

A Room of My Own in Paradise-Barbara D. Parks-Lee-District of Columbia State Organization (DCSO)

I rushed to get the passport, pack enough clothes to last a month, get to the airport in time to board for St. Kitts. It was the chance of a lifetime to begin work on a long wished for advanced degree. The plane was packed to capacity, and I was squashed between a tall, muscular man and a very obese woman who was clacking a piece of gum.

She saw the look on my face and quickly offered me a piece of gum. "You know, honey, to keep your ears clear!" She must have had the least stopped up ears on the plane, because she popped and clacked that gum all the way to Florida International Airport, where I was to transfer to a little puddle jumper plane for the trip to St. Kitts.

To get to the transfer gate took me forty-five, quick-walking, hard-breathing minutes. I vowed to ask for wheelchair assistance when it was time to return home. I arrived just in time to be rushed to my seat and to have my luggage stowed so as to distribute the weight equally.

Finally, we were airborne. The waters ranged from cerulean to turquoise, to a mottled blue. I could see what looked like toy boats bobbing and occasional white caps as we gained altitude. I settled in a window seat beside a companion who promptly put on earphones and began to snore softly. As we approached the island, the plane began to descend, but it appeared we were going to crash into the mountain! I held my breath and said a quick prayer just as the plane touched down so smoothly everyone sighed a breath of relief. The flight crew had earned our sincere applause as they thanked us for flying with them.

The shuttle to my lodgings was a white van that careened around the seawall at what seemed death-wish speeds, but I arrived in one, tired piece. I had ordered an older efficiency apartment at the bottom of seven flights of stairs leading up the hill to the newer four-person condos.

Having a room all to myself was something I'd never experienced, for I had always shared a bed with sisters, a room with college roommate, husbands, or whenever I attended conferences. Now, however, I would share with no one, no one! My room had a double bed, a desk and chair, a 30-watt bulb lamp, an antique four burner stove, a kitchenette-size refrigerator, a cabinet, and sink. The full bathroom had soft water, making bathing soothing.

Outside was a small balcony, just big enough for a small round rattan table and two chairs. A screen door to the balcony allowed a breeze off the water, but not the mosquitoes hungrily looking at me as a fresh buffet. I was free to rise at 4 a.m. to read, to write, and to get assignments ready for class. I sat on the balcony, watching the sun bid farewell to the night. As the sky morphed from navy to cadet blue to a golden peachy pink, a hot orange sliver rose over the eastern hills near Nevis until it was a neon orange sphere. I read *Proverbs* and marveled at the fishing skills of the brown pelicans with markings around their eyes that reminded me of early pilots' black rimmed goggles.

Before a breakfast of tea, juice, and fruit, I took a shower, shampooed my short haircut, and let it dry on the way to class. The school bus stopped at the stairs, and as I boarded, I heard the welcome in some of my DC colleagues' voices when I appeared.

You see, I had learned about the opportunity to study only three days before classes were to start. I had to hustle to get certified transcripts, emergency passport renewal, purchase tickets, and make room reservations after registering for class.

Classes were held in two white buildings with temperamental air conditioning. At two o'clock every day, animals appeared on the quadrangle. I thought they were sheep, but one of the teachers made the distinction between sheep and goats.

"Tails up, they be sheep; tails down, they be goats"—of was it the reverse? Anyway, I enjoyed taking their pictures.

Free-range chickens were everywhere as the month began, and we had chicken prepared every way chicken could be prepared. On the first day of class, during a break, I observed a chicken, drunk on over-ripe fruit, perch on the edge of a 50 gallon barrel, lose its grip, and fall head-first into the barrel. By the end of the month, very few chickens freely roamed.

I made a lifelong friend on St. Kitts. I had dubbed her "Dr. Sistah Girl Too Tuff," because of her no nonsense way of teaching. She was a "tekkie" but also a scholar whose memory was phenomenal. She knew qualitative materials so well she could, without notes, suggest book titles, authors, and page numbers. When class was going well, she walked around us in a clockwise circle. When it wasn't, for instance, when the party couple came to class and promptly went to sleep and snored loudly, she walked a counter-clockwise circle, picked up an unabridged dictionary and slammed it down as hard as she could on the table near the couple, then dismissed them from class with the warning not to return if they were not prepared. She was one of the best teachers I've ever encountered.

I learned the joy of having a room of my own, a room situated above the water, a room where I was responsible for no one but myself. A month of living on a Caribbean postcard island made me appreciate people, lifestyles, and scenery so unlike—yet, so very similar to my home.