

## **ALMONDS WITH THE CHILDREN OF LONG BAY**

**By Richard Elman**

The water gleamed like burnt oil. Burnt without flames. It gave off its fumes to the still air, almost black, or splotched dark blue, banded close to shore with the grey, purple shadows from palm and almond trees, surging gently inland from the surf's mild movements. The beach at Long Bay was like something thrown down suddenly against the water: behind a narrow violet strip of sand, sparkling here and there, a number of pistachio, lemon, and stark white bungalows blinked among the palms in one direction; a glance down the other end of the cove showed a wreckage of shacks, flotsam of chicken coops, battered old cars, beached dories.

Seated in the center of the cove, on a piece of beach five feet from the water's edge, George Kendril felt protected. The sky was this perfect untroubled Caribbean azure, and the lowest inklings of the Blue Hills that began at the farthest end of the beach, though lush with cultivations, seemed like stage flats erected, if he ever glanced heavenward, to insure the privacy of his good moods.

Kendril was dressed solely in white gym shorts. No longer red, he was brownish orangey, peeling, with bare long legs and big feet that were resting only a little lower than his perfectly wide moonish grin. He wore no sunglasses. For some minutes he felt at peace with himself and the world, very calm and still, but after surveying all the hairy trails and arroyos on his chest, his softly swelling belly, he cricked his face and neck slightly up in a squint of that blinding hot sun to watch the five small black children again climbing among the branches

of the tallest almond tree, in the patio of the nearly abandoned motel, where he'd been staying for more than a week.

The children were after nuts, just like yesterday. A scattering of shells and half rotted hulls stained and pocked the flagstones beneath that one great broad-leafed tree which was still quite overladen, ready for harvesting.

On this second day of their attack against the almond tree, the children were clearly not playing. They wanted food; they were hungry. They worked over each limb and branch with a desperate joyfulness, one climbing monkey-like along the boughs and shaking, and the four others harvesting, and they took turns up high, the others leaving small mounds at the foot of the tree. After a while, more than one child would be up among the branches, raining down nuts at the feet of the others.

Kendril observed they did not often stop to eat any of their precious harvest. As soon as a new rain of nuts fell, they were sorted and swept into mounds or else gathered among the faded upturned skirts of two little girls, about eight and ten, who ran about beneath the tree with their brothers and friends, their bellies bulging, and their bare scrawny thighs agleam.

Very little was said, though there was a lot of laughter, and an occasional command given in Creole from an older sister of the gang, tall, loose, and really quite handsome, a grown woman who stood some paces away, smoking at a thick hand-rolled cigarette. When she was not supervising the kids in the tree, she would glance shyly at Kendril, and then look away again, as if not wishing him to know she was interested in him.

He thought she was very attractive: The high brow, the long sculptured face, those loose limbs, warm dark skin. Her full breasts beneath her sketchy black housedress. The thought that she

was probably not wearing anything under her dress also excited him. He was more than just curious about her and the children; drawn to her handsome good looks, but unable to engage the young woman in an open flirtation, he turned back toward Janine, his traveling companion.

“Nice,” he sighed, and stretched out his legs.

“Oh fun and games,” she smiled back.

She wore a light blue silk bikini; she had boyishly cropped sandy hair, bright blue eyes, pretty bird-like aplomb.

Seated in a beach chair identical to this own, perhaps ten paces apart, Janine, when she was not trying to attract him – to be more than simply his companion – could be quite custodial toward Kendril. Now she asked, “Hungry?”

He continued to stare at her, so pretty and clean without a hair out of place, so well-groomed and trim and pretty. Good bones. Slim ankles. Fine. Well bred. All knowing. She obviously enjoyed being pleasant toward him, whenever he let her be, as though her question to him now was an irrelevance he could disregard, though not her smiling.

“Are you hungry?” she asked again, in the exact same tone of voice, raising a plastic glass of pink rum punch to her face, tilting up her chin, draining it all the way to the bottom, before smiling again.

