. I believe the Lord might have sent you to us.'

'Oh yes, sir. Oh yes. The Lord him own self call me down here today.'

She suddenly imagined an abundance of furniture filling the three bungalows – nightstands, coffee tables, dinner tables, desks, bureaus, whatnots, chest-of-drawers, dressers, cabinets, shelves; all of them wooden and bare, just waiting for her knitted creations to cover them.

'I was saying my morning prayers in bed this morning, sir, and I hear when God say to me, Pearline girl, mek haste and go down to the valley today today. They need a girl like you.'

'Very well . . .'

'Yes sir. I can do mats too, tablecloths, doilies, blankets, even clothes like sweater and all them things there, and even . . .'

'Then, my dear,' the priest interrupted her sharply, 'you will be able to knit something much simpler.'

'Sir?'

'Just a band, my dear, about this wide.' With his thumb and index finger, he indicated the width of about three inches.

'And this tall.' He indicated the length from the ground to his waist. 'And it must be white.'

Pearline's excitement vanished. 'Ongly that, sir?'

'Only that.'

'Ongly that. One so-so . . .' She didn't even know what to name this thing she was being asked to make. 'One so-so . . . something that is this wide and this tall?'

'Not just one. As many as you are able to make.'

'But ongly that, sir?'

It was the simplicity of the request that was disappointing, a mere twenty-four stitches across, chaining and turning, chaining

and turning, row after row until she reached the required four feet.

'Only that, young lady. Come back next week about this time with what you've done and I will buy them from you. Now, good morning.'

The priest bowed his head politely and Pearline understood she had been dismissed. She turned to leave but then remembered her mother.

'Beg pardon, sir, but the doily you have there is not free.'

He looked down at his hands and gave a slight start having quite forgotten what he was holding. Indeed, he hadn't intended on purchasing a thing so ... so purple, but he fished in his pockets nonetheless and deposited thirty cents into Pearline Portious's proffered hands. This was, of course, once upon a time when thirty cents was worth more than it is now.

Arriving back at the yard which she had left the day before, Pearline Portious found that her mother was still underneath the guava tree. She had fallen asleep in the dirt, her head resting on the pillow of her clasped hands. Pearline carefully placed the three ten-cent coins on her mother's cheek and watched as her eyes fluttered open at the cold feel of metal on her face.

'See there!' Pearline hissed triumphantly, towering over the confused woman. 'I tell you I would get the doily sold.'

Two teardrops sprang up from her mother's eyes. They rolled horizontally to meet the coins, and Pearline's arrogance vanished. She understood now why she had been successful: it was her mother's prayer – a desperation which had gone out into the world to accomplish what had never been accomplished before. She sat down while her mother lifted herself to a sitting position.

'You really get it sold, child?'

'Yes, Mama ... but you was right too. It is time I grow up.'