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# Uncle Anthony

*Marie Gallagher*

THE SUMMERS OF my childhood in the sixties were joyously punctuated with the arrival of a very important visitor. Our house would buzz with excitement and expectation and the four children would hare in and out the long lane into our house on the lookout of his hired car, heralding the arrival all the way from the West Indies, of my father's brother, Uncle Anthony.

Anthony, or Brother Ferdinand as he was known to his colleagues, was a Christian brother of the Presentation order based in Barbados in the West Indies. His stay in Ireland was usually divided up between Leitrim and the Presentation College in Cork where he had trained in the Order founded by Br Edmund Ignatius Rice who also founded the Irish Christian Brothers.

When eventually we spotted an unfamiliar vehicle making its way in, we were unable to contain ourselves, bouncing up and down with glee. A tall, thin handsome man with a glowing smile, he would lift us up one by one for a bearhug, enveloping us in his fabulously scented, clerical robes. Gifts would be distributed, candy with the "West Indies" stamped into colourful sugary centres for each of us, a specially engraved piece of cutlery for my mother and a tiny bottle of Bajan liqueur for my father.

The children would pile up on top of him on the sofa in our kitchen-cum-sitting room and barely allow him to enjoy his tea. My mother would offer him specially acquired cooked ham and tomatoes, only for her to be charmingly informed that he had travelled all the way from Barbados just to

taste her homemade soda bread. She would beam at the compliment and hand him instead, a plateful of newly baked bread, buttered to the nines.

In between mouthfuls he would regale us with his own special stock of fairy tales. We listened enraptured to stories of Mr Fox, Mr Dog and Mr Rabbit and their various disagreements over who was going to eat whom.

As the years wore on, my taste in stories progressed somewhat and his gift for me became a book on Barbados. This book contained a set of fabulous photos of the island, its beaches, churches, extensive crops of sugarcane and glimpses of the bustling capital of Bridgetown. Uncle Anthony showed me the district of St John where he was teaching English and History and promised one day to bring me over on a holiday.

During his visit in the summer of 1973 he asked to see my English books. I had just started Secondary School in Carrick on Shannon and brought to him my heavy tome entitled "Exploring English 1" This schoolbook was packed to the hilt with wonderful short stories from Irish writing masters such as Frank O Connor and Brian Friel. That summer Uncle Anthony explained to me the use of imagery in writing—the tool a writer used to drive home the moral of his story.

Together we read "The Windows of Wonder" by Bryan MacMahon and talked about the scene where the old man released butterflies from the palms of his hands as a symbol of releasing people to follow their dreams.

"Just as you can travel all the way to visit me in Barbados one day, Marie"

he said with a smile.

This transpired to be Uncle Anthony's last visit to Ireland. On a cold, dreary morning in March 1974 my parents were visited by our parish priest and the local Garda Sergeant. The news was not good. My uncle had died tragically in a drowning accident in the swimming pool of the school where he taught. True to form, he had died in an attempt to rescue a twelve year old girl who had accidentally fallen in. The girl's life was saved but the weight of Uncle Anthony's robes and a latent coronary condition had conspired against him.

Our house was struck with mourning. Uncle Anthony's funeral was held in Barbados where he was buried within the Presentation Order. At that time the distance was much too great to allow attendance by the family at the funeral. A special ceremony was held in his childhood parish of Drumcong and the dark clothed presence of at least one hundred Presentation Brothers filling the seats of my local church is a sight that will linger with me forever.

Nearly twenty years later, I had the good fortune to fulfil my childhood dream of a trip to Barbados. I finally got to visit the white sanded beaches, the colourful sugar cane plantations, the churches, the bustling town of Bridgetown, all depicted in the book he had given me. And as I knelt in prayer at Uncle Anthony's sparkling white marble grave amongst his colleagues in the district of St John, I was transported back to those idyllic summers and all the excitement generated by his visits to Leitrim.