

SIDE BY SIDE



Ann Watson Yates

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For Jonathan, with love from Mum.

Christmas, 2000

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wanted to record my meetings with just a dozen of my Barbadian compatriots so that as the years slide by, future generations will not forget them.

On a small island like this, we have so many unique and eccentric characters it was hard to know where to start. Most of these people live "Side By Side", separated by race, economics, education or prejudice, but when their paths have crossed and continue to cross they weave a dense and complex cultural fabric, completely incomprehensible to many people from away. To a true Barbadian "away" is anywhere that is not Barbados, be it Alaska or New Zealand, England or Africa.

After I had met these people, I showed them what I had written and if I had the facts wrong or misunderstood something I set it right. My opinions, of course, are my own. These are simple thumbnail sketches of how these people appeared to me and my own observations about them. I have written in detail about the first seven years of my life and I have tried to cover all "classes" of people, but at the end of the day we are all Barbadians. This book was written in 1999 and I drew a line under that date. Any changes in circumstances, titles etc. happened in a different year.

I recently heard a Trinidadian referred to at a party as a "Trini". The Trinidadian turned sharply and said "I've been living here twenty-eight years, I am married to a Barbadian, I consider myself a Bajan". Wrong, my friend, you have to live here for about four hundred years before you start thinking that way.

*Ann Watson Yates,
Barbados, 1999*



WEST INDIAN WOMAN

I am West Indian woman,
I'll tell you what I see
As I stand here so straight and tall
And with such dignity...
I see a big ship sailing,
Land far across the sea,
Tall trees with no foliage, dead,
As my ancestors hearts must be.
I see the fields they were made to work
The hills they had to climb,
And I mourn for those who were laid to rest
Under the bridge of time.
My roots today are strong and deep
In this land that is now my own.
For them, and for me, it has really been
A long, hard journey home.

Ann Goddard, 1993

This poem was inspired by the picture on the wall which was painted by Ann.

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Chapter One

SEARCHING FOR THE PROMISED LAND

Ikael Tafari

Before I met him, I would look at photographs of Ikael Tafari in the newspapers and think, “My God, what a nightmare!” The nightmare was that it was first year at university and it was carnival week. You had put on a silly costume, had too much to drink, spouted some half-baked ideology and suddenly, somehow, been frozen in time. You had to live carnival week for the rest of your life – no going back, no going forward, just carnival week forever, a living hell.

I met Ikael in the comfortable offices of the Pan African Commission. He was of course, dressed as a Rastafarian and looked as white as almost any other “white” Barbadian, small build, fine features, grey-green eyes. Of course I could not see his hair under his tam, but he assured me that some was straight and some was tough, reflecting his mixed ancestry.

I told him that I would prefer not to use the Ethiopian Royal title of “Ras” for him, as he was not entitled to use it by birth, not being an Ethiopian Prince. In the same way I would be quite happy if he did not call me Princess Ann. He insisted that he was the son of a King and his spiritual reality was that of a Prince. I had heard that there was a man in Black Rock who thought he was Lord Nelson.



Michael Hutchinson at Harrison College.

His gentle manner and shy smile belie an armoury of debating skills, a well-read background and a formidable memory for quotations, Churchill, Roosevelt, to name a couple, but particularly from the Bible. I was relieved to learn that he uses the King James Version, so very occasionally I could reply (briefly).

Ikael was born Michael Hutchinson, to businessman David Hutchinson and his artistic wife Alma, nee Hynam. They were no doubt proud of their clever son, because there was no doubt that he was clever. At Harrison College he excelled at English, History and Geography, but his love of books and reading started before he went there. He enjoyed all sports, especially tennis.

I could easily imagine him in a loving and comfortable home, well cared for, in tennis whites, short back and sides, playing tennis in Belleville. There would have been high expectations of him from his parents, of whom he spoke with great respect and affection.

School, he said, was a different matter. It had been painful to realize that almost all the white boys looked straight through him after school, even those "trying to pass as white". At first I misunderstood him; I thought he was trying to tell me that his problems stemmed from the fact that he was too white, but the fact was (as he saw it), because of his coloured blood. I asked if at the time he was at Harrison College most of the boys would not have been black or coloured too. He swatted me verbally like a mosquito. He said that ironically he was being considered white only since he had embraced black culture, and anyway, why was I so obsessed with his colour? Pointless to explain I was not. Later he said he would not swat me verbally because he was an "educator".



