

# Unmooring

How could a sixteen-year-old explain the sudden return of her absent mother? Could she even greet her return with joy? It might not have seemed so worrying if there were stories about the day she left. A teenager who had no tear-stained remembrances of clutching her mother's skirt, or wrapping herself around her leg, not even running after her.

My mother Gloria's return to Jamaica began with the letter, the one that told my grandmother—whom I called Mama, to make travel plans for me to move to England. Gloria had emigrated there when I was 4 years old, and that began the unmooring. A disturbance of where I belonged. Now, my mother's return triggered an unease I could not keep at bay. It was impossible to ignore.

Building a relationship with my mother from overseas was limited to letters, which then took weeks to go back and forth. In most places of the world in the 1950s, telephones were still expensive and largely out of reach for the working class in Montego Bay. At first, Gloria's letters were to my grandmother—Mama. But by about the first form in school, sixth grade, I had taken over the letter writing. At the same time Gloria and I began our own letter-writing relationship. But all the decisions about my development, my life were with Mama. And the communications between my mother and me was neither deep nor intense. The life I led was unwittingly hidden from her purview.

Why wasn't I excited? It should have been a time of joy, the chance to rejoin my mother.

Most teenagers, in similar circumstances, looked forward to seeing a parent again. Perhaps it was because I already had said no; I did not want to join them—her husband and children in England. So, she was coming to Jamaica to straighten me out. I was expecting a fight. She was expecting me to get on a plane.

But by then, I was in the fifth form, eleventh grade, and planning to attend West Indies College. Why should I go to England? What would I do there? I was on schedule to sit for the General Certificate of Examination (GCE)—an examination that was the national standard for getting into college or university. I was expecting to be named a prefect at school, my friends had whispered it to me ahead of time and I was excited. What was I supposed to tell my friends? Gloria's disruption was nine months before the exam. She had shared no plans for my education—would I complete high school or attend university in England?

When I grew up, the absence of a mother or father in the home was common in Jamaica. This was the time when Britain's enormous postwar need for workers offered expansive opportunities to its colonial citizens to travel to England, uninhibited by visas and other immigration restrictions.

Like so many women of that era, Gloria climbed aboard a ship for England to better her situation. She would neither need an employment contract nor specific educational credentials before arriving. Training guaranteed. She would no longer be a domestic, working miles away from home, barely making ends meet. The sixteen-year-old Pam—the name my family called

me, was fortunate. Her mother was doing nursing in England. She was not visibly in need. That she was raised by her grandmother, Mama, was not a secret and no one cared much about the details. Still, that cocoon of religious and social respectability that shroud the working-class would be shattered—cracks revealed. Illegitimate. What would people think?

If I had gone to the airport to meet Gloria when she returned from England in 1964, I might have paced back and forth on the uneven concrete floor watching for her to emerge. I had no memory of my mother's smile nor the echo of her voice and could not have picked her out from a crowd.

We had no family car and there was no convenient transportation for the three-mile ride to our home in Albion, a sprawling suburb due south of the airport, and west of the city of Montego Bay. Like most suburbs, ours was made up of middle and working-class families, interspersed with tenements for the poor and the occasional convenience store. But my mother had never been to Montego Bay, a city regarded as "country," not like Kingston, the capitol. The ride would have been uneasy—Albion roadways were only partially asphalted in sections but in other parts, irregular and curvy, very narrow, shared by cars, busses, pedestrians and the occasional donkey. There were no sidewalks.

My mother's arrival turned the world I knew upside down, disrupting my sense of place and unsettling my quiet life. Till then, my sense of place in the world was secure but fragile. Then she arrived with her two children, my sisters, both so full of confidence, their distinctive British accents emphasizing the distance between us. I felt displaced, as if someone had entered a crowded banquet, speaking loudly so you had to notice they'd arrived. Then, not content to

merely grab everyone's attention, they rearranged the chairs at the tables, ignoring the place cards and displacing the people already seated. When my two London-born half-sisters landed in my island world, all attention drifted toward them, leaving me in the shadows.

I never asked Gloria why she left me. And, she never told me. Decades later, her sister offered what seemed only half a reason. My mother's doomed relationship with my father soured, disapproved by my grandmother, she separated herself from him and emigrated to England.

