

HERE COMES *the* SUN

‘The book vividly captures the fraught dynamics of familial and romantic relationships...Poignant.’

The New Yorker

‘[A] lithe, artfully plotted debut...Margot is one of the reasons to read this book. She is a startling, deeply memorable character. All of Ms. Dennis-Benn’s women are. The author has a gift for creating chiaroscuro portraits, capturing both light and dark...’

Here Comes the Sun is deceptively well-constructed, with slow and painful reveals right through to the end.’

New York Times

‘Dennis-Benn’s protagonist is refreshingly brave, clever and ambitious...*Here Comes the Sun* sheds much-needed light on the island’s disenfranchised.’ *New York Times Book Review*

‘One of the most stunningly beautiful novels in recent years... Dennis-Benn’s writing is so assured, so gorgeous, that it’s hard to believe *Here Comes the Sun* is a debut novel... it feels like a miracle.’ NPR

‘Impossible to forget...Dennis-Benn’s writing is as lush as the island itself...[She] knows how to make the women so complex that we believe every hairpin turn of her plot.’

Boston Globe

‘This buzzy novel dives under the shimmering surface of paradise to expose its dark secrets.’

Elle

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NICOLE DENNIS-BENN



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This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions
and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places,
and incidents either are products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously.

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For Addy and Jamaica

PART I

God Nuh
Like Ugly

1

THE LONG HOURS MARGOT WORKS AT THE HOTEL ARE NEVER documented. Her real work is not in answering the telephones that ring off the hook, or writing up delinquent housekeepers for sleeping on the beds and watching TV when they're supposed to be cleaning. Her real work is after hours when everyone has bid their goodbyes and piled up in the white Corollas—robot taxis—at the massive gate of the resort, which will take them home to their shabby neighborhoods, away from the fantasy they help create about a country where they are as important as washed-up seaweed.

Margot has been employee of the month for several months in a row, because she was the first to arrive and the last to leave. And

for good reason. Requests are called in, not in conversational tones but in code that only Margot knows in case anyone is listening on the line. “*Ackee*” means he wants to taste her down there. Foreign men love that. “*Banana*” means he wants her to suck him off. “*Sundae*” means he intends to be kinky—anything goes. Of course they know she’s in business, because she makes sure to slip them a wink on the first day of their arrival. Flattered, they initiate conversation. Margot flirts, reading their stray glances, which almost always land and linger between her exposed cleavage. That is Margot’s cue for a forward invitation. She goes to the employee restroom to freshen up, spray perfume between her breasts, and powder her face before sauntering to the client’s room. She undresses for the client, whose main goal is usually to satisfy a deep curiosity that he never had the balls to satiate with the women in his own country. Like a black woman’s breasts, for instance. Many of these men want to know the shape of them; the nipples, whether or not they are the same color as tar pressed on the heels of their leather shoes from the paved roads in Europe or America; or if black nipples have in them the richness of topsoil after a thorough rain shower. They want to touch. And she lets them. Their eyes widen like children ogling baby frogs for the first time, careful to hold them so they don’t spring from their grasp. She doesn’t see it as demeaning. She sees it as merely satisfying the curiosity of foreigners; foreigners who pay her good money to be their personal tour guide on the island of her body. Margot stashes the money in her purse when she’s done and hurries home. By then the robot taxis are scarce, so she walks into town and waves for one there. She has long ago rid herself of any feelings of disgust. She used to stay back and shower in the clients’ rooms, scrubbing every part of her until her skin was raw. These days she goes straight home and falls asleep with the smell of semen sunken in her pores. Replacing the disgust is a liquid hope that settles inside her chest and fills her with purpose. She rolls over

in the bed she shares with her sister knowing that one day she won't have to do this. That one day Thandi will make everything better.

But until then, she must work.

On this night she looks both ways to see if the coast is clear. The hotel maids have all left, and so have management and most hotel staff. The concierge, Paul, is the only one working. Since it's almost midnight, the night front desk clerks, Abby and Joseph, take turns resting on the sofa in the office. Margot doesn't pass their desk when she exits the hotel. She exits from the side by the pool, surprised to see Paul outside smoking a cigarette.

"Good night, Margot," Paul says with a slight bow. He's always polite, so polite that Margot wonders what he knows. She wonders if he hides his contempt behind that poise. Does he whisper to the other concierges that he sees her leave the hotel late at night? Does he tell them that he has caught her on more than one occasion adjusting her blouse and skirt after coming out of a guest's room? Such occurrences would have helped the man to put two and two together, but then again, he's not so bright. And for this, Margot is grateful.

