

The Abundance of Water*

Jenny Mitchell

The black she-devil, Miss Queen Fall, was lying in soiled sheets – too weak to cough, too proud to cry. There was something in her throat that seemed to want to stop her breathing. Out of the corner of her eye she could see another sad clump of her own grey hair fallen onto the pillow. Her voice, which had been so strong until that summer, was now so weak it failed her at the times she needed it most, except when she spoke about the past.

Her voice failed her now when she wanted to scream at the workmen to stop their noise and leave the house. They were downstairs tearing at walls when Regret was hers and always would be, even after her death. She wanted to shout for someone to chase the workmen away but knew that her grandchild, Lily, had gone to the Slums.

Miss Fall raised her head to scream at the workmen but her neck was weak and her head fell back against the pillow. All she could see in the dull morning light was the ceiling, so far above her and indistinct it might as well have been the sky. The room now seemed too large even though she had slept in it for years; it was twice the size of the shack where she was raised before Tiny Minton stole her life.

She strained to move her head on the pillow and squinted. She could hardly make out the furniture off in the distance but knew it shone – well enough for her to see her face in it if she had ever been the kind of woman to care about the way she looked. Ever since Tiny's death, when she moved into his bedroom for good, she ensured the highest standards of care for the old sturdy pieces he loved so much when the rest of the house hardly mattered.

The maids had only just closed the door, having cleaned the room in tears because the workmen followed them about the house calling the twin sisters dundusy albinos because they were such pale-skinned mixed-breeds; the workmen offered them money to go out to the stables and shame themselves amongst the horses.

These workmen were known in the parish for their hard work and casual acts of violence. They were Irish, some German, known collectively as the Dodds and

easily identified by the short back-and-sides they gave each other every week, and the crude black D they tattooed onto the back of their necks. D for Death and Destruction.

They had been in the house since July, brought there by Primrose because everyone knew she meant to destroy her own mother's sense of purpose and worth as she lay dying. But Miss Fall would not allow any part of herself to be destroyed, and refused to die until she had the chance to dictate her will.

She pushed back the sheet but the effort to move her legs made her breathless. She screamed for her lawyer Austen but the name only scraped the back of her throat. He was the only man she trusted, never mind that he was white, because in over twenty years of undivided service he gave her the advice that helped ensure the American traders offered the very best price for her crop. She wanted to ask why he had not been to see her since July; where was her money from the traders when they knew she would not send the crop without an advance? Yet she knew the answers already: Primrose found a way to divert all money and correspondence to The Land, and she found a way to keep Austen from coming to the house. Despite this, his final task must be to write down the will that would ensure everything was left to Lily.

Miss Fall was determined that Primrose would have no part of the estate. Mother and daughter had not spoken for months, ever since Primrose went to live with Judge Moore, unmarried – to commit such a sin with a white man when everyone knew that Miss Fall was forced to bed down with Tiny Minton for years. Lily would never behave in such a shameful way. She was only seventeen but knew that the only thing that mattered was The Land. She had worked in the fields as a foreman for almost two years, and did her best since July to lead the few remaining workers. Miss Fall taught Lily that the only way to make the field hands loyal was to pay them the very best wage and allow them to build their shacks out on the lawn because they feared and hated the forest, the old slave shacks where their parents lived before Emancipation.

Lily understood that she must only ever hire the blackest of men to lead the field hands so that they would not be shamed into calling a white man master. These blue-black foremen were never allowed to carry whips even if the crack might spur the workers on. Miss Fall said they must not have the same rules as during slavery days and to this end she built a chapel near to the house so the field hands could marry with the full attendance of a priest; and they could christen their children with African

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names if that was their preference. Her workers were free to ride horses within her boundary wall when in Kingston the blacks could only ride donkeys and mules; and the women were given the right to sell any crops they grew on their provision ground and keep the profits. And all of the field hands were welcome to go to the library in the evening and learn to read and write. Miss Fall was known to spoil her workers even further: She had the gift to find old timey herbs, and whenever the women and children were sick, she went to the shacks on the lawn and fed them healing teas.

