

**I am on a tiny island in the Outer Hebrides** of Scotland with a full-grown ram between my legs — not the way I usually spend a summer Saturday. This began as a simple errand, to fetch a fleece for dyeing from John Finlay, a crofter and neighbor of my hosts. It's shearing day, and I am wearing big, padded coveralls with an incongruously saucy leopard-print chiffon scarf around my neck, lent to me by John Finlay's mother to keep the chilly June winds from snaking down my front.

Fifty sheep are jostling one another indifferently within the confines of the *fank*, a roofless dry-stone enclosure where the shearing takes place. John Finlay, shy with people but sure-handed with his animals, selects one sheep at a time, flips it neatly onto its back, and shears it with old-fashioned steel hand clippers. My job is to mark each sheep across its shoulders with a can of red spray paint once he's done so it will be identifiable next year. Right now, though, I've been asked to hold on to this ram so he won't melt off into the crowd while waiting his turn to be sheared. And this is how one hangs on to a ram: straddling him, holding his horns like a jockey.

It's a long way from home for a Caribbean girl to have come.

**I was fifteen when my auntie Lucy told me, as** we sat together on her red-and-green-plaid couch one humid afternoon in Trinidad, that I had a Mackenzie as a three- or maybe four-times great-grandfather. Mackenzie, or MacCoinnich in Gaelic, is a Highland clan whose homelands look west from the Scottish mainland toward the Isle of Skye. Wealthy and powerful in the fifteenth century, the Mackenzies fell on hard times in the wake of the Reformation and endured decades of disastrous and expensive battles with the English. By the late 1700s many impoverished Mackenzies had emigrated, leaving the British Isles for America, Canada, Australia, and the West Indies.

Trinidad has only a tiny European population mixed in with its mainly African and East Indian peoples, and this small pool includes descendants of British, French, German, and Dutch colonials. Yet the Scottish influence, even as distinct from the larger British one, is surprisingly evident. The first delegates to govern Trinidad when the island became a British colony in 1797 were Scots, and they've left Scottish place names, from Pembroke to Culloden, across the nation. Saint Andrew, Scotland's patron saint, gives his name to one of our eight counties. There are outposts of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland all along the sweltering Eastern Main Road, their sober gray and blue signs dissonant against the breezy frivolity of lacy openwork concrete blocks and languid churchyard breadfruit trees. My mother lives across the road from a Mrs. MacPherson and a block from a Mrs. Gaskin; boys named Finbar, Errol, and Kester play on the sports ground a few streets away. My own father's name is Kenneth, the root name in Mackenzie. Aunt Lucy, his sister, didn't speculate to me about whether his ancestor was a laborer, a sailor, a merchant, or, far more likely, a sugar-plantation owner who passed his name on to us, who became a part of us, through slavery.



KAYO LACKEY

# Archipelagoes

ROCHELLE SMITH

The conversation on the couch with my aunt was remarkable only for its arbitrariness. I seldom talked at any length with her; she was one of those aunts who thought that asking you about church attendance and examination results was making conversation. Why she chose to relay that bit of family lore to me that day, I don't know. I do know I didn't dwell for more than a moment on the Mackenzies; I simply tucked the scrap of information like a bright bit of foil into the hoard at the back of my mind. It was hard to tell if it was even true, since both sides of my family can be maddeningly offhand about genealogical detail. My mother's maiden name is Guerra, which means "war" in Spanish, and it's received wisdom on her side of the family that a little Spanish blood mingles in our veins with the African. But when I would ask if "Spanish" meant from Spain, or Venezuela seven miles away, or Cuba, or the Dominican Republic, or any of a half dozen other Spanish-speaking countries in the region, I would get a shrug, a patient look (as though I were dim but trying hard), and a "You know, *Spanish*." Asking about the African blood yielded even less joy.

My sophomore year in college I took Swahili, the only African language offered in my school's curriculum. At the time I was wallowing in angst over my "identity" in that intense, tiresome way people in their early twenties often do. I needed specificity, and the heedless diaspora had robbed me of it. I didn't want to eenie-meenie-miney-mo from Ibo to Yoruba to Hausa to Ashanti. I wanted to know my people came from *that* village, on *that* obscure spit of West African land, spoke *that* Niger-Congo language, wove *those* patterns into their cloth. I wanted to go there, stand on the soil, learn the language, and weave those patterns myself. But, Alex Haley's research for his novel *Roots* notwithstanding, there was no way for me to do this — or, at least, none that I could imagine undertaking as a work-study-funded, ramen-eating undergraduate. I was morose, even angry: at *Smith*, my archetypically anonymous surname; at the middle passage; at fate.

I lamented as much to my Swahili instructor, Professor Shariff, a diminutive, dapper Tanzanian with curly salt-and-pepper hair. Avuncular and generous, he responded, "All of Africa is yours." (He himself was Mswahili, not just a speaker of the language but an actual member of that East African tribe.) And I remember thinking, as I smiled and nodded in agreement, *The second-largest continent on earth, with more than 700 million inhabitants and some eight hundred languages, is mine? What the hell does that mean? Would you tell an amnesiac from Iceland that all Europe was hers: Manet, lederhosen, the Volga, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, fish and chips?*

I kept this churlish reaction to myself, thanked him for his kind words, and slouched off to my next class.

**Years later I found out that I share a birthday** with Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland. This means that on my birthday every year, transplanted Scots and plaid-wearing wannabes from Aberdeen to Antarctica are swilling Scotch of widely varying quality and mistily crooning, "Oh,

my love's like a red, red rose / that's newly sprung in June." I'm not sure if it was discovering this that brought my aunt's story back, but suddenly one of the ironies of colonial history came home to me: almost all of my family and cultural story died down to a whisper at the port towns of Trinidad, but because of the clannish, stubborn, and exceptionally tenacious nature of the Scottish Highlanders (and their comparative good fortune at the hands of recent centuries), a sliver of me had a tartan, a crest, a motto, a *place*.

This was far more temptation than I had the strength to resist. These ragged threads of connection — Burns, my birthday, my aunt's words, the erasing middle passage, the winking pinpoint of that surname — might come together as, if not whole cloth, then at least a surreal and not unpleasing patchwork of my ancestry. My sidelong, tongue-in-cheek, orphan's relationship with Scotland was on.

*(end of excerpt)*