

Apology Accepted

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*Note: There is an important mistake in
the published version.*

Thus, I'm sharing my PDF.

I don't usually cry over the presence of mannequins, but when I saw this one, the tears rose.

I am in Panamá. It's the fall of 2008 though there really is no fall here, just moist heat all the time. Weighty, greedy clouds hoarding droplets like kids collecting marbles till they are too heavy to hold. Exhausted and defeated, they let go in the air, sheaths of water rushing out for days, sopping, overrunning the land, keeping people housebound and waiting. For the first time as an adult, I am living here on my own, not a vacation visit with my parents and family, who know this place as home no matter how many decades they have been dug in and planted in The States. Panamá City, this is where I am making home for now, in El Cangrejo, a cosmopolitan neighborhood of tourists, expats, and natives, of simple stucco homes and new glass condos (some of which I'm told are funded by Nicaraguans wanting a place to hold their money away from Chavez). I've received a Fulbright Fellowship to come here—my project, researching the builders of the Panamá Canal. But there's more. I'm here for more than that. It was time for me to have a Panamá address, be in these streets. I left New York, my city, my admissions counselor job. I'm 41, no longer closing off from what's part of me, and have some things I need to live out and see. Mainly, I want to find evidence that who my grandfather was and what he lived through are not being denied.

I had ignored the stories that my parents told until I stopped, as an adult, when I began to align pieces: the complexity and beauty of how we are both West Indian and Panamanian; why my father was raised on the Canal Zone; what my grandfather did; what he arrived to in Panamá as a new recruit from Barbados at 19. But there were still spaces that needed filling in.

Gang# 155, 1918: his ID photo four years after the end of canal construction and nine years into his canal career. My grandfather, Reginald McPherson Dottin, is a smooth, tight sheet of black, intent eyes, twenty-eight years old, and no smile. He was working in a storehouse then, as a foreman, in Paraíso— literally, Paradise—moving parts, checking in supplies and machinery orders. In the early 1900s, as a 50-mile gash of land was ripped open from the soil of the tangled tropics from the Central American rainforest, about 200,000 West Indian men served as labor. These men, who had whipped machetes through cane on white-owned plantations in the British West Indies, traveled to Panamá and joined Atlantic to Pacific for the better life that was promised to them, envisioned by them. Most of the recruits, 60,000, came from Barbados, including my paternal grandfather. In late May of 1909, the Peerless steamer brought him to Panamá, five years into the construction, a young man who worked various jobs through its completion in 1914, from waiter in a hotel for white tourists coming to visit the muddy and musky gaping endeavor in their crisp linen suits, their eyelet dresses and parasols to laborer on the construction. After, he was one of the few recruits hired to stay on and work for the canal, at that storehouse, where he was employed until he retired at 62.

My father's doppelganger peers out from the small square of Granddad's disability benefits identification card in 1968, the year I turned one and his 15th year in retirement. Fleshier face, fuller features, creases in that once tight skin, low cut wavy hair, thick square eyeglasses. La Boca: a tiny grid of a town on the Pacific end of the watercourse. One of the Caribbean communities of canal workers and their families was home for Dad, Vivian McPherson Dottin.

He spent his youth there during the 1930s, going to school, playing baseball, swimming, being a boy. He's now in the 11th year of his own retirement from Manhattan corporate life as an accountant, some of which was spent supervising the finances of a US shipping company that pushed goods through the canal he lived next to, that his father helped to build and run.

My granddad died in Panamá on October 11th, 1969, without ever meeting me, his two-year-old granddaughter, his son's first child, only girl. My parents—my father, the son of a canal worker, and my mother, also Panamanian-West Indian but raised in the city—saturated our Queens home with the best of their cultures: the story music of Panamá's favorite son, Rubén Blades, from my dad's hi-fi, the rice & peas and bacaloitos—crispy spicy cod fritters — amid the mac and cheez and roast chicken meals of Mom's dinner-time repertoire. Mom's visits or phone calls with my aunts alternated between English and my mother's fluent Spanish, the Spanish saved for when they wanted to talk about their kids. Dad spoke some growing up but attending American schools on the Canal Zone and being surrounded by English speakers from the British islands and their children, he eventually let it go. Neither of them spoke it in their own homes as children, only with friends in the city. So, it never occurred to them to teach my younger brother or me. Besides, it was a way of keeping things away from the children. So I studied some in high school and college but was only taught a few words and phrases in my house.