The field hands were so grateful for this better treatment, they called Miss Fall by the exultant name Queen Dove – Queen was her given name, and Dove was a title given to any woman close to God. They called her talawa as well – stubborn and strong – because she built the boundary wall that kept the English soldiers out, and never suffered the strikes that plagued the white West Indians, especially the piss-poor Winters on the neighbouring estate.

She knew how to make poison.

Miss Fall stopped screaming Austen's name and lay very still as terror began to rise up from her belly towards her throat. She was used to the feeling of terror – it came every day at such ordinary times – as she looked towards the fields or chewed a mouthful of rice. Terror was a legacy of all she had known when she was Tiny Minton's slave. But she would not admit to any weak emotions so she turned the terror into rage, and all the anger she wanted to aim at the Dodds, she turned on herself. She was not worthy. She was not strong. It was her job to keep The Land safe and the house protected, but the Dodds roamed freely, and most of the field hands – every single one of the men – had been sent to live in the Slums on the orders of Primrose and Judge Moore. Miss Fall blamed herself because of her collapse that summer.

She had been ill for months and unable to ride a horse ever since her might-be eightieth birthday in April. But still she insisted on going out to the fields everyday in the back of a cart, propped up on a high-backed chair, refusing the comfort of a cushion even though the journey jarred every brittle bone.

Lily led the cart through the fields as Miss Fall greeted her workers or called to them that they must work harder, quicker. 'Abernathy and Lyle will pay good money for that crop so hurry up and bring it in.'

But on the eighth of July, she found she could not leave her bed, and within a

few hours, the Dodds arrived at the house and the English soldiers lined up all of the field hands and marched the men off the estate, on the orders of Judge Moore and Primrose.

Five months had passed since then and as Miss Fall lay in the soiled bed, with terror at her throat, she knew she would not be able to last much longer. She tried to call for Austen again but fell back against the pillow in silence and almost fell asleep. There was the buzz of a mosquito close to her ear and the noise, the irritation, made her determined to go downstairs and chase the Dodds out of her house. Then she would ride to the gate and disperse the English soldiers; and beyond, she would ride to Austen's house and he would write down her will. But she would not stop there – she would ride to the Carolinas with the crop and demand her money from Abernathy and Lyle. It was only a handful of years since she rode at the head of her field hands to fight the English soldiers that Robert Winter sent to steal The Land. Those battles were fierce and she found that the worst things about her collapse was not the soiled sheets, the indignity of bed sores, but that she could not escape the memory of those battles. The pictures came to her unbidden – the long-lost details of the violence she was once so proud to commit: the crunch of bone under the hilt of her machete; the blood she spilt in order to be safe.

She wanted to cry for the soldiers she killed but no tears came because she did the one thing that always offered some distraction from grief: slowly, she spelt out the words she taught herself from the *New Oxford English Dictionary*. She lifted her crooked hand above the sheet and spelt out No – the first word she taught herself to write; then Runaway; Breed. She taught this word to Primrose when the girl was eleven years old and her blood came for the first time. 'You are a girl that can breed now,' Miss Fall said. 'You are a mixed-breed. Men will want to rape their way to fatherhood through you. There are no more slaves, but men still think pale babies are worth more.'

Had she really said all that to such a young girl, to her only child to scare her from men as a form of protection?

I did all that to make her strong.

The only protection had ever been the boundary wall.

Words are not swords. The world is no good.

Miss Fall began to scream for Lily but the effort hurt the back of her throat

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and made her body tremble. She called for the maids because Fidela and Ru must change the sheets before the piss soaked through the mattress. There was money under the mattress – was that soaked through as well? Never mind. The sodden amount would be the only inheritance Primrose would ever have.

She is a wretched daughter.

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In Fortune House at the edge of Freedom, Primrose Fall woke up from an erratic dream in which she still lived at Regret and could find no way to escape her mother and daughter.

She sat bolt upright and the dream faded quickly, replaced by a pink and yellow room; a huge white bed; and windows all along the wall with yellow curtains that puddled prettily to the floor. There were ceiling fans in every room, and the sun was locked safely outside where it could not harm and darken her skin.