Outside, the night is cool. The stars are sprinkled across the sky like grains of salt. The chirps of crickets in the bougainvillea bushes follow behind her like gossip, their hissing sounds deafening. She walks to the street, thankful for the anonymity the darkness provides. In town, the regular taxi drivers are there: Maxi, Dexter, Potty, Alistair. Maxi jingles his keys first. It's a sign to the other drivers that he'll be the one to take her. "Whappen, sweetness?" Margot blows him a kiss. They grew up together and attended the same basic school, primary school, and secondary school. Maxi dropped out of secondary school, embraced Rastafarianism, and started referring to himself as "I an' I." He smokes ganja all day and by night he's a taxi driver and a dealer to the tourists who are adventurous enough to go looking for ganja in the town.

“Wha g’wan, Maxi?” She settles in the front seat of the taxi. The smell of peeled oranges and smoke greets her. She begins to wonder if the scent will stick. But then again, she has her own scent.

“Me deh yah.” Maxi starts the ignition. His dreadlocks are a thick, matted pile on his head. He tells her about his two children, whom she always inquires about for the sake of conversation that doesn’t involve flirtation. One of them just started primary school and the other one is just starting basic school. They’re from two different mothers, women Margot also grew up with. Women she no longer associates with because of their small minds and quickness to judge. *“So she t’ink she is big shot now, eh, working in di hotel. Look pon har, nuh. Thirty years old an’ no man, no children. Har pumpum mussi dry up. Can’t even come down from har trone fi fuck right. She t’ink she too nice.”*

“When yuh g’wan get yuh own car, Margot?” Maxi asks. “Ah hear seh di hotel pay good, good money.”

Margot leans back on the leather seat and breathes in the pungent smells. “Soon.” She looks out the window. Although it’s pitch-black, she can tell she’s passing by the sea. For a moment she wants to give her thoughts freedom to roam in this dark, in this uncertainty.

“How soon?” Maxi asks.

“What? Yuh dat desperate to go out of business?” She smiles at him—it’s a slow, easy smile; her first real one all day. Her job entails a conscious movement of the jaw, a curve of the mouth to reveal teeth, all teeth—a distraction from the eyes, which never hold the same enthusiasm, but are practiced all the same to maintain eye contact with guests. *“It’s a wonderful day at Palm Star Resort, how may I help you?” “Good morning, sir.” “Yes, ma’am, let me get that for you.” “No, sir, we don’t offer a direct shuttle to Kingston, but there’s one to Ocho Rios.” “May I help you with anything else, ma’am?” “Your shuttle is outside waiting on you, sir.” “You have a good day, now. I’m here if you need anything. No problem.”*

“We jus’ haffi stop meeting like this. Dat’s all,” Maxi says.

Margot returns her attention outside. “As soon as Thandi gets through school. Yuh know how dat goes.”

Maxi chuckles softly. When she looks at him, she sees the flash of his teeth, which seem luminous in the dark. “*Yuh know how dat goes.*” He mimics her.

“What?”

“Nottin’.”

“What’s di mattah with you, Maxi?”

He uses one hand to smooth the mustache over his wide mouth. In school all her friends had crushes on him. They thought he looked like Bob Marley, with the naps in his head that grew longer and longer, his peanut-brown skin, and his rebel ways. Once he told a teacher that she was ignorant for believing Christopher Columbus discovered Jamaica. “*Wha’ ’bout di indigenous people who were here first?*” He was always book-smart, using words no one had ever heard used in everyday conversations: *indigenous, inequality, uprising, revolution, mental slavery*. He skipped classes to read books about Marcus Garvey, telling anyone who would listen that real history was in those books. The principal, Mr. Rhone, a high yellow man from St. Elizabeth, grew concerned about Maxi’s rebelliousness, fearing it might influence other students, and expelled him. Maxi hadn’t been back to school since. Had he not filled his head with rubbish about freedom and Africa, he would’ve been a doctor, a lawyer, a politician, or some other big shot by now, since he had certainly been the smartest boy in school. Margot doesn’t want the same thing to happen to her sister. Like Maxi, Thandi is book-smart. She has the potential to be somebody. Margot has to make sure that Thandi doesn’t ruin it for herself.

“Yuh put too much pressure pon di poor chile. Why yuh don’t focus on your own dreams?”

“My dream is for my sister to be successful.”

“And what’s her dream?”

“Same.”

“Yuh eva ask har?”

“Maxi, what’s with all dis talk?”

“Jus’ saying if yuh eva ask yuh sista what is her dreams. Yuh so set on pushing her. One day di bottom aggo drop out.”

“Max, stop wid dis foolishness. Unlike certain people I know, Thandi ’ave ambition.”