Mr and Mrs David Hutchinson, daughter Cheryl and son Michael.

We moved on to the next phase of his life, when he moved from his well ordered and protective home in Barbados and was thrown into undergraduate life at Mona Campus in Jamaica at the University of the West Indies. He still speaks of the “freedom” he experienced in Jamaica. Here, along with most other students, he would have enjoyed his first rush of freedom – from parents, from home, from routine, from study; after all, being at university is what all that pressure and study had been about. His eyes still smoulder when he recounts his first brush with police brutality, as he made his first political protest as a young man in his twenties at the time of the Walter Rodney riots, in October 1968. Only middle-class people experience this shock; the underprivileged have always known it.

I believe it was as a result of what he sees as this first resonant undergraduate baptism of fire that Ikael Tafari’s life has run the course that it has and continues to do.

While reading for his B.Sc. in Sociology on the Mona Campus, given the radical climate in those days, he started identifying with and fighting for the underprivileged in Jamaica. He was much more at ease within that environment. The dispossessed of Jamaica were probably doing as much for the personal development of Michael Hutchinson at that time, as he was doing for them.



Ikael, Dawn and Tsahai (1st daughter) Jamaica, circa 1973.

At this point, and not having made a faux pas for at least ten minutes, I was bold enough to ask the big question – why Ethiopia? Surely the uneducated and dispossessed Jamaicans would have thought of Africa as one big country, one big family; but I thought that he, as an educated man, would have to know that very few if any, Afro-Caribbeans had come from Ethiopia. He insisted that my misconceptions in these matters were erroneous and that many Ethiopians were enslaved and brought west instead of east.

I pointed out that the much-venerated Emperor Haile Selassie had owned slaves nearly one hundred years after slavery had been abolished in these parts, and had to be encouraged by a British Civil Servant to consider his position on the subject. In reply to this observation he argued that when Haile Selassie came to the throne in 1928, as Regent, he immediately hastened the pace of emancipation of slaves – a process begun by his father, Ras Makonnen. Nevertheless, I persisted, would it not have made more sense to point his new friends in Jamaica towards West Africa, to the Ashanti, always described as “all born heroes”? This question provoked an unstoppable flow of Biblical quotations from him to prove that Rastafarianism is part of God’s great plan for mankind. I had been able to understand the depth of longing, of displacement, the lack of focus, for which Rastafarianism has acted as a catalyst, but here was an educated man whose favourite subjects at school had been geography and history and who was unable to see the farcical side of any of this, historically or geographically, not to mention sociologically.



With second son Teij.

The flow of Biblical quotations started again. All were made with complete conviction and he wound up with a reminder that the context of what is described as the original African slavery was fundamentally different, he explained, and not nearly as horrendous as New World slavery. He explained that the source of underdevelopment and the ensuing horrors of Africa had been brought about by the European Colonisation of that country.

I asked if he had ever been to Africa and he said no, but added that one can still be well informed about a country that one has never visited. Sometimes it can be better to stand back and take an overview; one could read about it, see films and videos, look at the picture as a whole.

By now I was speechless, but not quite. Oh Ikael Tafari, I thought, if you think you have seen racial discrimination at Harrison College, they would chew you up and spit you out in Addis Ababa. The proud rich Ethiopians and the poor, closed societies of Ethiopia, neither would have time for a man with dreadlocks in a tam. Who would be his friends? But I could be wrong — I hope I am wrong.



At the Rastafari International Conference, Barbados, 1998 (August) with elder Ras Sam Brown (Standing) and Ras Miguel Lorne.

Sitting there, in his office, the scales suddenly fell from my eyes. This whole thing really is a religion, I thought, and like every other religion, it is an idea, an ideal, and a hope, something to get you out of bed each day, something to get you through life and death. Ethiopia and Heaven are wonderful ideas and goals. Christians are not exactly breaking their necks to go to Heaven, so why should Rastafarians rush to Ethiopia? There could be terrible disillusionment for both, but of course we will never know just how disillusioned the Christians may be. In response, he noted that there is a fundamental difference between the above – Christians desire to go to heaven after they die; Rastas want to return to their ancestral land now, while they are alive. When asked why they don't, he explained that entrenched vested interests of all kinds and the present military regime make it extremely difficult for Rastafari to go to Ethiopia. I was surprised to learn that there are over one thousand Rastafari in Ethiopia, which the present military government would like to evict.