As she looked at her possessions, she sighed because this was the day she was finally going to meet her nephew from England after months of planning.

Will he be a fine white gentleman like my father? Will he care that my mother is black?

She looked down at the empty space beside her where the Judge was meant to be sleeping. It was wrong of him to be late coming back from his trip to Savannah-La-Mar. He promised to be back in time to meet *The Rendezvous* so that Louis would see how powerful she was, and accept the first offer of money to give up all claims to The Land. Then she and the Judge would take possession and destroy the banana trees, and begin to build the rail that would make them both impossibly rich. She already made several important changes to Regret. Her bedroom suite would be the envy of every white woman in Kingston, and as soon as the rest of the house was as she desired, the Dodds would begin to clear the ground up to the moat. She planned to establish the largest ornamental garden on the island; nothing practical would ever be grown there – no bananas or cane, no produce to be worked for like a slave as if money was the only thing that mattered. Instead, she would grow imported English flowers that were able to stand the heat – roses and morning glories; and she would rejuvenate the graveyard where her father was buried, where her mother would be buried – not soon enough.

Primrose threw back the sheets and went downstairs to make sure the staff had begun the preparations for the seven course lunch. Would her nephew like the menu she took so long to choose especially for him?

Oysters

Prince of Wales's Soup

Smoked eels & horseradish garnish

Roast chicken with bread sauce & parsley

Sirloin of Beef with Potatoes & Cabbage

Sherry Trifle

Stilton

There was a selection of wines from England so that he would feel as if he had never left the Mother Country. The menu was printed on embossed card from Graves & Son even though there were only three copies and sadly, only two of them would be used because it did not seem, no matter how hard she prayed, that the Judge would be back in time for lunch. She wanted to talk to him about the invitations to the Christmas Eve ball; she meant to have them printed along with the menus but could not do so because the ball was meant to announce their wedding and after almost a year together, the Judge still refused to name the day. Her wedding dress was in the wardrobe, the veil of French lace, and she planned to show it to him again because it was so beautiful and surely that would force his hand.

She went to the kitchen and told the chef that if there was one mistake during lunch, even of the smallest kind, the entire staff would be dismissed. 'You shan't find work on any of the other islands,' she told him. 'I'll make sure the Judge blackens your name. Remember what I said – there are to be no experiments with spices.'

When she was satisfied that the rest of the staff were suitably cowed, she went to see to her ablutions with an intense, almost absurd attention as if she not only meant to wash herself clean but to wash away the stain of her colour.

She allowed the maid to gently towel her dry and douse her with lavender talc; then Primrose stepped into the petticoats and ordered the corset to be tied so tightly it was difficult to breathe. She took careful steps to the wardrobe where she gently touched her wedding dress; then she pushed back several gowns on pale silk hangers,

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and reached for the one dress that would be right for the occasion: the green silk that cost so much she dare not tell the Judge. She carefully hung the dress on the wardrobe door, held her breath, picked up the jar, and began to remove the spiders hidden in the delicate silk folds. Eight spiders were placed in the wardrobe every night to eat the moths that would otherwise destroy the fine cloth, and she could not wear the dress till all eight spiders were safely captured in the jar.

The maid, Florence, stood with her arms at her side, slack-jawed, when it was meant to be her job to remove the spiders.

Primrose wanted to scream because it was not true what they said about white maids – Florence was not dainty but bovine and rough. She always pulled at the clothes without due care so that Primrose lost her temper and had to do the job herself.

When she was certain there were no more spiders hidden in the dress, she burrowed into the wardrobe where she found the last two spiders. Then she attached the parchment lid and handed the jar to Florence. ‘Put it over there,’ Primrose said. ‘Not the floor, stupid girl. The dressing-table. Now hurry up and do my hair.’

‘Yes, miss.’

Primrose sat down in front of the dressing table and allowed Florence to place a large silk cloth over her shoulders and begin to comb her hair. ‘Don’t pull on me so hard.’

‘No, miss.’