Kendril shook his head: “Are you?” He felt he was being appeasing, slightly cowardly. Ever since he’d noticed the black woman three days ago, he could barely bring himself to look at Janine openly, in daylight, her overseeing presence. He was also ashamed somewhat, aware she knew what was going on and would never say anything to him about it directly.

But now she spoke to him, with just a little pouting of the lips. “Those children aren’t just playing George. They’re hungry. Real hungry.”

Was she emphasizing that last phrase with the vernacular to warn him of something? Discourage him?

Kendril didn’t like being so closely supervised, but he knew talk would be less threatening to her than more silence at this point.

“One would think so,” he observed, as if a little too blithely, stuffy from exposure to the sun. “Do you suppose big sister said fetch me some nuts for supper, or else there’ll be no supper...?”

“She might be their mother,” Janine advised. “She’s old enough,”

“Oh, do you think so?” He was really angry with her, and hoped she was trying to convince herself as well as him by being this catty.

Frowning back at him a little fearfully, Janine said, “I don’t need to tell you they get pregnant very young down here...”

“I know that, but not that young...I mean so many times,” Kendril said, “She couldn’t be. She’s much too young. Too slim and pretty...”

There. His attraction was published for both of them to hear and edit. “You do like her, don’t you?” Janine said.

Kendril didn’t want to feel himself blush; he resisted the feeling without knowing what was happening to his face.

“Well don’t defend her,” Janine said, turning away, annoyed, after a while. “Because I wasn’t attacking her.”

She was staring down the beach toward the cabanas and he found himself counting hairs on his chest once more. “Never mind,” Kendril said. “Just let’s forget it.”

“That’s fine with me I’m sure.”

The surf sashayed; the cries of the children were feverish a moment. A shadow crossed his lap, as if his head had sunk on him a bit. The branches of the almond tree shook and swayed once more, wildly. Kendril saw two more of the children ascend the trunk and then the topmost part of the tree seemed to bend under all their pulling weight so that their guardian, and one little girl left on the ground, began to shout at them in Creole some words of caution.

He thought it sounded like Seethewaveyes, couldn’t make out their exact words, but the woman’s voice came very loud and harsh and throaty, without any lilt to it, and that disabused him of his fantasy about her, for the moment. The climber nearest the ground descended; a few nuts fell, too, and he again squinted off toward the ocean.

Janine rose from her chair. She tugged at her panties, and walked over to the ruffled water’s edge, seeming very birdlike and necky when her toes touched the water and she wiggled them. “Lovely...” She seemed to make song: Bent herself low over the waves and adjusted her bra straps, with the cup of her right hand splashed at her shoulders and her small round breasts.

Janine splashed herself again and again, and cooed and giggled and sighed. She was putting on a good show. She liked being watched; she was an actress. She wanted George to look at her, and never look away. But really that was not part of the rules they’d made in advance on coming to this island together and she knew it and, in a little while, stopped and held her head up high and was necky and pouted when she saw George gazing off into space again.

“Really,” he wanted to say, “You’re being childish. Being such a little girl.” But he followed her movements out of the corners of his eyes and said nothing because he knew the woman and those children were still hanging about and might overhear. Had it not been more or less mutually decided upon with Janine that they would travel together as friends, chums, eat together, of course sleep together, but not get “too involved.”

“Let’s just try to have some fun together for a while,” Kendril could remember hearing himself say, more than once, “for a change. I think we can both use that.”

“Of course. Some fun. That would be nice.”

He never agreed to notice her moods. Their sex had been good together, the air of their company bright and easy. She seemed as content as he believed he was. But, in the Capitol, their first night, Janine almost went off with a handsome black hustler who promised to show her the best reggae and street dancing, and some dynamite high green: (“You know beauty, real spliffs.”)

George felt tight and abused by the invitation to ‘turn on’ without him as he watched it transpire, Janine not resisting, that he became openly angry and ordered her not to go. “I just don’t like feeling left out,” he explained later: “Like a bump on a log.” George meant he didn’t want their holds to be quite that loose, though he did not have to be possessive because he had a sort of unwritten title to Janine’s attentions, squatter’s rights, for the duration of their trip.