Still, my parents, they tried to talk to me as a kid, wanted to fill me with my grandfather—*Abuelito? Would I have called him that?* —and the lives men like him lived. At 8 and 12 and 15, I would walk out of the room, leave the dinner table or sullenly roll my eyes and tune them out, sigh and wish out loud for them to "Stop talking about this Panama stuff," I couldn't have it. Because it seemed like I was always running to my mother's lap, first as a young thing coming in from hopscotch to sit on her knees shrieking my hurt feelings, wrapped in her arms. As I got older, my head on her thighs, tears rolling off of my cheeks and onto her jeans. Constantly

running into the house from playing to find the balm of her hand smoothing my hair. "They're just jealous," she'd soothe. I told myself to believe that every single time they'd say it: "White girl. You act like a white girl."

I was always reading. The school bus aide found Mom when all the neighborhood kids spilled off at my stop. Mystified, she'd ask my mother if I'd always been like this, to tell her that as spitballs sailed over my head and kids ricocheted with chatter and mischief, I'd sit quietly reading *Encyclopedia Brown* or some other book all the way home. I was in the highest classes in PS 219 in Flushing, Queens, at the Windsor School, the private junior high and high school I attended a few blocks away. I was on the honor roll and voted Most Likely to Succeed, graduated second in my class, and made return trips to the stage to receive awards at my high school graduation. On those afternoons on Mom's lap, Mom would pull out the Scrabble board after the tears dried, and it became a better day. Lively and wise brown children like me ran around my neighborhood, lived next door, across the street, and down the block. I went to school with these children, middle brown like me, and those lighter or darker. But I had only one brown friend. In high school, Tracy, who lived a couple blocks from me, was the only black punk girl I knew, heavy on the eyeliner and fond of The Clash and many things British. "White girl," the black kids call me "white girl." Not Oreo, no euphemisms, only clarity. So, I couldn't have more difference. I couldn't. I couldn't have Panamá.

But my parents, they tried to tell me about the Gold & Silver; that as the passageway was being constructed by Caribbean workers, the Gold & Silver Policy was erected, dictating the parameters of their agency. Blacks, like Granddad, were paid in silver—the Panamanian balboa—while the more valuable American dollar—gold—was doled out to their white American supervisors: \$87 per month on average. This came with additional money if the worker had a wife plus benefits, like vacation pay. In that 1918 photo, my grandfather earned \$40 per month on the silver roll working in Paradise and never made more than \$109 a

month—.63 per hour—in his 43-year canal career. My parents tried to tell me that neither the "Silver Men," as they were sometimes known, nor their families were to live, eat, shop, drink water, be buried, be educated, relieve themselves in the same places as gold roll whites who had the most ideal living and working conditions. Whites moved into new homes built by black labor, were granted access to fine social clubs served and scrubbed by black hands. Though American recruiters had arrived in Barbados promising good work, good pay and new housing, these workers lived in shacks and vermin-infested barracks on the Zone. Maybe they found a place in the city. There were no new homes built for them until nearly the end of construction. And if granddad or any other silver worker tried to leave for a bit, say to take money back to their families and rest from the grinding work, they were fired. Signs indicating what hue of metal was granted entrance into bathrooms and commissaries and clubhouses were etched into the stone, painted, everywhere. Blacks were apprentices beneath pale American supervisors even though white turnover was high since they often returned to their US hometowns for less demanding work. Their more experienced black "apprentice" became the underling of a newly arrived Caucasian US superior. It was only in the rarest of occasions when blacks like Granddad would be named foremen. Even then, they had white overseers, and the title carried no pay increase.

