

THE LITTLE WHITE GIRL

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Translated from Spanish by Sandra L. Dixon
(Who would like to express special thanks to Joselin Tovar.)
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IN THE BEGINNING, there was milk. From the fat and black teats of her milknurse, she sucked the sap that tinted the spirit with the color of the gods who know how to dance. Her ears awakened at the rhythm of the chants that always reflected the longing for the lost homeland. She learned to walk with her feet in contact with the earth, backbone straight and rump raised, as it must be in all women, creatures destined to support the heavy burdens of life.

With the passage of time she began to smell like those who fed her with their special foods: sweet potato; okra; four roll; boiled yucca with garlic, salt, and lemon; corn flour with fried pork skins; smoked root, black beans; fried malanga;¹ red jerked beef, burning, stinging; thick onion and garlic sauces, juices from the sugar cane; molasses; mashed fufu, made from plantain, neither green nor ripe, in between; guanabana, chayote, watermelon and melon; and other delicious things, carried for the first time to her mouth by hands that were the sum of all the tastes. Perhaps, for this reason, she grew lips that knew how to kiss.

Later she learned how to name things in two languages, without distinguishing any other difference than the odor that emanated from them. Only after smelling them did the words spring from her lips in Castilian or in Lucumi². When she was made aware that it

¹ This is a plant found on the island of Cuba. It is similar to a calla lily.

² Language brought to Cuba by Yoruba slaves and used in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies. The people.

disgusted Father that she spoke like the blacks, she kept their words for her secret dreams.

They used to call her by one name in the Big House and another in the slave shanties. She played with the slaves' children as freely as animals while they weren't old enough to go to the plantation. One bad day, they were carried away also. Much later, there came from among them, other faces, looks, and voices. Those who would see her and say, "LITTLE WHITE GIRL," no longer simply "Little Girl" like before. And never more did they have the opportunity to play, except on Sundays and religious holidays, when, by Father's order, they were allowed to dance.

At that time, the drums sounded.

Father liked to see the blacks dance and he would get particularly excited watching the slave women. They would move their bellies, breasts, and hips, frenetically contracting the pelvic area to the rhythm of the percussion instruments made of wood, iron, and seeds inside gourds. The slaves played their instruments and danced until after sunset when the overseer took them back inside the shanties.

On those festival days, the father used to get drunk on alcohol and desires. At the peak of the celebrations, he would point out some of the slave girls. The overseers would set them apart to be taken to the stables. In time, their bellies would grow big and would give birth to pale creatures that could have the eyes and hair of albinos. For this reason, they were stigmatized as people without a color. Because of this, they were hated by their own mothers, and they hated one another. These slave girls demonstrated such fertility in bearing bastards, while his lawful wife was incapable of giving him an heir to his properties—a male heir who

would carry on his illustrious surname. The father of the little girl bitterly acknowledged this, watching the increasing number of mulatto and quadroon offspring among his slaves.

In the face of her master's lewd amusements and orgies, inasmuch as he had not been a husband to her since Little Girl's birth, Mother closed herself up in her rooms in the Big House repeating "Hail Marys," while *Iya*³, the African wetnurse with whom Little Girl spent the majority of her time, sang and danced to the *Orishas*, gods who went up into the head of a chosen person, staying there as long as the music played.

According to what *Iya* affirmed, the *Orishas* themselves made the uncontrollable drums, cowbells, and *chequeres* sound. Their horses, as the possessed ones were called, sweated copiously, jumped about, fell on their knees, rolled around in the mud, climbed trees, flew, swallowed burning embers, and spat out truths with sounds from their innermost recesses, capable of passing through the time and distance that separated them from Africa.

It was something else when they had the *mani* dance.

Those who were invited arrived from leagues around. They were, like Father, the owners of plantations, sugar mills and numerous slaves from Trinidad Valley. Dressed in their best clothes and riding on brightly decorated saddles or in carriages, they had their houses slaves dressed in livery with white powdered wigs, accompany them. Behind them came the gladiators, chosen from among the best of their respective work forces; half-naked, shining bodies. Their limbs were tied with strips of cloth. There was hate in their gazes.