When the hair was dressed, Primrose turned her head from side to side and gazed in the mirror. She was in love with the hair pomade that the Judge brought back from the Carolinas on his last triumphant visit to raid her mother’s bank account. Primrose wanted to go with him but the Judge said it would be difficult for them to travel together: there were places in the United States where men and women of different races could be hanged if they were even suspected of amalgamation.

‘But if we are married,’ she said.

‘Even then.’

He told her to write a letter to the bank confirming that her mother was no longer of sound mind, and authorising the transfer of all funds into the Judge’s account. This triumph gave Primrose particular pleasure because the balance in the account – twenty thousand pounds – was the exact amount the Judge said she could spend to renovate Regret and for their wedding. He bought back several expensive

gifts but Primrose cherished *Miss T. Washington’s Miracle Hair Straightening Product*. The pomade completely destroyed the annoying frizz she inherited from her mother, the tendency for the hairs at the back of her neck to grow kinky and tight. Now thanks to the pomade, the dark brown hair was shiny and lank and had to be specially curled once a week.

When her hair was arranged, Primrose placed two pearl-headed pins amongst the curls and sighed because Louis Mackenzie would have to be impressed. Perhaps he would agree to be the best man at the wedding and with that, even the most important whites – The Brotherhood that still refused to invite her into their homes – would beg to come to the wedding, and she would say yes, of course they must come.

As she sat closer to the mirror, she smiled. She was well aware of her beauty – it did not seem to fade but grow, and made her feel there really was nothing to envy about white women after all – they aged so quickly in the sun. Primrose hardly had a wrinkle, and her stomach was so flat no one would ever guess she had a child, almost a woman now. Primrose shuddered every time she thought about Lily’s father, and could not believe that she once cared for someone so poor and so black.

Bailey Seeton had been one of her mother’s field hands, a man Primrose went to visit almost every night for three years before anyone guessed they were lovers. She aborted several of his children against his will by drinking the bitter tea made from black cohose root. But when the affair was discovered, he was banished from The Land by Miss Fall who said that no man could take advantage of her only child. ‘Men and their nasty ways,’ Miss Fall said. ‘Let him go elsewhere and spread his nonsense.’

When Primrose heard that he went away without attempting to see her, she put her hands on her belly and said *I will keep this child and Bailey will come back*. But he never came back, and by the time she drank the dark tea at the end of the seventh month, the baby could not be uprooted from the womb.

The birth was the biggest disgrace of Primrose’s life, not because she was an old maid of almost twenty-eight with the air of an untouchable queen, but because the baby was so black and everyone knew the father was only a field hand.

She refused to give the child a name – Miss Fall chose the name Lily – and now, almost eighteen years later, Lily was due to inherit The Land. Primrose felt this was simply more of her mother’s spite. When they lived together at Regret, they

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argued about everything, especially the way Lily was to be raised. Primrose said the girl should not wear trousers or go to the fields like a man; she should be sent to school in England so that she would know the proper way to behave. 'I've done my best with her voice,' Primrose insisted, 'but the girl still talks like one of the common people.'

Miss Fall believed that work in the fields made Lily strong, and pursed her lips at the word England as if it was a synonym for hell. 'No school,' Miss Fall said. 'Lily stays with me.'

Primrose rarely argued for long – there was always some great social occasion that offered distraction, although she only ever attended events dominated by the upper echelon of white West Indians. She spent years trying to win a husband from this select group as a wealthy marriage would offer the only possible escape from Regret. Miss Fall refused to give Primrose an allowance or buy her a house of her own. 'I pay for your fussy clothes,' Miss Fall said. 'We have so much food, it goes to waste. What more do you want? You must be satisfied.'

But Primrose wanted to own her own house where there would be no field hands tramping into the library to read books whenever they wanted, and no dust from the fields blowing in to dirty the floor, and no daughter Primrose was meant to love. She wanted to be married to a wealthy white man so that her mixed-breed nature would not matter. She took several white lovers but none would agree to marriage because her mother was the black she-devil and it was common knowledge that Primrose would not inherit The Land.

