

MY CARIBBEAN STORY

My maternal grandmother, Kathleen, had, like Jean Rhys, wealthy white Caribbean/Creole ancestry. Kathleen, was twenty nine, when she was literally banished from her Barbadian family home, after becoming pregnant from an extra marital relationship. Kathleen was sent to New York to “do the decent thing” and abort the child; she chose to disobey her parents wishes and my mother, Sonia, was born in 1919 in New York.

Kathleen was not forgiven for this perceived misdemeanour and lived impecuniously, in exile in the UK, as a single mother, raising her daughter, in drab 1920's Britain, dreaming of her warm and colourful Barbadian home, very much as Jean dreamt of her Dominican home.

In 1928, Norman, Kathleen's father became seriously ill and Kathleen was finally invited back to her family home, along with her nine year old daughter, Sonia. Kathleen and Sonia spent a memorable year with the family in Barbados, during which time Norman, the family patriarch, died.

Norman, for undocumented reasons, chose not to leave the family house to his wife or any of his three daughters. Instead Norman, a doctor, willed the family house to the Barbadian government on the proviso that it should remain 'the doctor's house'. He was buried in Barbados, his epitaph reading; 'the beloved physician'. The rest of his family left Barbados.

In 1989, when my mother was seventy, we - my mother, brother and I - made a visit to Barbados and discovered the former Barbadian ancestral home pretty much untouched; I took photographs and recorded the film snippets you see in this film. The house was unoccupied and bore a ghostly resemblance to the many snaps that exist in family photo albums.

I have now taken the liberty of repurposing a few of these 1989 super 8 film clips, as stand ins for Jean's recollections of her own beloved Dominica.

Tim Rolt - May 2025