When everyone was gathered together and after the exchanges of respect, greetings,

³ In this Yoruba word, I (i) is pronounced like English E (e), while the final vowel (a) is stressed, *lyá*, like also happen in Shangó, maní, Oyá, Maferefún, etc.

and offerings, and once the bets were made, they passed into the arena where the combat would take place. The *mani* was a slave fight, which, like almost all of the things that come from Africa, was carried on to the beat of the drum.

The owner of the farm introduced the mode of fighting to the death in the *mani*. Searching for great excitement, he armed the dancers with gauntlets and sticks. It was his favorite diversion, and he enjoyed the luxury of risking a piece- as they called the blacks-at the end of each harvest. A good *mani* dancer enjoyed the privilege of not going to the plantations. Rather, he would occupy himself with work within the farm itself and with healthily exercising his body. With the promise of freedom, if he won, he would assure that the master would win his own price many times over.

On one Three Kings' Day, Little Girl surprised everyone with her behavior.

By the decision of His Majesty, the King of Spain and the Overseas Vice- royalties, the sixth of January was an obligatory holiday for the Africans. They were permitted to dress in ritual garments and to name themselves after their king and queens. They could hold council sessions. Early in the morning, they received gifts from their masters, and they were granted permission to play instruments, to dance, to sing, and to perform the stories of their "savage and infantile myths," as the masters, priests, and overseers were accustomed to saying.

On that memorable Three Kings' Day, from the rising of *Olorun*, the sun, which was magically awaited with chants and ceremonies, the drums sounded. It was almost sunset.

From a crevice, at certain times Little Girl saw Father riding above the young chosen slave girl, hitting her with the whip; or counting his money time and time again until he was

asleep. She was nine years old. Following her nurse, she went to the Mount with the Africans. There they would celebrate farewell rites for *Olorun*. The only slaves who did not attend were those who considered themselves different because they were house slaves and they preferred the white people's Church before that of *Ile* or the House of the *Orishas*; that is, the open country, the mount, or the kingdom of the spirits. There they cleansed their bodies with holy herbs.

Iya belonged to the important dignified group, since she sang as a soloist and she had bright necklaces hung around her neck with *moforibale*. The necklaces were kept in earthen pitchers taken from the ground under a giant ceiba tree. The drummers, of whom there were three, occupied a distinguished place. They were presented with fruits, rum, and dried tobacco leaves that the participants placed before their sacred instruments.

Little Girl made every dance movement her own. The sound of the drums, prayer, and oath, were petition in the Yoruba language. Feeling, in turn, outside of herself as well as inside of everything that vibrated, she suddenly suffered an explosion of something uncontrollable that made her move and whistle like the wind. She ran in every direction and spoke an archaic language of visceral sounds. Only the most ancient one among the slaves recognized in those syllables the forgotten language of the people who arrived from the desert-at the beginning of the times-to establish the Yoruba nation there in Africa. She, woman and man at the same time, danced as had been seen few times before. And she arrived dancing at the Big House, where she caused the crashing of a tornado. When Father tried to contain and trap her, she forced him back with her gaze. Mother, ashamed of her own offspring, locked herself in to pray. She said that she would only come out on God's orders.

Iya immediately understood that Little Girl's being that way marked her as the legitimate descendant of *Oya Yansa*, mistress of the cemetery and the great winds; and of *Alafi Shango*, King of Kings, the most virile of the *Orishas*, lord of music and fire. And so she found out how to treat her as was proper. She whispered *Lucumi* words and succeeded in calming her, spitting mouthfuls of water and honey into her face. She who was her wetnurse knew that things suddenly appearing not as they were the way of the gods to say that *Omo* was endowed with the gift of being able to communicate directly with the dead. If her head was not cooled on time, she could go insane. With the authority of being the only one who understood the girl, *Iya* asked the master for permission to carry her far away from the farm, under the pretext of calming her. She said that a walk through the valley, the vision of the blue profiles of the mountains, the leaves of the royal palms in the wind, would do her good. They left the place on a cart that the slave woman drove, calling the burros that were pulling it by name. They recognized her voice, having no need for reins.