They had rented a car to drive out to Long Bay and then the thing between them heated up. Among the coconut groves and sugar fields of Moro Bay, it was hard to resist being with such a pretty available woman. They made love on beaches, bathed naked near deserted coconut plantations, were with each other and honestly happy for a while, except

that, as soon as they were back on the road, Kendril retreated from her again. His excuse was his fear of getting lost in a strange part of the island. He also wanted to draw back, he thought, with some self-loathing, having once again established his rights to her.

Now George blinked at her coldly near the water's edge at Long Bay: "You'll be swimming again I suppose..."

"If you will." She smiled faint encouragement toward him. Ever since Moro Bay, Janine had been guarded with him like that, her attentions toward him, a weak pulse, were constant, debilitating. Kendril found her come-ons more disagreeable than enticing.

He said, "I'd like to sit here and watch those kids...you know...I may even sketch them all, after a while."

"In that case," she said, as she gave an annoyed peck at all that pure bright air with her pretty head, "I think I'll take myself a little stroll down the beach."

She went off through the sand, across the breakwater, toward the Inn.

"Be sure to be back by five," he called after her. They were planning to drive to Port Antonio for dinner though he didn't explain, as if hoping she did not need to be reminded.

Janine never turned around but waved through the air, her slim arm held high, and sauntered on, very sidling and provocative, as if cooling herself down in the wind. Watching her diminishing form negotiate the rows of small private bungalows to enter the crowded public beach near the Inn, he felt slightly peeved again by what seemed another reproach intended for him: then the anger died in him. He was grateful just to be by himself. He could just be good to himself for a while. Gradually, he let his head rise from his shoulders, felt the tension drain from

his neck, and then he heard the children rustling in their tree, and turned and saw that they and their guardian had also stopped what they were doing to watch Janine's departure.

There was a sudden almost syrupy hot thickness to the air about his face. They were all smiling at George: one of the little girls was bouncing up and down on her bare heels and squealing joyfully.

Then the others began to bounce and make happy teasing sounds.

"Now shah," said their guardian, as if she knew she was their target. But the children quieted only for a moment. They all seemed so very pleased for Kendril and their 'relative,' now that he was alone, at last.

Slowly, dropping their legs down under them like large spiders, the two oldest children descended from different branches of the tree, and fell, and rolled about, and giggled. There was a little applause, and then a lot of panic. The smallest little girl had gotten her skirt snagged on a branch so that she was more or less hanging in peril. Kendril got up from his chair. He saw the woman gracefully extend her long arms and on tip toes grab the little girl's bottom and yank her out of the tree.

She bent over the child to ask if she had been hurt. Wildly, the girl shook her head. She whispered. Pulled herself away from the woman who was pointing around a corner of one of the old buildings.

The child walked to a place near where the woman pointed and, in full view of Kendril, lifted her skirts, and squatted, a stream of dirty colored water gushing from her bottom.

When the child was done, the woman gathered all of her children near her and they started to walk toward Kendril with some of their nuts.



“Good day to you sah...”

“Good day. Lovely isn’t it,” he beamed back at them, though, at first, he was somewhat frightened by so many bright faces and happy smiles. They seemed like a reproach to his customary sense of dread, and they were so easy in their beauty toward him. When they offered some nuts out of their little pink palms for him to share with them, Kendril worried about taking food from hungry mouths. But the woman, who surely must be their mother, from the broad-nosed family resemblance he now observed up close, gave him such positive encouragement with her nodding warm smile, he was infatuated with all of them once again.

“Take please take,” she was saying. “You will make the children very happy and you’ll like if you take.”

Her smile was broad; it broke against her high dun cheekbones, crinkled her eyes, and showed her handsome pink mouth, almost toothless. She saw he was pleased with her and she was pleased for being handsome to him. “I assure you sah you will like...”

“No sah,” Kendril said. “George.”

“Alright sah my name is Barbara. Take,” she insisted.

He took a nut and the children cheered. “Patrick, Lally, Sheela, Marcus...this is Mr. George.”