Thick women and dusky complexioned men looking and sounding like they could be my dad's brothers; my father's friends were not strangers to me. But I never questioned how they knew each other. During my childhood, I answered the door in my substantial afro puffs, letting them into our house when they'd hug me like a young niece — "What goin' on wit you, Miss Gail?" Or they were cordial but all about getting to business with Dad when they came to pick up the income taxes my father had prepared for them. And then there were club meetings. I was always hearing about them. Dad was always getting ready for one or getting a call from somebody about something that had to be discussed at one, going to one or asking Mom to or "Order dis ting for me for club meeting, okay, Olga?" I'd been opening the door to let familiar people in for meetings in our basement, growing taller but no more aware of what these

gatherings were for. I knew they were a group, El Pacifico, but nothing more. They'd rush in, anxious to get downstairs, say quick hellos to Mom in the kitchen fixing food for after—"Smell good in 'ere, Olga. You cookin' up something good!" I'd been there when the meetings were over, they dimmed the lights, and it became a basement party. I never thought about how these people knew my dad. But slowly, I grasped that these weren't friends Dad had made from work or even college, that these meetings, this Club El Pacifico, was their high school alumni association, that they gathered each month to plan fundraisers to send money back to charities or students, that they'd come up together, gone to school in Panamá on the Pacific side of the canal thus their name, that they moved to this country together, that after the talk was done, they were moving to the rhythm of their childhood music with their husbands and wives, the Celía Cruz and Beny Moré of the neighborhood get-togethers and dances. Though he's nearing the eighth decade of his life, and he's lived in New York for more than 50 years, Dad still has friends he's known since they were in Zone grade schools.

But still, I didn't know that the school they all attended was segregated, that Dad and these friends of his had fathers and uncles and grandfathers who worked on the canal. I didn't know that all schools for children of West Indian labor were solely occupational, created to make them useful labor for the canal. My parents tried to tell me. That even though my dad was born on American land, he was not an American citizen there, was forbidden to be such because it would wrench the simplicity of the Gold & Silver system of privileges and payment to have black children of Silver laborers be eligible for Gold advantages. The Gold & Silver was an open secret on the Canal Zone and in DC. So, perseverance was the custom. Neighbors in La Boca, Paraíso, Red Tank-- towns for Caribbean labor, were linked together by canal work and island traditions that made the transit and the understanding of how things were.

This black tide hired for jobs in Panamá, jobs given to outside labor because Americans deemed Panama's citizens lazy, far less industrious than the West Indian; this was an abrasion that only

chafed and burned more deeply as The States amassed 22 military bases in the Canal Zone by the time the canal was placed under Panamanian rule for the first time in 2000. When US canal authorities forced Blacks off the Zone after the construction was completed, former laborers built new communities in Panamá City. "Which was no better," says Mom, a Panamá City kid. "They called blacks chombos, nigger." Yeah, that word that got my attention, one of only a few things that pierced through my persistent blockade. The longer Caribbeans like my grandfather stayed, the more pronounced and vocal became the resistance to them being there. Books like the 1924 diatribe *El Peligro Afroantillano La Defensa de la Raza* railed against this dangerous West Indian. By the 1940s, Panamanian presidential candidates built platforms on handling this Panamá problem.