They rode a long way and arrived at the cemetery. Three days and nights Little Girl remained there. Her soul filled up with a peace that was unknown before. It was in this way that *Iya* confirmed that she was in the presence of a chosen one, born to be queen.

Nevertheless, on the ride back and without apparent reason, she again fell into a convulsive trance for days and weeks. Doctors who were sent for from very far away considered them symptoms of the holy illness, as it was called since Julius Caesar suffered from it. As a consequence, they recommended to the father not to disturb her so that the illness would not grow worse. With the decision, they allowed her to avoid the predetermined future of a white woman, which permitted her to fulfill her life as a black woman. She would

dress, walk, laugh, sing and dance. She was as proud as a *Lucumi*. And she spent more time among them than among her own people, who, little by little, forgot her without understanding that they were losing her for ever.

Thus did Doctor Barrera express it. He was brought into the case by a slave-holder from the surrounding areas. Recently arrived from Havana, he brought with him copies of his work about typical illnesses of slaves, thanks to which he enjoyed notoriety among illustrious landowner. It was he who defined the problem with the master's daughter as the "sickness of the blacks"—since, in his career, throughout the width and breadth of the island he saw similar behaviors in black people, without giving much importance to the latitude of their African origins. In his judgment, Little Girl was sick with nostalgia.

Consequently, he preferred to follow the instructions of his colleagues without success, leaving the patient to act and speak freely, while he observed her. His fear was that the said sickness of the blacks, called nostalgia, undermined the will to exist. He knew of slaves with the same symptoms who decided to throw themselves in water wells, convinced that in this way they would return to Africa.

Father listened to him seriously. Worried about his reputation, he promised the doctor of the slaves a large fee if he liberated his daughter from the horrid illness unworthy of her race, religion, and lineage. The doctor meditated a bit before committing himself. Finally, he took a copy of his work titled "Reflections", turned to the chapter referring to the diagnosed illness, and read from it the prescription for treating the nostalgia.

"We will try to give her vegetable acids mixed with a somewhat small dose of potassium acid or calcinated salt from the lagoon of the fig tree."

He stopped, raised his eyes from the page, his pupils sparkling, and continued:

"Or of Glauber⁴," with all its students and families, with pure nitrate, the Arcanum duplicated, either dissolved in orange juices or in teabags of *chicora*, *zerrajas*, *Cardo santo*⁵, and other related substances mixed with tamarind pulp or the spirit of sweet nitrate; and also we can treat her with the burning of vinegar or powder because these are the fumes of very compressed and flexible air, like the wise alchemists found out about, and which the well-versed philosophers in the material confirm."

Father gave the doctor a perplexed look, but after thinking about it for a while, he authorized him to try his remedies. Thus the doctor did it, in the face of the silent disapproval of *Iya*, the same woman who had to put the water on to boil for the bad-smelling medicines. During the siesta, *Iya* escaped from the Big House to the nearby mount. There she began her secret war against the white warlock.

There were four weeks of comings and goings of both people around Little Girl, who far from getting better to the eyes of the author of her days, seemed to grow worse. No matter how much they did for her or didn't do for her, she was delirious. Finally, she did not even wish to put on the expensive dresses that had been brought to her from Europe, but was set on dressing in coarse clothing and going about barefoot like a black woman of the plantation work force.

Fearful of allowing comments about the strange case of his daughter that flew to the city of Trinidad and crossed the sea in ships that went to the port of Casilda and that of

⁴ Named for the German doctor and chemist who discovered the use of salt sulphate (Glauber salt) as a purgative.

⁵ Medicinal plant used as a narcotic.

Veracruz, the city where a newsletter published the news, Father dismissed Dr. Barrera, inadequately paying him for his efforts. Immediately, he decided that the matter was not to be spoken about anymore. If his daughter had gone insane, what was he going to do with her? They were God's designs. The doctor, under *Iya* satisfied gaze, departed as he arrived, riding an old mule with his belongings, replete with books and instruments.

