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Item Type	Story
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Publisher	Centro de Publicaciones Académicas, Facultad de Artes y Ciencias, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez
Download date	2026-06-11 03:50:50
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3358

BABIES THE COLOR OF SMOKE

Craig Loomis

Two cabins down and directly across from one of those small tightly-buckled lifeboats—a loose strap having wind-whipped its bow for so long it's left a raw, splintery smile—are a Frenchman and his wife. He is white, she is black—almost blueblack on the arms and neck. He wears a gold chain that looks more heavy than expensive. I've seen her twice now, him three times. All three times he's looked the same: gold-chained, drink in hand, needing a shave, grinning as if there's a joke to be told—to be retold.

And so on day three, in the bar, and with something like cruise music seeping from the ceiling, I look up in the bar mirror and see him headed my way. Taking long purposeful strides out of the sunlight and into the mahogany-gloom of bar, he comes straight to me, as if it's all been prearranged—'meet you in the bar.' He slides onto the stool, saying, "Hello." Not even on the stool when he says hello, but still sliding. "You are American."

He's wearing one of those bright green tropical shirts cluttered with bamboo and parrots. The parrots tilt, hang upsidedown. Their beaks are orange, sometimes red. "You are American." His hair is slicked-back, neatly furrowed. "American."

Not once does it ever sound like a question. But now he is waiting, grinning, and so I say yes, and he nods and says yes back. He raises his finger to the bartender. "Please. Please, here." In a flurry of bartending, a drink is made and placed in his outstretched hand. Swirling the ice, rattling it against frosted glass, he gulps it down. "Aaaaah," the parrots bobbing in the green waves of his shirt.

His wife and another man now come in and sit at a table that overlooks the South China Sea. This other man is gold-chained as well, even more, a row of golden rings. He too is wearing a shirt of bamboo and birds. He has the same unshaven chin as the husband.

Swiveling—his knee catching my leg—, he waves to her. She

wiggles fingers back at him. Turning back to me, re-swiveling, grinning, he says, "Yes. So, an American." Meanwhile, a new drink is made and slipped in front of him. "You know," he begins, "she is my wife." Pointing, "That one." And now waving, but this time she only smiles. "You see." He motions to her to come over. She continues to smile. He motions again, a great traffic-directing wave of his arm. She slowly rises and steps over. "You see. Can you believe? Ah, but of course you can, you are American." Not once does his hair unslick, unfurrow, holding firm and fist-hard.

Her earrings are silver, twisting and turning with some kind of animal—otters, squirrels. A small muscle throbs along her jaw. Her forehead is beaded with sweat, her neck and shoulders glistening. He gently takes her hand and lifts it. Her skin is the color of coffee.

"Oui?"

"It's nothing."

"Oui?"

"Nothing, I tell you. Just showing my American friend here something. Something to show him."

He presses his arm against hers—a hairy raw sunburn against smooth ebony. Finally, she pulls away frowning, and slowly walks back to the table next to the window and the South China Sea. Re-seated, glistening legs crossed, she stares out into the bright blue until the other man takes out a cigarette, lights it and offers it to her. His gold rings twinkling in the windowlight.

After lifting his drink and clicking the ice and taking a long swallow, he says, "We are, how you say, taking honeymoon number two." And he runs a hand through the stiff-perfect of his hair, making it ruffle and rooster in the back. "Number one honeymoon was in the Alps. You know the Alps?" All the while he's looking straight ahead, talking into the barroom mirror. "And this time, this number two honeymoon, here we are, going up and down a seashore of jungles and mosquitoes, and... Up and down, back and forth." Meanwhile, she has stopped looking out the window, doing nothing but softly bouncing her crossed leg, smoking her cigarette, while the man—unshaven chin resting on ringed hand—lazily watches her.