“*Certain people.*” Maxi grimaces. Again he runs his hand over his faint mustache. “I an’ I did know weh me want long ago. An’ it didn’t have nothing to do wid weh dem teach inna school. Dem creating robots outta our children, Margot. Is di white man’s philosophy dem learning. What about our heritage and culture?” He kisses his teeth. “Ah Babylon business dem ah fill up di children’s minds wid. Yuh sista, Thandi, is a sweet girl. She know har book. But as ah say, when pot boil too long di wata dry out an’ di bottom aggo drop out.”

Margot holds a hand to his face like a stop sign. “Ah t’ink we done wid dis convahsation.”

They fall into the hum of the silence. Maxi begins to whistle as he concentrates on the dark road ahead of them. Only the white lines are visible, and Margot tries to count them to calm herself. Of course she has dreams. She has always had dreams. Her dream is to get away as far as possible from here. Maybe America, England, or someplace where she can reinvent herself. Become someone new and uninhibited; a place where she can indulge the desires she has resisted for so long. The hotel actually doesn’t pay much, but this Margot cannot say to anyone. She dresses nicely to go to work, her dove-gray uniform carefully pressed, each pleat carefully aligned; her hair straightened and combed into a neat bun, not a strand out of place except for the baby hairs slicked down with gel around the edges to give the impression of good hair; and her makeup meticu-

lously perfect, enough powder to make her seem lighter than she is; a glorified servant. Maybe that's how Alphonso—her white Jamaican boss—sees her. A glorified servant. As heir to his father's Wellington empire—which includes coffee farms, rum estates, and properties all over the island, from Portland to Westmoreland, including Palm Star Resort—he was nice enough to keep her aboard after firing everyone else that his father, the late Reginald Wellington Senior, had hired. At first she despised herself for letting him touch her. But then she despised herself for the pride that made her believe she had a choice. What she got from it (and continues to get from it) was better than scrubbing floors. She didn't want to lose this opportunity. All she wanted in the beginning was to be exposed to other worlds, anything that could take her out of this squalor and give her a chance to get away from Delores and the memory of what her mother had done to her.

Maxi nudges Margot on the elbow. “How yuh push up yuh mouth suh? Relax, man.” He smirks and she looks away, trying to resist.

“Yuh so dedicated to yuh duties as big sistah,” Maxi says. “Ah find it very honorable. Jah know.” He reaches over and touches her knee with his hand. He leaves it there. She takes his hand and moves it. Fifteen years ago, when she briefly dated him in high school, this would've sent waves throughout her anatomy. Now it doesn't feel the same. No other touch feels the same.

When Maxi approaches the foot of the hill, Margot tells him to stop the car. “Ah can walk from here,” she says. Maxi squints through the dark as though trying to see what's out there. “Yuh sure? Why yuh always mek me stop here? Me know weh yuh live. Why not just mek me drop yuh there?”

“Maxi, I'll be fine from here.” She takes out the money and gives it to him. He reluctantly takes it from her, glancing once more at the pitch-black in front of them. Margot waits until his car drives off and his headlights disappear. The darkness claims her, encircles her

with black walls that eventually open up into a path for her to walk through. She takes a few steps, aware of one foot in front of the other; of the strangeness creeping up her spine, wrapping itself around her belly, shooting up into her chest. The scent of the bougainvilleas that line the fence is like a sweet embrace. The darkness becomes a friendly accomplice. Yet, the familiar apprehension ambushes her: *Can she be seen?* She looks over her shoulder and contemplates the distance it would take for her to walk to her house from here. A good mile. She stands in front of the bright pink house that emerges from the shadows. It seems to glow in the dark. As though on cue, a woman appears on the veranda, wearing a white nightgown. The nightgown blows gently in the light breeze that rustles the leaves of the plants and trees in the yard, and carries a faint scent of patchouli toward Margot. From where she stands, the woman appears to be sailing toward her like an angel, the nightgown hugging her womanly curves. And Margot sails toward her, no longer cognizant of the steps taken over the cobblestone path or the fears hammering inside her chest. When she arrives at the foot of the steps, she looks up into the face of the woman; into those eyes that hold her gaze steady. She can never get them out of her mind, for they're the only ones that see her. Really *see* her—not her figure or the nakedness she so willingly offers to strangers, but something else—something fragile, raw, defenseless. The kind of bareness that makes her shiver under the woman's observation. Margot swallows the urge to tell her this. But not here. Not now. No words are exchanged between them. No words are needed. Verdene Moore lets her inside.

At Old Fort Craft Park, Delores links arms with the flush-faced men in floral shirts who are too polite to decline and the women in broad straw hats whose thin lips freeze in frightened smiles. Before the tour-

ists pass Delores's stall, she listens to the prices the other hagglers quote them—prices that make the tourists politely decline and walk away. So by the time they get to Delores—the last stall in the market—she's ready to pounce, just like she does at Falmouth Market on Tuesdays as soon as the ship docks. The tourists hesitate, as they always do, probably startled by the big black woman with bulging eyes and flared nostrils. Her current victims are a middle-age couple.