Nevertheless, when a bishop stopped at the plantation on the way from the coast to New Spain, he observed Little Girl and her strange behavior. He asked the owner if he also had white slave girls, going against the Pope's command, to which the owner answered:

"Your Excellency, that is my daughter. She's crazy. We have treated her with eminent doctors from the colony and the peninsula, and she is not improving. Her madness is wanting to be black. I mean that. If you redeem her, Monsignor, I'll give her to the Church to be a num."

The bishop looked at the girl one more time. She came from a nearby river. She carried water with the other young black girls, rumps high and incipient breasts, in spite of the tunic or the slave garments. His Excellency imagined the waspish waist under the caftan material, and perceived in the hips, the swing of prohibited dances. He sighed. Then he glided his tongue over his dry lips. The confusion of seeing the white girl with the backside of a black girl, and a black girl with the face of a white one disturbed him exceedingly. He felt once again the anguish of his youth that had led him to commit so many sins, hidden in the toilets, beneath his mother's sheets, and later in the monastery cells, when his father decided to convert him into a holy man. During the night, inside the walls of the Big House, resonated the bishop's whip, punishing his flesh.

At dawn he rang the bell with which he called his servants. He ordered them to take out of his trunk his mitre and surplice; the Holy Bible in Old Latin; the wooden crucifix carved with the wood from the table where Christ Our Lord celebrated the Last Supper, a relic inherited from his Crusader ancestors; and also other things that he believed suitable to wear on his person, or to have at hand, in view of the serious circumstances and the strangest case of demonism that surrounded him. He called for Father and said to him:

"Satan possesses your daughter, and it is my duty to exorcise her before I depart. I shall bring the lustful succubus that hides herself behind her innocence to the light. Bring all the slaves here so that they can see the greatness of our faith. This exorcism will serve as a lesson for them. Make the mother leave her rooms where she hides her shame, so that she also will have the opportunity to give peace to her spirit. Let the foremen, overseers, and servants, and as many subjects of the Crown as there are on your properties attend. The Holy Inquisition orders it."

With the last words he stood up, enhancing the pomp of his hierarchy. Father understood that he would not be able to argue, but simply obeyed.

It was in this way that the house servants and muleteers who accompanied the bishop became judges of the Holy Inquisition. They were invested in a brief ceremony and clothed with habits quickly cut into cloth from curtains. In a short time, we saw them coming out with more dignity than if they had come from Rome.

The slaves did not understand what it was about this time. Anyway, they were happy that they didn't have to work and they were willing to see whatever there was. They saw, however, that the masters remained seated, heads lowered and frightened, and this intrigued

them. Later they observed the overseers bringing Little Girl by force. In the same way they made her sit before the white men dressed in long tunics. Only then did they comprehend that the matter was going directly against them. A sound of protest went through the blacks gathered in attendance, which made the bishop look at them angrily, speak to them in words that they didn't understand, and threaten them with gestures that included every one in attendance. Silence was imposed to the point that the monsignor could hear the flight of a bumblebee that hovered around his head.

The one who suffered most was *Iya*, but she had to contain herself. Her *Eledda*, or Guardian Angel, had to nourish itself from the surrounding spirits, for she needed energy of a very different type from that of hate. She held back the tears that began to show in her eyes at the spectacle of seeing Little Girl being treated like a criminal with the consent of the masters; and she looked at her eyes with the limitless kindness that she always lavished on her. In thankfulness, she perceived the light of a smile of the most clear and serene kindness that *Iya* had ever known.

At that immortal instant, the bishop felt that he had never seen such a beautiful creature as that, but far from abandoning himself to the enjoyment of that feeling, he put the cross between himself and Little Girl.

"Kiss the cross, Satan. Don't trick me! Kiss it, demon!"

Mother felt a leap in her entrails. A lump came to Father's throat because his own future depended as much on the monsignor's ability as his daughter's behavior. If the farm was declared the devil's home . . . Suddenly, everything was in suspense.