She had rattled off her children’s names with so much familiar insouciance that Kendril could not locate faces as they answered to them. Though each child seemed to be smiling when his or her name was called, he realized they had all been smiling at him for quite a long while. Kendril heard himself mumbling at a collection of smiling yams: “How do you do, George. George Kendril. George.”

“Three cheers for George. We’re all just fine,” she told him then. “But please you must take more. Take another. We picked for you.”

Kendril accepted a second nut and crushed the two between his fingers easily, their hard scaly rinds yielding so readily to the pressure of his thumbs that two shiny white pips, about the size of his cuticles, almost slipped from his palms before he was able to push them up toward his mouth and chew on them, studiously.

The fruit was salty, and then sweet, a slightly bitter greenish taste. “Good?” all the children were screaming at him at once. “Good?”

“Good as a gennip,” he blinked back. They giggled and bounced up and down again, delighted he knew the names of one of their favorite local fruits.

Then he heard the woman’s voice, and it was rather soft and deep and thrilling to him, but just a little more schooled and English in its accent.

“Really,” Barbara was saying, “they are delighted for you...”

He felt as if she were counting herself out. “For what?”

“We all are,” she said. “That you like.” Smiling so warmly toward him again that he felt drawn to touch her. He wanted to reach for her, felt he already knew her in ways he could never know or trust Janine.

“Well I certainly must return the favor,” Kendril said, suddenly. He got up out of his chair so that the soles of his bare feet were burning against a new patch of sand. “Come with me” he announced, and started up the beach toward the porch of his bungalow.

Once, as he led this small procession of children and their handsome guardian, Kendril couldn’t resist glancing off toward the direction in which Janine had gone away, but he did not

see her figure among the bathers, nor was she off somewhere beyond the public beach, that he could perceive, where the cove bent in upon itself under low hills of banana, papaya, and cocoa cultivations. When he reached the wooden porch steps, he turned and said to Barbara and her children, "Make yourselves comfortable here. Just wait and I'll be right back."

He went inside to find the big bowl. He had Gros Michel bananas for them, and soursops, green and yellow mangos, star apples, and heavy sprays of the lime green gennip. When he came outside with that big flowered bowl heaped high with fruit, proffered between his outreaching arms, he felt himself also brimming.

In the bright glare the faces of all the children dulled on him, then, as though they really did not expect immediate reimbursement for their gift of a few nuts to this nice friendly white person.

But he thought he was being generous. They could have all they wanted and there would surely be plenty left over for Janine with whom he's bought the fruits.

"Take," Kendril echoed their words. "Do take."

Then Barbara said, 'It's alright to take.' All their faces brightened. An octopus reached for his bowl of ripe fruit.

Now all of them sat about on the porch eating the fruits and nuts noisily, wetly, making large sucking sounds. Only Kendril lacked much appetite. He worried that there would not be enough for everybody. The children and their mother seemed ravenous. They gladly reached for seconds and thirds. The piled-up fruit in his bowl dwindled. He believed he was happy in the sun to be giving these people so much enjoyment.

When there was only just one mango and a couple of gennips left in the bowl, Barbara noticed a paperback copy of a novel on the porch, and picked it up, and started rifling through its pages, almost blindly, with her sticky fingers.

Her face gleamed at him:

“You are a professor?”

“Artist,” he explained. “I sometimes paint.”

He brushed at the air between them with his right hand, a rather grand flourish of strokes.

“000000.” She giggled, showing her bare pink gums to him again as her face broke into another smile.

“You’re famous?”

“Not at all. Not really.” He blushed.

“Yes sah I believe you are,” she insisted, and went 00000 again, before jabbering a few words at the children which also made them 0000h, as if delighted with him.

Kendril, for lack of any more appropriate response, brushed at the air again.

Barbara 00000ed at him a third time, and now she, too, darkened. He could see the crimson rush against her brown skin stretched tight across those cheek bones so that it seemed to him, momentarily, that his own feeling for her was being reflected back against his face. Kendril’s ears burned. Bashful; he cast his glance down at his bare feet.