By the time she was forty she grew so desperate she even considered marriage to George Lascelles, a well-placed mixed-breed who made his money from pigs. But despite his large house near the Harbour, she felt he was too pleasant to ever attain the kind of power she craved.

They were close friends for three years but she was saved from a decision when Judge Moore arrived in Kingston and did all he could to have her. He did not seem to care about her colour, and as soon as they began to go to bed – something he craved and she endured – he asked her to come and live with him in Freedom. 'I cannot bear to sleep without you now.' His voice was stupid with sexual longing.

On her first night as mistress of Fortune House, she went from one room to another, deciding what needed to be changed; it was all too masculine and dark. The Judge – he would not allow anyone to call him Daniel – listened to her complaints

then wrote a cheque so large that even when she made the alterations, there was still enough for her to buy an entire wardrobe of clothes. It was the kind of opulence she saw in her father's house when she was a child, an opulence she rarely enjoyed because she and her mother lived with the servants. It was the kind of opulence Primrose wanted at Regret, and she would have it as soon as The Land was in her name.

When she was satisfied with her hair, she ordered Florence to stand on the chair and place the green dress over her head. 'Do it gently.'

'Yes, miss.'

Primrose sighed as the silk skimmed her arms and fell into place around her hips, but as Florence began to hook the thirty-eight pearl buttons at the back, Primrose grew impatient. 'Don't take so long. Bring me my brooch.'

'Which one, miss?'

'The pearl one of course.' Primrose wanted to slap the maid for being so stupid; it was wilful, this pretending not to know what brooch went with what dress. 'Hurry up.'

Florence turned away so quickly, she knocked the jar of spiders onto the floor. The parchment lid fell away and the spiders slowly climbed over each other, taking a slow trail towards the wardrobe.

Primrose held up her skirt and stood on a chair until each spider was gathered back into the jar; then, without stepping down, she slapped the maid across both cheeks. 'Now bring me the brooch.'

Florence held her hand to her face and whimpered: 'The Judge says you're not to hit me any more.'

'Does he indeed? If you tell him, you'll be sorry. Go downstairs and make sure they've laid the table correctly. Oh, what would you know? I'll see to it myself.'

Primrose could feel sweat begin to prick her underarms and she was afraid it would show through the silk.

Is green the right colour?

What if Louis despised her colour and refused to sell his claim? Perhaps she should go to see her mother quickly, and force the old woman to change her mind.

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At Regret, Miss Fall tried to sit up in the bed but she could only stiffen her neck and narrow her eyes to look at Primrose. ‘What dragged you here today?’

‘I’ve come to see how you are.’

‘What does it have to do with you? You haven’t been here for months, ever since you caused the trouble with those workmen. Take them out of my house. Get rid of the soldiers and bring back my field hands.’

‘Your voice is very weak, mother. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?’

‘You can stop talking to me in that sweetie-sweetie voice for one thing. I know you too well.’ Miss Fall looked Primrose up and down slowly as if to say the green dress with the impractically long train would be no good for work in the fields, and the woman who wore such clothes, well – she was no good. ‘Why you always have to dress so fandango?’ Miss Fall said. ‘You don’t have any shame to let a white man dress you so?’

Primrose tutted, a sound Miss Fall could not stand because it was just like Tiny. He used to tut when she cried, when she asked to be sent back to her mother, when she held out her hands to push him away.

‘Why are you in my house?’ Miss Fall said.

‘This is my father’s house.’

‘He lives over there.’ Miss Fall pointed towards the graveyard. ‘I told them to bury him twelve feet deep – six for the man, six more for the devil.’

Primrose sighed. ‘Mother, you won’t last much longer and we must talk about the estate. Most of the fields are rotten now, and without the men you have no chance of sending a crop to the traders. It’s time for you to admit defeat. The Judge and I have spent so much to renovate the house...’

‘Stop your noise. You come here using your big words. You think I don’t know what it means – to renovate. Go downstairs to the library and see how many books I own. Every night, Lily reads those books to me and I can read as well. Is not renovate you want. You want to steal all that I worked for. You want to live here with your ugly white man.’

Primrose moved towards the door. ‘I have to leave now, mother. I have an important guest.’