“Me have nuff nuff nice t'ings fah you an' yuh husband. Come dis way, sweetie pie.”

Delores pulls the woman's hand gently. The man follows behind his wife, both hands clutching the big camera around his neck as if he's afraid someone will snatch it.

To set them at ease, Delores confides in them: “Oh, lawd ah mercy,” she says, fanning herself with an old *Jamaica Observer*. “Dis rhaatid heat is no joke. Yuh know I been standin' in it all day? Bwoy, t'ings haa'd.”

She wipes the sweat that pours down her face, one eye on them. It's more nervousness than the heat, because things are slow and Delores needs the money. She observes the woman scrutinizing the jewelry—the drop earrings made of wood, the beaded necklaces, anklets, and bracelets—the only things in the stall that Delores makes. “Dat one would be nice wid yuh dress,” Delores says when the woman picks up a necklace. But the woman only responds with a grimace, gently putting down the item, then moving on to the next. Delores continues to fan. Normally the Americans are chatty, gullible. Delores never usually has to work so hard with them, for their politeness makes them benevolent, apologetic to a fault. But this couple must be a different breed. Maybe Delores is wrong, maybe they're from somewhere else. But only the American tourists dress like they're going on a safari, especially the men, with their clogs, khaki apparel, and binocular-looking cameras.

“Hot flash and dis ungodly heat nuh 'gree a'tall,” Delores says

when the woman moves to the woven baskets. At this the woman smiles—a genuine smile that indicates her understanding—the recognition of a universal feminine condition. Only then does she finger her foreign bills as though unwilling to part with them. “How much are the necklaces?” she asks Delores in an American accent. She’s pointing at one of the red, green, and yellow pendants made from glass beads. Delores had taken her time to string them.

“Twenty-five,” Delores says.

“Sorry, that’s too much,” the woman says. She glances at her husband. “Isn’t twenty-five a bit much for this, Harry?” She holds up the necklace like it’s a piece of string and dangles it in front of her husband. The man touches the necklace like he’s some kind of expert. “We’re not paying more than five for this,” he says in a voice of authority that reminds Delores of Reverend Cleve Grant, whose booming voice can be heard every noon offering a prayer for the nation on Radio Jamaica.

“It tek time fi mek, sah,” Delores says. “Ah can guh down to twenty.”

“Fifteen.”

“All right, mi will geet to yuh for fifteen!” Delores says, suppressing her disappointment. As she counts the change to give back to the woman, she catches her eyeing the miniature Jamaican dolls. Delores imagines that those dolls, however exaggerated, might be the only images the woman sees of Jamaican people on a short one-day cruise stop. Her husband, who snaps pictures nonstop, surveys the table of the Rastas with their long, oversized penises, the smiling women with tar-black faces and basket of fruits on their heads, the grinning farmer carrying green bananas in his hands, the T-shirts with weed plants and a smoking Bob Marley with IRIE written in bold letters, the rag dolls wearing festival dresses that look like picnic tablecloths.

“If yuh buy three items yuh get a discounted price, all these t’ings are quality,” Delores says, seizing the opportunity. “Yuh wouldn’t get dem anyweh else but right yah so.”

The man takes out his wallet and Delores's heart leaps in her throat. "Give me two of those in a large, the tank in a small." He points at the T-shirts. Once he makes his purchase, his wife, as though given permission to grab as many local souvenirs as possible, purchases a woven basket—"For your mom"—more bracelets with Rasta colors—"For Alan and Miranda"—and a couple of the rag dolls decked in festival dresses—"For the girls."

By the time they're done, they have bought half of what Delores had. Only Delores can sell this many souvenirs in a day, because, unlike the other hagglers, she knows she has a gold mine at home—a daughter she has to support—one who is going to be a doctor. She does it for Thandi. As she stuffs the foreign dollars, which will be saved inside the old mattress on the bed that she shares with her mother, inside her brassiere, Delores is convinced that someday all her sacrifices will be paid back. Tenfold.

Thandi wants more. She searches for it in Mr. Levy's Wholesale Shop, which is right across the street from Dino's Bar on River Bank Road—the only road that takes people in and out of River Bank, a former fishing village on the outskirts of Montego Bay where Thandi has lived all her life. Mr. Levy's Wholesale and Dino's are the only two businesses left since the seafood shacks closed down. The construction and the drought have not only driven the fishermen out of work, but out of River Bank, leaving behind a community with not much to live off besides the highly taxed groceries each month at Mr. Levy's.

Mr. Levy's Wholesale has been around since the beginning of time, it seems. The shop has fed generations of River Bank residents. Like the evolving population it serves, Mr. Levy's Wholesale has changed owners many times—the business being passed down