“I came here to have a vacation,” he declared. “And it’s been so lovely. But someday soon, I may want to draw all of you because I think you are all so very nice and pretty...”

“Thank you very much sah,” said the littlest of the girls. The others were giggling again.

Barbara said, “Yes, you must come to visit with us. Then you can draw.”

“Another time maybe.”

“We live very close,” Barbara said. “You come with us. Now. The children will like that, won’t you children...”

“Not today.” He felt tight all over in his neck again.

“Yes you must...”

“He should. He must,” the children said.

“But I can’t today. I’m waiting for my friend...”

“You come,” Barbara seemed a little gruff. “You’ll like it, come...”

He glanced across his shoulder down the beach and felt her warm hand grasp his wrist.

He shrugged her off. “I’m very sorry...”

She drew back her hand. There was hurt in her eyes. Now he knew he had been drawn to her by something in her too, an eternity of mutual melancholy he might have ended here, at last, if only he had not hurt himself so much now by rejecting her.

“My friend she would notice I had gone away. Wasn’t here,” Kendril explained, “and she would miss me.”

“You mean the lady?”

All the children gasped and jawed at him.

“Yes, I came with her. She’s my friend...”

“But we were friends.” Barbara nodded glumly and the children all gathered around her.

They were all looking very sad.

“The man don’t wish to come for sure,” Barbara shouted crossly across the beach.

“Don’t you hear the man?”

“Some other time,” Kendril was saying. “Perhaps tomorrow if you tell me where you live I could come...”

He knew the effort was futile. They all started to walk away in a single file. “Goodbye sah. Goodbye.”

Waving at him as if he were a moth or a fly, their heads cast dejectedly against their shoulders.

“Goodbye.”

Kendril watched their procession along the beach the opposite way Janine had gone. When they disappeared behind the row of shanties near Mama Kelty’s store, he felt relieved. He’d no more fruits to offer.

He went to the ice box and got himself a bottle of Dragon Stout. Cold and very bitter against his teeth.

His face felt like a big hot stone.

Kendril stayed alone on his porch all that afternoon, feeling himself as heavy, unalterable and heavy, leaden, sad. Light glinted dully on the lavender beach. Another improbably bright day was leaving him. The tide came in. He felt abandoned, whether he had missed out on a chance to defy death by becoming involved with such a band of strangers... that his body was not a grievance against his mind...and when the warm winds blew he felt just bleary misery.

Janine reappeared at dusk, a rather thin smudge at first. Her figure enlarged as it alternated with the palms along some nearby nearly deserted stretches of beach.

“Hello there,” she said, cheerily, with a forced cheeriness, at last, three feet from the lowest porch step: “Been having yourself a party?”

Her eyes took in shreds of mango and papaya, pits, stems, skins and a bottle around the desolated fruit bowl. Her face seemed very burned and crisp and sere, her nose much too red, and there were reddish smudge marks along her shoulders and rib cage.

She was sweating.

“Well,” Janine said, a moment later, “I’m glad you saved something for me. I guess I’ll go and shower.”

“Janine.”

He was trying to stop her because she was being much too mean. This couldn’t simply be another reproach.

The woman wiped her hand across her face and left herself with a smile. “I see you didn’t get to sketch after all...”

“Have you been with somebody?” Kendril demanded.

She smiled on: “Of course.” She started up the porch through the sliding glass doors into their bungalow.

Kendril followed her. He watched her undoing herself. He thought he could detect even more red marks.

He said, “Janine...”

“Now George,” she spun about so that she seemed scrawny, almost flat chest, resilient seeming, her look determined, her mood bolstered by her afternoon away from him. “Don’t you

start anything,” she warned. “I mean it. I really won’t stand for it...”

The fist of anger in him unclenched. He felt warm again, despite himself. He smiled. He felt evil and very sexy, felt quite good, and then guilty as hell about all that.

“I’m not going to split hairs with you Janine...” His voice was a slur, a leer. “Hurry, because I’m feeling real lonely.”

Her face was almost blank. “I’ll just pop under the shower, George.”