This interview was too long, but I still wanted to break through, to let him know that I understood; but did he understand me? Probably not. I felt I was beginning to understand a little better, but intellectually, in truth, academically, he was way out of my league in reading, in philosophy, in advocacy; but as I looked at him I could not help wondering – if he has got the answers, what the hell are the questions?



Being admitted to the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, November, 1997 — Ph.D Sociology.

I tried to imagine what he could have done with his degree in sociology if he had simply just gone home with it. Teach more sociology? All the people I know with that degree seem to end up doing something completely different. Returning to Barbados in 1981, he finally decided to pursue a doctorate, which he received from Cave Hill in 1997. His thesis was entitled “Rastafari in Transition: the Politics of Cultural Confrontation in Africa and the Caribbean”.

I asked if he was married. He looked at me as if I in turn were some sort of deranged religious fanatic. Marriage? Marriage? What was I getting at? Over the years in Jamaica and Barbados, he has had two “partners”, Dawn and Laura-Lyn and from these unions he has produced Tsehai, Nakazzi, Renga Moi and Teij. The first two are girls, the latter boys.

If I hoped to find out something meaningful about this man, I felt I had to actually hear what he had to say about drugs. He had been open in the press about marijuana being a “sacrament” of his religion, defending it because it was made by God. But then, so is the white poppy and coca leaves — would he have Biblical quotes for that as well? He indicated that he did not know about the white poppy (surprisingly), but said the peasants in South America have chewed coca leaves from time immemorial, and it has helped to invigorate them while they work. Cocaine is a different matter. He was making the point that a natural herb is different from a changed chemical substance. On a different level I was thinking I’d been told that South American peasants chewed coca leaves to dull their hunger pangs while cultivating a non-edible crop for a higher cash return.



Nakazzi (2nd daughter) standing by one of her paintings on exhibition.

Months later, I talked to him on the phone; again the shutters were down. Everything I mentioned elicited a negative reply. I am a Grantley Adams fan, he too, but his own appreciation of Adams, he said, was not an uncritical one. As a matter of fact, he would know more about that than I do, as Lady Adams was his god-mother.

I asked him if he were given \$1,000 what he would do with it. He said instantly that he would give it to his children. I insisted that he should spend it on himself. He thought for a moment then said he would pay the licence on his car, buy a new watchstrap and spend the rest on books. If he had wanted the expensive things of life he certainly had the brains to be a first-class lawyer. His large capacity to memorise, to change a point to his advantage in debate, the hypnotising verbal flow, he had it all.

Is he happy doing what he does? Does he feel secure in his role? What if the University takes a tough line on drug propaganda? What if Barbadians want to be Barbadians, not Africans? What if they tell Ikael Tafari that they don't want him in their club and he can't be an honorary black man? Will he go to Ethiopia then? I just don't know.

In response to my final query Dr Tafari said his future plan was to go to Ethiopia. He had spent most of his life in the West and would like to enjoy the remainder of his years in the land of his forefathers.



Chapter Two

MY FAIR LADY

Lady St. John

I wanted to meet her because I had heard that she was vigorous, vivacious and vibrant. That should be interesting, I thought, so I was up and off to the St John's house at Enterprise Beach. She opened the door herself, wearing white leggings, a Holders Hill tee shirt and Reebok shoes, skin a little misty with sweat. She had been exercising with a friend. This was Lady St John.

La Maison St John is comfortable with a great view. Acquired and improved over the years it is an eclectic mix of the exotic, the beautiful, and the valuable. I liked the paintings hanging on her walls, a personal thing, but a bond straight away. I liked the way she had arranged them.

She crossed her legs and I took a long hard look at her. She is sixty-seven and still beautiful and above all supremely confident. This is probably what irritates people about her most of all. But why should Stella not be confident? She comes from a class of Barbadian which for generations have been well educated, well travelled, appreciate music and drama, studied abroad and have seen and understood great art and architecture. Most importantly, she does not have a little closed off mind; she comes from a small but important class in our culture once known as "high brown".