Mom would go on, "If you were dark-skinned, you couldn't get a decent job in Panamá." When applying for work, especially in white-collar positions where your face would be seen—like in banking or at a front desk— applicants were to submit the customary résumé and cover letter but also include a photo of themselves. So, for much of his life during and after his Zone career, my grandfather was a numbers man. I'd heard parents of kids on my block—Southern transplants, Harlem natives—talk about playing the numbers and thought it was some piece of black American culture. Hearing it wasn't new or American, that my grandfather didn't play them but actually had a part in their operation, this I found curious and was another thing I let in. Dad would say, "My father put on his hat and had his little notebook would take down the bets, collect the money." On Sunday mornings, my grandfather would get dressed like he was going to work at the storehouse, his pudgy belly belying his love for food, stressing the buttons of his short-sleeved dress shirt, and belted in his slacks. He'd walk among the coconut trees, door-to-door collecting money from his regulars, through the blocks of La Boca, all named after the Caribbean islands their residents hailed from—Guadalupe St., Jamaica St., Barbados St. Each bettor opening the apartment door of the wooden two-story buildings, he'd note each name and amount in his little book. And all the money was given to a man he worked for who paid him a percentage. "And when you see 11:00, no lemme see...", Dad'd look up, squinching his eyes to imagine his father "10:30 because 11:00 he's very busy. He's counting. He would count. The money fall on the floor. You think it's not counted. And a woman came by him one

day, and he *busy* busy, and she went to pick up the money and he would take his foot and..." Dad stomps on an imaginary bill. "He already had it counted!"

After he retired in 1953, Granddad, 62 at the time, moved to Rio Abajo, an impoverished district of rooming houses in Panamá City where many former West Indian canal workers lived. He'd been evicted from Canal Zone housing, as he no longer worked for the canal nor had children in school on the Zone. The year his father stopped working, Dad, 22 at the time and with two years of junior college on the Zone, boarded a train from Panamá as a US soldier. The Korean War was stirring, and the American government allowed recruiting from the Canal Zone for the first time. Dad didn't think about the reality that this had been done before; that his birth in Panamá resulted from The States needing people like him and his father to work for them. Granddad was only a little younger than Dad was when he left Barbados and arrived on the Zone. To my father and many of his friends, it was just a way out. Trim and handsome in his uniform, his pencil mustache, his right-angle jaw, Dad left to create a life in The States that would allow him to become the retirement fund his father needed and deserved. After more than four decades on the canal, Reginald Dottin received a monthly pension of \$45. The amount arrived by the canal governors by a formula they devised: a dollar per month for every year you worked there not to be more than \$25. In 1954 the checks increased to \$45 as fissures spread in US segregation law. Still, the Gold & Silver policy remained on the Canal Zone until the 1980s. Mom and Dad spoke about all this, spent Sunday dinners, and drives in our old Chrysler retelling these stories to me, for me. But youth can be a blinding slurry of ignorance and arrogance, and I could not have been less interested. Felt like I couldn't afford to let it in. I was invested in being young and American, trying to fit in. I was irked by their chatter about this old-time Panamá place when I was growing up in New York, the coolest place on earth. Why were they still hanging on to that country? Why were they trying to pull me in?

But in 1999, at 31, I went to Panamá with Mom, Dad, a dozen of his La Boca High School alum and their families to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their first graduating class. Sliding through the canal, heat on me like a bodysuit, my hand reached out to touch the bricks of the locks. We stood around the ship, some of us wearing the t-shirts Dad had made for the trip— a dark photo of canal laborers digging, between the words "West Indian Builders" and "Panama Canal Construction 1904-1914." We waited for the gargantuan iron doors to close, for the sea in the locks to elevate us. And I discovered that those stories hadn't been wholly silenced in me, that sound slices of my parents' recounted memories slid to the front of my brain and pride and understanding. Back in New York, I searched the books and documentaries available, looking for black canal lives, never really feeling sated. I found a few written or produced by Caribbean scholars, inhaled them. But for the most part, I got facts about the structure: three locks— Miraflores, Pedro Miguel and Gatún—which lift a ship 85 feet during its transit, considered the 8th wonder of the world.