It was a time when Caribbean men—citizens of the British colonies who fought in WWII were lured back to Britain. That confluence of circumstances was enough to convince ambitious men and women to emigrate to better-paying jobs. Most thought they would be temporarily leaving their island homes in places like Jamaica and Guyana to return after they had accumulated some wealth. Many of the men brought along the women they were dating; others sent for their wives later. And some found women in England, whom they married. My mother, Gloria, was one of these brides. She and her husband each had left a child behind in their respective homelands. After some time, she would change my name to her husband's—from Williams to Lovell—though I would not meet him until I was twenty-one years old. His daughter in Guyana was not invited to join them in England.

My sisters remember the reasons for our mother's return to Jamaica as an extended holiday to get to know their grandmother and older sibling. I don't know whether they knew that Gloria planned for me to return with them to England. They did not know of my anxiety—how I began to show signs of worry which the adults could not ignore. Anxiety, which heightened as

the reunion approached—obsessive fretfulness, restlessness and insomnia, and decreased appetite. My teenage body seemed to have begun to finally experience the separation trauma of early childhood. My grandmother sought medical attention for me. And, my mother, who must have weighed the long-term cost of forcibly taking me with her, quietly returned to England without me.

When my departure to England did not go as planned, the letter-writing communications between Gloria and me abruptly ended. We renewed our communications when I finished college and left Jamaica to work in the Bahamas. At 21 years old, I emigrated to the United States and she to Canada. Our communications improved with her living in Toronto and me in upstate New York. I began to visit regularly.

But there always was a certain silence between my mother and me as if I did not do the things that delighted her. Our relationship was fraught, and my resistance to her attempts to counsel me did not help. I did not want to hear her thoughts about the men I dated. After all, I thought, she did not know me all. Our conversations felt more like jabs of disapproval. When her health failed, my attempts to assist her were rebuffed with skillful ploys to short-circuit any conversation she did not want. Yet I thought conversations would have helped connect us—might have enlightened her view of me and I of her. Instead, I felt like the intruder. Our interactions pierced through emotional spaces, where I was prone to agitate. And our relationship left me incapable of ignoring what I felt—a vague rejection and certain disapproval. It was unsteady and encouraged decades of uncertainty. But this, I did not, would not tell anyone.

The relationship remained fragile, tinged by guilt. I sometimes took responsibility for her sense of detachment—our lack of closeness. But the social norms of Jamaica sheltered me in an extended family, permitting her to linger away from me longer than wisdom suggested. Time would not return to my mother and me whatever attachment we might have had in my first years. And after years apart, despite her ardent desire and my sense of honor, neither of us acquired the knowledge nor emotional where-with-all to bridge our broken bond.

I've learned that abandonment anxiety and its triggers are common among people who experience early childhood trauma. But many of us will only connect the emotional dots in a therapeutic setting. Without intervention, most of us cannot confront the nebulous emotions of that trauma. And many will never be afforded therapy and will engage in emotionally harmful behaviors over a lifetime. In my case, behaviors were triggered by the latent guilt of a, perhaps regretful parent, and by a subconsciousness of rejection, a loss of closeness, and a sense of brokenness. For the lucky ones, we understand the unmooring and see connections between the anxieties and the things that trigger us.

**On Reflection**—In a room that seemed set apart from the rest, my mother, Gloria, lies in hospice. I've been nearly two weeks at her bedside. The end is near they told us, and she is unresponsive though not silent. I stare at her face and notice the hairs under her chin. I am surprised. I am not moved to pull them as I might want to be done for me. I gaze at her face and I am numb. My sister and I switch places when she takes my mother's hand in hers and caresses our mother's face with the gentleness of a cat. The stroke of her hand is delicate, tracing her

cheekbone and jaw area, kissing her face. I am again the outsider. This is not a moment I should see. It is intimate, it is meant just for them—my mother and my sister. It is not an ordinary moment—the expression between them, a mother and a child, her special child.

My mother passed away within minutes after I left. I don't know whether she let go of her regret for leaving her four-year-old behind. But in that moment of irony in that complicated relationship, my guilt dissipates. My feelings of rejection move through the air, and with four-year-old innocence, I let go.