

Story

Journey

By Maryanne Sam

Maryanne Sam is a founding member of Ilbijerri ATSI Theatre Cooperative. Her writing credits include *Oh My God I'm Black* (with Patricia Cornelius and Irini Vela), *Casting Doubts*, and *Lessons in Flight*, and she has performed in numerous professional theatre productions. Her awards include the 'Uncle Bob Maza' Award for Outstanding Contribution to Victorian Indigenous Theatre (2002), and the Centenary Medal for Services to Indigenous Arts (2004). In 2007 she received the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts to develop her children's book, *Meo Samba – Dream Traveller*, as well as two plays: *Lighthouse* and *Guess Who's Coming to the Kup Mari?* Maryanne is the proud mum of Tobi Meo and Maxi Rebecca.

It was turning into the trip from hell. The service, shit. The plane food, shit. The long walk from the tarmac to the airport terminal was hot, and shit. The forty-five minute wait for the luggage carousel to spin would have been shit if it weren't for 'Buzz's Tropicana Bar' directly opposite, but losing the much-prized Louis Vuitton hand case in transit was complete and utter shit. How she wished she could have followed it to Fiji. To anywhere but here.

From the moment she opened her unit door to face the smiling turbaned taxi driver at 6.00am that morning, 6.09am to be precise, to when she stepped awkwardly off the curb causing her sizable body to be flung atop her deluxe Louis V. 56-incher, Menan sensed the day was going to be a challenge. Likewise at 3.37pm, when it took three hulking, black Adonis's to heave her up into the tiny Cessna that would glide her over to the island and then heave her back down onto a waiting dinghy at 4.19pm to take her to her final destination, she knew something was definitely stirring. In the end, because of the heat, coupled with the few or more shots of twelve-year-old Johnny she had guzzled at 'Buzz's Tropicana Bar' earlier, she decided there was nothing more to do than accept her fate.

And sitting there, at 5.08pm, in the five-man tin dinghy, carrying *eight* people, sautéing lightly under the tropical sun, bobbing relentlessly up and down, up and down like a pro rodeo rider, Menan took a deep breath and resolved to stay positive. This feeling lasted till 5.10pm when one of the smiling black Adonis's informed the happy voyagers that due to their late arrival, the tide had lowered and passengers would have to disembark and wade to shore. '*Shit, shit, shit, shit*', screamed Menan to herself, or so she thought, but the look of shock on the other voyagers' faces said otherwise. It was official, she was beat. '*Come and take what's left*', she challenged the gods. Her resolve that had two minutes before been impenetrable had now languished.

'Here,' Adonis One said, offering his hand.

Menan sat studying the whiteness of the outstretched palm, followed by the tiny brown rivers of lines upon its surface. How striking she thought the contrast of his jet black skin looked, muting into that palm; how odd she felt on realising a similar contrast in her own coffee-coloured hand as she took hold of his.

'It'll be okay lady. Think of this as your first ilun experience,' he chuckled.

And as he and Adonis Two launched her over the side of the dinghy, landing

her knee deep in warm salty ocean, Menan was momentarily mesmerised by the sight before her. A setting sun had glazed the whole ilun with golden rays, every tree, every hill, every house painted in gold. A breathtaking vision. Almost enough to wipe the day's miserable slate clean. But as she and the other passengers neared the shore, followed by the Adonises towing a luggage-laden dinghy, the scene dematerialised. In its place stark reality. Primitive architecture, shabby run down boxes resembling homes, dirt roads with no crossings or

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stop lights, unfamiliar ebony faces and shrieking Creole voices. Wet, and starting to feel the chill of the evening, Menan waited in line for her turn to climb the barnacle-adorned steps up to the wharf. On emerging from the sea like a bedraggled urchin she suddenly felt spent. And as her Louis V. was unceremoniously tossed up on to the wharf, she made a grab for it and slid it beneath her, as if she were about to collapse. She didn't. Instead, Menan settled back into the world that was unfolding before her. The wharf was abuzz with other people's business, other long awaited homecomings. She found herself laughing at the children who buzzed around their loved ones like little bees, searching for treats they might have brought back from the mainland, hands here and there, eyes wide with anticipation. The hugs, the tears, the endless pidgin chatter. Fisherman lined both sides of the wharf with their ice-cream containers full of bait and buckets brimming with the day's catch. Everyone seemed to know each other regardless of whether they were here to welcome or not. The only people on that wharf that seemed not to fit the picture were the white tourists—and herself.

How strange she must look to them all sitting pigeon-toed and wet on top of Louis. Louis, whose tapestries and golden shields of branding and zips with teeth glimmered majestically with the last of the sun's rays. Louis, who had come to represent so much achievement in her life, achievement based on determination and denial. How they both looked out of place now. She might have belonged here once if her mother hadn't died and her father hadn't run away. And because it did happen that way, Menan had been shipped off at the

age of two to a family down south. His family. White family. And she began her life in blissful ignorance of what that cultural void had ripped from her.

Her first sense of anything different happened at school when, at the age of six, a boy took to calling her 'nigger' and 'abo' somehow magically knowing she was black, even though she considered herself more Greek exotic or northern Italian! He had sought her out one day and pinned her against the red brick wall of the administration building, singing loudly and egged on by his little mates, 'Eenie meani, mynee mo, catch a nigger by the toe, if it hollers let it go cause it's just a stinky abo.' It wasn't until Sister Mary Joseph poked her large feather duster out the office window, donging him square on the head, that he let her loose. Sister Mary Joseph took no sides that day but threatened to cane anyone who dared play down the side

The small black hunched outline inched its way toward her; it was an old woman leaning heavily on a walking stick.

of the building again. She, like Menan's good, decent, white, catholic family, found it difficult to reconcile this dark child's existence with anything other than god or ignorance. It wasn't until Menan's grandmother received a letter from the islands informing her of the family's desire to meet the young girl that fear replaced ignorance. And in order to keep her aging grandmother from any anxiety or stress the young Menan vowed never to meet with them, and they were never mentioned again.

Yet here she sat, evidence that she had broken that vow and would indeed soon meet with them. But with her grandmother long since gone and a disastrous one-sided, long-term relationship behind her, Menan had found herself empty and in need of some answers. The garbled message she sent down the telephone line to an Aunt Sadie or Seisa or something like that was met with such squeals and ilun ravings that she wasn't really sure if they understood that she was on her way up.

But here she was, not sure if she was expected, and a thousand miles away from anywhere. Menan had endured hell to get to where she was, and it had borne no fruit to speak of—just heat and heat stroke, sand and sand flies, dry cracked