Talking through his grin, he continues, "But more important than two honeymoons, bigger than any honeymoon, did you see the difference between us, hey, the black white difference? Night and day, yes?" There's the softest of squeals, something between metal and animal, as he moves his stool closer. A small quiet, followed by

louder ocean-cruising music. "But I tell you a secret now, Mr. American,..." Tapping his glass. "A secret." Tapping his glass with chewed fingernails. "My wife, I married her not because of love. Can you believe? Nothing like love." Turning to face me now, leaning so his chain dangles between us. "No love here. But something else, something maybe even bigger—even better." No longer tapping his empty glass, but looking me straight and hard in the face, at my mouth. "I marry her for her blackness, Mr. American. Yes, for her skin." And she continues to smoke and sometimes glance out into the water and sometimes over at her husband, and now turns to talk with the man who is saying little, almost nothing. "I tell you the truth." Grinning, and leaning back so the gold chain is flat against his chest again. "I marry her for her skin. For her skin and the children. What you think of that, heh?"

"The children?"

The sound of my own voice sounds weak and out of practice. I look down at my feet, at the gleam of bar stool, and feel strangely embarrassed. It is then that his grin softens,... unbends,... disappears.

"The children, Mr. American, the children. Don't you know? No?"

"The children?"

Once again staring at me, as if staring and talking have always gone together, he says, "I marry her, this black woman of mine. I marry her to see what our babies will look like. Can you imagine? Me..." Holding up his hands in playful arrest. "Me, so white and French, and her, so black and Algerian. Can you imagine the color of our babies? Gray? The color of smoke? I can hardly wait. I can hardly wait to see." His grin is trying hard to return, the corners of his mouth twitching, pulling. "An experiment, you see? This mixing,..." His hands tumbling in front of me. "... this mixing, this chemistry of people and colors. An experiment, yes?"

Finally, done with her cigarette, she turns away from the man and the South China Sea and carefully uncrossing her legs leaves the bar. The man, waving his ringed hand at us, hurries to catch up.

"Your friend?" I ask.

He looks at me as if there is something hidden in the question, as if I know something he doesn't. "Yes, of course. He is with me, my good friend, maybe my best friend. Since little boys..." He holds out his hand, showing me the height of little boys. "My best friend. He, too, wonders about this black and white business. My friend does. He, too, can not imagine babies the color of smoke. His babies."

Letting his outstretched hand drop to his side. “But he has not been lucky, know what I mean? Not like me. He knows no black woman like I do. No other black women have come into his life, only my wife. You see?”

The bartender has disappeared into the backroom to talk too-loud with someone.

“And so,... so, since this is our number two honeymoon and he is my best friend, I said why not come with us? Yes, come with us. At first he said no, of course not, but then, thinking about it longer and harder, he said fine, why not, yes; but then thinking again, he went back to no. Absolutely not. Finally, after going first this way, then that, I talk long and hard with him—all night we talk and drink—and in the end, with the boat leaving in three hours, maybe four, he says yes, of course.” Running his fingertips across his forehead, his grin growing wider. He sighs. “So, our blackandwhite babies should be coming soon. She has promised me this. Sometime soon.”

The bartender is done talking too-loud, and steps out of the backroom. Without saying a word, he makes another drink.

With his gold chain heavy against his parrot shirt, he reaches for the drink, saying, “You are married, Mr. American?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, I’m not.”

The bartender takes a white cloth and begins wiping the bar.

“Not married, and you never think about these black and white things—of men and women and babies?”

There are peanuts in a plastic dish and I grab a handful. My hand moves big and clumsy, as if it has suddenly forgotten all there is to know about picking up peanuts. I try grinning one of his grins, but nothing comes of it.

“Of course we have all heard your American music, seen your Hollywood movies. We know all about your singers and dancers and baseball players. We know all about that. But how about you, Mr. American? Can you imagine children the color of smoke? What do you think? Hmm?”

The bartender is wiping and rewiping. With his question still there, waiting, growing bigger and heavier than any golden chain, I glance at the window, at the bright blue and farther, at the green line of jungle beyond. Except for the throbbing of the ship’s engines, all is quiet.

Grabbing my wrist, he says, "Please, my friend, come with me. Let us see what can be done, yes? Come." And I let him lead me out of the bar and into the blinding sunlight of the South China Sea.

Craig Loomis