

Letters to Navy Island



Nora wiped the sweat from her brow. She glanced at the white envelope and picked up her pace. The cool breeze of last week's storm had long since passed. Now the sun was back to its sweltering best, shining brightly in a cloudless sky. Nora listened to the women singing on the banana plantation and it reminded her of Mother. She could feel her breathing getting heavier, her mouth becoming drier, but she was determined to get home as fast as she could.

Nora ran between the banana plants and followed the path as it wound its way through a small thicket of palm trees, the blur of leaves providing the briefest of flickering shades. Jumping through a small gap, Nora was soon racing along the white stretch of coastline that led to her house. She held the envelope high above her head as she splashed along the water's edge; the wet sand felt cool and soothing on Nora's scorched feet. She whizzed past a group of fishermen, then sprinted up a narrow channel of fresh water that led to her home.

"Grandmother!" Nora yelled, waving the envelope. "Grandmother! It's finally here!"

She skipped across the veranda, where an old woman was resting on a chair. "Nora!" the old woman said, with a croaky voice. "What's all this noise? Slow down, girl!"

"Grandmother!" Nora wheezed, bending over to catch her breath. "Look what I've got!" Nora waved the white envelope again, her smile as wide as the Caribbean Sea.

Nora's grandmother took a quick breath and sat down. "Praise the Lord," she sighed sharply.

"It's him!" Nora laughed. "It's from Father!"

Nora's grandmother opened the envelope and two letters fell out. She handed one to Nora. "Here," she said.

Nora gazed at the handwriting. "It's definitely Father! His handwriting is terrible!" She ripped it open and pulled out a slightly crumpled looking letter.

"Well?" Nora's grandmother said. "What does it say?"

Nora stared at the blotchy blue ink and brought the paper to her nose. She hadn't heard from her father for months but somehow the letters always smelt of him; it was like a familiar mix of coconut and spices. Tears welled in her eyes as she read the letter aloud.

Dear Nora,

5th May 1944

I am sorry it has taken me so long to write to you.

So much has happened since my last letter! I have been with the Royal Navy for some time now and they encourage me to write using standard English (which I am doing my best to practise in this letter!) However, finding a port with a post office is still proving rather tricky!

Most of our days are spent looking for mines or helping ships that have been torpedoed far out at sea. Sometimes, we escort ships all the way across the Atlantic Ocean to America. It can be very exciting but the threat of German submarines keeps you on your toes! So far, so good on that front.

How is Navy Island? Have you been helping your Grandmother with the chores?

Write back soon. Your grandmother has the address, though it may take some time to reach me!

I miss you very much. All my love, from the length of Jamaica and back,

Father

Dear Father,

27th July 1944

It was wonderful to receive your letter! I collected it from Kingston Post Office and ran all the way home. I did not stop once! Navy Island is hot!

Everyone is really proud of you for helping the mother country against Hitler. I think you are really brave. I just wish it could all be over soon so you could be back home with us. It isn't the same without you. To help you learn to write using standard English, I have decided to write that way too. I hope I do not make any mistakes.

I am helping grandmother with my chores. I delivered a big stem of bananas to a ship bound for England. As it sailed off I wondered whether the bananas might make their way to you! I gave the shilling to grandmother.

What is it like in England? Please write back soon. We miss you so very much. All my love from the top of the Blue Mountains and back,

Nora

Dear Nora,

5th September 1944

I have been transferred to the marine section of the RAF (Royal Air Force) and there is never a dull moment! Last week we got the call to help an aircraft that crashed in the sea. When we got there, the survivors were holding on to pieces of the plane to stay afloat. Incredibly, they were all still alive! When we got them aboard, we asked them what had happened. That's when we realised that they didn't speak English - they were German! I could tell from their faces that they didn't care about being prisoners. They were just glad to be alive!

To answer your question: England is wet! The rain here isn't like Jamaican rain. It's lighter, colder and stays for days! The British people are wonderful, though. I think that they are just grateful that people like me have travelled from all over the world to help the war effort.

Well done for helping your grandmother - keep it up! All my love from the length of the Atlantic Ocean and back,

Father

Dear Father,

23rd January 1945

Your last letter only just arrived today! I've decided to write back straight away!

Thank you for the beautiful doll you sent at Christmas! I love her. I named her Elizabeth after the princess! I cuddle her every night when I go to sleep and we both say a prayer for you!

I have been working on the banana plantation a lot more recently. It is ever so hot but I love singing with the older women and listening to the macaws chatting away in the trees!

Well done for saving those airmen! I have always thought of Germans as the enemy but it got me thinking: they are just ordinary people, like you and me.

I laughed when you wrote about England being cold and wet! We have had some terrible hurricanes over the last few months, but at least it is always warm here.

When are you coming home?

All my love, from the deepest reaches of the Caribbean Sea and back,

Nora

Dear Nora,

3rd April 1945

I am so sorry about the lateness of my last letter - the post is not always that reliable - but glad you like the doll!

I haven't much time to write as news has just reached my unit about a secret mission. We are to leave in five minutes and I may not be able to write to you for some time after that.

Please don't worry and remember to take good care of your grandmother.

All my love, the distance from England to Navy Island and back...

Father

Nora held the paper between her fingers and re-read the letter over and again. She had been writing to her father for almost three years now. Every time a new letter arrived in the post, it had left her smiling for days. But this one was different. Instead of putting her mind at rest, it had left Nora feeling worried. "What does he mean 'secret mission'?" she murmured.

A strange scent blew in on the sea breeze but Nora couldn't help thinking about the letter. She turned to her grandmother. She rocked quietly in her chair and smiled. "And why do these letters always take so long?" Nora added. "It's October now! This letter was sent in April!"

There was that scent again. A strange mix of coconut and spices...

Nora stopped what she was doing. She hadn't smelt anything like that for over three years!

Her eyes widened. She held her breath and spun around.

Standing on the edge of the veranda was a tall man with a huge rucksack on his back. His smile was as wide as the Caribbean Sea.

Nora leapt up and threw herself into her father's arms, tears falling from her cheeks.

"The war is over," Nora's father whispered. "This is my final secret mission... to be with you on Navy Island..."

Nora held him even tighter. The sun warmed her arms and back and she closed her eyes, breathing in her father's familiar scent.

Macaws chatted in nearby trees, and in the distance, warbling tunefully on the sea breeze, she could hear the Kingston women singing. And in that moment, time stood still for Nora.

It was the best day of her life.