"*Maferefun Olofi!*"⁶ those who were present heard.

The bishop heard it behind him, and later, like an echo, face to face, in the voice of the prisoner. He turned and saw a robust slave woman of an intense olive black color with a disturbingly serene face who defied him with her gaze.

Versed in demonology, the monsignor immediately detected in the slave woman's image, another manifestation of the same kind that occupied him; only this time he was able to confront it in addition to the root of sin. He signaled at his rival with the cross.

"*Vade retro Satan! Get back,!*" to which *Iya* responded the same as before, as Little Girl and some other slave stood before the panel.

With the bravery and strength that faith infuses, the bishop raised his voice and the imperative maxim against the devil was heard very far away, for leagues around, rebounding against the mountains of Escambray. It was not louder than the antiphonal chorus of the blacks because Little Girl was also black or the demon that she had within her was black. Believing that he was being made to look ridiculous, the bishop ordered the overseers to get *Iya* and to make her kneel down at his feet.

Little Girl, in one leap, put herself between them. She carried in her hand the sheath of the flamboyant⁷ tree, the distinctive attribute of *Oya Yansa*. Moving it circularly, she held it over her head. At each rotation, those in attendance heard the wind whistle. It did not linger in the form of a whirlwind in front of the Big House. It carried with it the dead leaves of the nearby forest, the dust of the slave shanties, the howling of the country dogs, the cackling of

⁶ Praise the Lord!

⁷ *Delonix regia*. It's also known as Royal Poinciana.

broods of hens, the hissing of the jungle reptiles, the chorus of the branded dead, followed by a watery avalanche with strong rain and hail made of snail shells, seahorses, and blind fish, under laser sparks that uncovered the terror of the unbelievers. In order that no doubts remained, it happened that in the sky appeared the rainbow with the colors of the feared goddess.

“Maferefun Olofi” said a slave chorus upon seeing how the masters fled to protect themselves under close guard. The wind made the bishop turn upon his own feet. He looked like a top, with his cassock upside down, which carried the slaves to a state of frenetic hilarity of happiness almost forgotten. Not even the discharges from the guns fired in the air by the overseers contained them as the bishop turned, turned, and went turning as far as the Camino Real. And there the wind let him fall, heavily on the mud.

Without waiting for droves of beasts and servants disguised as officials of the Holy Inquisition, the monsignor rail toward the sea. The fear showed on his face, as if what occurred was nothing but the beginning of the terrible days of the Apocalypse, with the guffaws of black slaves who were descended from that tribe expelled from the Holy Land instead of with the trumpets of Jericho.

The great disbandment did not wait. Following the masters, the overseers, the majordomos, and the house slaves locked themselves in. They feared the uprising, so many times the subject of their nightmares. But there was only a party that lasted three continuous days, with bells ringing and chants to the *Orishas*, which infected the slaves of the neighboring farms. Together they decided to go away to the hills to establish a Palenque⁸

⁸ Fugitive slave community.

with Little White Girl at its head, as the legitimate manifestation of *Omo-Orisha*.

Oya and *Shango* had demonstrated to all their immense power. With its sacred names, the palenque was known for decades. It was the palenque that the fugitives founded and their descendants maintained in the mountainous region of Escambray.

On the night of the revelation, Mother, smiling, behind a window on the upper floor of the Big House, watched as the blacks joyously celebrated. Mechanically, she squeezed her breasts under her sleeveless bodice. She muttered something in a low voice, which could be one more prayer or the continuation of an interminable conversation that lasted during years spent with herself-a rosary of scattered faults since the unknown night when she decided to take revenge for the offenses committed against her female's honor by the man to whom her parents bequeathed her in Spain, before the Church's altar a few days before embarking for America. She vaguely remembered the little girl with the beautiful golden curls whom she once had inside her womb and who came out from between her legs to turn into the main cause of her conjugal unhappiness. Now she would be the age of that most beautiful woman whom the slaves carried in triumph like a queen. Only God would know what happened to her.

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