As a kid, February was alit with the 1000-foot tv screen glow of documentaries of the Civil Rights Movement; 28 days of slow-motion PBS, school assembly, an "ABC Special Presentation" revolution on celluloid: Freedom Fighters in contrast. Students at lunch counters that didn't look like students to me, not like me—casual but geeky, jeans and high tops— but like grown folks in jackets and ties and Sunday coats and dresses. The "Whites Only" sign over the counter. Camera pans their faces, determined until the coffee pot held by a white hand is freed of its contents, scalding the lap of a once silent protestor who leaps in agony. The still, pale masks around them watching. Water fountains marked with the race of throat the water was meant to quench. Portraits of charcoal faces bending over them to moisten beige lips. I put my grandfather at that fountain under those signs. This Gold & Silver thing, this is what it called up in me. The films and documentaries were public declarations of this unjustness in America. History acknowledged. Where was that voice and vision of what my grandfather endured? And then, when pieces aligning, I finally began to ask Dad about the discrimination, about how Granddad felt working under these conditions. My father tells me, "He didn't talk about all that.

He just accepted it." My Dad tells me nothing that there was no tirade set free from my grandfather's lips after a long workday, saved for his entrance into his home. It was just the way things were. I needed to go back to Panamá.

So now I am searching for more. I've studied Spanish for two years, gathered up words and verbs and grammar, put it all into myself to bring here, to this country to understand. I go to Casco Viejo, the cobblestoned colonial village on Panamá Bay gentrifying into a warren of boutiques and galleries, real estate offices and renovated condos in Spanish brick and brightly painted wood while the neighborhood's poor homesteaders hold on in closet-like quarters amongst the developments. Mom and Dad made it out of Panamá. They were young and able and came to the States in the 1950s, which at the time was certainly not any less prejudiced than the country they left. But there was possibility. My grandfather stayed. His body was tired, and there were no savings to begin elsewhere or go back to Barbados. Maybe if Granddad had lived longer, my father might have brought him to New York once Dad had more under him and secured us. Still, I know my father took care of him, had to. When I ask about the discrimination, he tells me, "I sent him money every month! Every month till he died! He couldn't make it otherwise!" I'm here to visit the Interoceanic Museum of the Panamá canal. I want to see if those displaying this history will honor him and name the ugliness for what it was. So often, the images I've seen and the words I've heard trumpet the greatness of the American feat, thumping Teddy Roosevelt soundly on the back for his vision. But it's common to find only a passing mention of the labor force that came from the West Indies to build it. "Gold and Silver," "discrimination," "segregation"—these are words hardly used.

Walking through the museum, I was prepared for the nature of the displays: what a colossus of American innovation, the medals given to white workers to boost morale. Then on my way out, I saw it and the tears formed behind my eyes: a simple, brown male mannequin in the white cotton shirt and dark pants of a canal laborer, a shovel propped in his hand. I took a deep

breath and read words on the plaque in front like "sistema segregacionista," "discriminatorio continua" and "segregación se institucionaliza." The museum is a Panamanian non-profit that has support from the Smithsonian and other historical preservationists. These words are the shamed Panamanian and American apology that Granddad died without ever hearing.

I was last in this building in 1999, when it was technically closed, during that trip with my dad and my family and La Boca alumni. The museum, a stop on our city tour, was shut for cleaning that day. But our guide begged our way in, telling the manager that it existed for us as descendants of canal builders. At the time, there was only one floor, and the canal was in the final months of American ownership. This plaque was not here then. After the canal's changeover to Panamanian rule in 2000, the museum expanded. A former Spanish Colonial hotel from the late 1800s, the bedrooms were refinished with new wood flooring and painted archways and now hold the exhibitions the history. The day I meet this mannequin, it's a quiet Tuesday afternoon. The sun is coming through the windows as I stand on the landing overlooking the exhibits below. A docent nearby is talking to his co-worker. I keep looking at him, unconsciously trying to connect. He sees me, and we take steps toward each other. Teary and shaking inside, I search and conjugate and try to put together my acceptable but imperfect Spanish, but now even English is failing me. "Este hombre, él es mi abuelito. No exactamente pero mi abuelito trabajaba en el canal de Barbados, de 19 a 62. Todo de su vida." I told him my grandfather's story, that he spent his life there, lived under the bias described, that he died before I could know him. The docent listened, nodded, attentive, and took me in, his face softening as I spoke. Still, I don't know if he understood why I needed to tell him this. But I'm sure my granddad heard me.