‘If I’m so ill, how could you let them change the house? How could you put those soldiers at the gate? I want to see my lawyer.’

Primrose turned back and smiled. ‘It’s time we clarified ownership. By the end of the year, I shall be married to the Judge.’

Miss Fall laughed and was almost grateful because it made her feel stronger. ‘You’ve been with him for a year and he hasn’t married you yet.’

Primrose looked at her gloved hands for a moment but when she raised her head, the smile was firmly back in place. ‘It’s all very simple, mother. You shall write your will and name me as your heir, then the deeds will be destroyed. Where do you have them hidden?’

‘The deeds your father left say everything is mine until I pass away, then the estate reverts to his *legal* heirs. That is not you. It’s your sister in England. Grace was given her father’s name and you were not.’

‘He meant to make me his legal heir before he died. He told me...’

‘Words, just words. He let you call him father and made you love him. He taught you to love everything white, and look how hated I must be as I am so black.’

Primrose bent over the bed and spoke through clenched teeth. ‘Mother, this is your final chance to give me my rights, or I’ll not be able to stop the soldiers. They’ll remove you and Lily. You’ll be thrown out onto the road.’

‘You want to treat me like a slave. You want to run me out of my own house. All you ever cared about was money and man.’

‘Be quiet.’

‘Because you say so?’ Miss Fall scowled because she did not want to give away the truth: that even with all the hatred between them, she still believed her daughter to be the most beautiful thing in the world – the cat green eyes, the long brown hair, the delicate flush of light brown skin. Primrose was so beautiful that Miss Fall wanted to close her eyes and turn her head away because it could not be safe for her only child to be so dan-dan in such a wretched world.

On the day she gave birth, Miss Fall dragged herself up from the pallet and took the baby out to the fields to smear its face with dirt so that it would be much darker and Tiny would not know it was his child. But whether dark or fair, ugly or dan-dan, there was no way for Miss Fall to ensure that men – black and white – that seemed to value women only as a thing to use, would leave the child alone. So on the

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day that Primrose was born, Miss Fall looked at the sky and said: 'Take her back. I'll not keep her if I cannot keep her safe.'

The sky did not respond, and Miss Fall wanted to say she never meant to be a mother. She poisoned eight of Tiny's children in her womb, and it was only in a moment of weakness – nine months of weakness – that she decided to keep this child. Emancipation was not ten years old and the whites were determined to have slaves again. They spoke about it all the time at the Jamaica Assembly where they made their laws; they wrote about it in pamphlets that she could not read but that Tiny read out loud, nodding his head to say yes, yes – the blacks *must* be slaves. How could he make anything of his land if he had to pay for the labour?

Despite all this, Miss Fall decided to keep his child when she knew it was not safe for blacks to walk the open roads. Everywhere, black men were grabbed and carried off to work on strange estates, or put in ships against their will and taken to new lands to labour. Women were turned to whores in order to buy food; children were worked to the bone and still their families did not own sticks or stones enough to raise their shacks out of the gullies. Black men, fathers, must be prepared to give their lives in order to protect their pickney from defilement, disrespect. Mothers must go to act as wet-nurse to white babies and keep their babies at arm's length so that the nipples would not be tainted before they went to a white mouth.

Miss Fall knew all this and still she decided to keep his child because eight unborn souls were damned to Hell and she loved the name Primrose.

It was more than forty years since then and she could not stand to look at her daughter.

'Now you listen here,' Miss Fall said. 'I am the mother and I tell you this – you and the Judge will have no more power in my house. You will not hurt Lily.' She did not know how she managed to lift herself out of the bed but her feet were on the floor and her knees locked in place. She stood up and began to walk by holding everything she could – the chair and the table – clawing the air as she moved closer to Primrose. 'Come here,' Miss Fall said, 'before you leave, I want to give you one ras lick. You were always too damn facetious. Is your father's fault – you didn't get licks enough when you were a child, he would not let me.'

Primrose backed away and ran out of the room.

When the front door slammed, Miss Fall collapsed on the bed and cried for the dan-dan child she could not love.

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