

Creole Folktales: The Rainmaker

Listen:

In the days
of yesteryear,
life still blossomed
now and again into a kind
of dreamworld. Storytellers thus
were free to lavish upon their creations
liberties that had nothing to do with lies. For instance,
They told us of a dismal drought, and of a child who
could call down the rain.

The Rainmaker (2)

Now, the sun had gone way beyond obstinate. The hills had cracked open, releasing the wispy steam of dead roots. The sky had a metallic sheen so bright the slightest cloud committed suicide on the spot. The reddest flowers had burst into flames with sulfurous sighs, while others – white, yellow, orange – had dried into straw that tickled the nostrils of the oxen, mules, goats, and hens that gathered in exhaustion to mourn the passing of once-gushing springs. There was not a hint of dampness anywhere at all. Complete catastrophe ! Folks were going up into the mountains to fetch a sad little dribble of water for their babies' bottles or to moisten the holy oil of the Dominican fathers, which had congealed inside its crystal vials. And although I'd hate to upset you, I might just add that people had dug up petrified yams, picked stony oranges, plucked guavas that crumbled to dust, and gathered mangoes charred in the secret furnace of dried-up tears.

The Rainmaker (3)

When the Dominicans discovered that their good wine had turned into a sludge of vinegar, they feared the island had been cursed. They sounded the tocsin throughout the parish, and a pretty sorry lot of wretches answered the call: wild-eyed fishermen, field hands as parched as tree bark, hobbling old-timers whose hides were deeply scored with wrinkles, women with clutches of strangely silent children. The alarm bell also roused out the Békés, the white colonials with their big parasols. They had changed their ankle boots for rope sandals, unbuttoned their collars, rolled up their sleeves. The women tried to foil the suffocating heat by wearing lace so airy it was hardly there at all. In spite of their verandas and their cisterns, they were oh-so-pale because the heat had spoiled the half-light of their bedrooms, crackled their china, and crazed their looking glasses. High atop their hills, they had gazed through their shutters day after day, hoping for a breeze and watching their wealth shrivel up in the scorching brazier of the cane fields.

The Rainmaker (4)

When the populace had gathered round, the Dominican fathers told them all to pray for rain. So they prayed to everyone the heavens had to offer in the way of saints, martyrs, gods, the son of gods and their mothers too, cousins included. They even invoked names unsanctified by any religion, and many a mischievous devil was inadvertently dragged heavenward through their rampant fervor. Not a single raindrop fell. “Ooo,” cried the Dominicans, “we are lost!” And they all burst into tears.

The Rainmaker (5)

Then a child stepped forward, a boy no taller than a hibiscus hedge and wearing rags of sackcloth pieced together with string. “*Kijan lavalas zot le-a, an brital o an flo?*” he asked the good fathers. “What kind of rain would you like, a frog-choker or just drizzle?” Everyone, black and white, began to sling muddy insults at this cheeky [cheeky] brat: Punish his insolence! Chastise his parents! Call down curses on his descendants! Oh, how could he make sport of their misery that way! But the good fathers said nothing, ladies and gentlemen, for they could clearly see a full-moon innocence in the child’s big round eyes, which glimmered like stars in a reflecting pool at the soft approach of a storm. They asked him his name. The child stood mum. The fathers lifted him up onto a barrel and asked him about his parents. An old woman stepped shakily forward to explain that although the boy was not her son, she had been taking care of him in her hut ever since the beginning of Lent, when she had found him loitering around a seven-crossroads. And then she added, “He most strange.” In reply to every probing question, the child offered only rain, a lot or a little. So just for a laugh and without taking him seriously, one of the good fathers said, “We’ll take the small size...”

The Rainmaker (6)

A choice he and the entire community regretted straightaway, down through sixteen generations, for almost one hundred and ninety-nine years, and come every Lent. Because the child brought forth from his rags three mysteriously plump oranges. Placing them on the ground where they shone like seashells, he prostrated himself before them, murmuring words in a tongue unknown throughout the Caribbean. The boy stuck a twig into each fruit, accompanying these mysteriously precise gestures with a rambling homily. A froth of spittle edged his lips. When he picked up a single orange and looked toward the sea, a tiny gray cloud sprang into view. Pointing a twig at it, the child patiently drew the cloud closer until it floated overhead. And now a fine, diaphanous, languid rain refreshed the region. The straw huts of the populace and the gutters of the Békés' great houses gleamed wetly; shriveled fruits glistened as if varnished, as did the uplifted faces of the ecstatic crowd. Then the rain trickled away into the droughty earth, sucked up by its great thirst. When the dust-devils returned, and the sun beat down upon them cruelly once again, the people begged the child, "Oh, give us a huge downpour!" But the boy simply gazed at them with the pure candor of a babe in arms.

The Rainmaker (7)

The Dominicans wrote all this down in a report submitted to their authorities: throughout the entire sun-scorched island, only their parish had enjoyed that brief shower, and even when the rainy season returned, the little town in question never received more than the odd light sprinkle, regardless of the people's desperate need. Even today, this place, called Prêcheur, is as hopelessly dry as an old woman's dugs. The boy lived on there in seclusion and died overcome by threats and entreaties, since he was no longer able to capture even a cloudlet. For it is indeed true that wherever rank bad luck has taken root, a rainmaker may work his miracle only once, and never again.