

THE KAIRI CHRONICLES

KAYA ABANIAH

AND THE FATHER OF THE FOREST

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KAYA ABANIAH AND THE FATHER OF THE FOREST

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To my family and friends who helped colour these pages.

Foreword

Kaya Abaniah (Kah-yuh Abba-na-yuh) is a boy's name. *Kaya Abaniah and the Father of the Forest* is a unique story, set in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. In this two-island Caribbean nation, inhabited primarily by people of African and Indian descent, Trinidadian English is the official spoken language, and Standard English is the official written language. However, Kaya speaks authentic Trinidadian Creole, which is similar, but distinct from Tobagonian Creole. Trinbagonians (Trinidadians and Tobagonians) use Creole in spontaneous conversation, while Trinidadian English is often reserved for more formal speech. Various combinations of English, Trinidadian English, and Creole are not uncommon.



The creole languages of Trinidad and Tobago mix English-derived vocabularies with elements from several African languages. Trinidadian Creole also has influences from French and French Creole, as well as other languages spoken by Trinidad's diverse cultures and ethnicities. These include Spanish, from its proximity to Venezuela, Bhojpuri introduced by immigrants from India, and Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin brought by Chinese immigrants. Trinidad Creole is quite different to Jamaican Patois, which is also spoken in this story.

Kindly refer to *Appendix IV*, and the *Selective Glossary*, especially if you are unfamiliar with Trinidad Creole or Jamaican Patois. The extensive glossary explains the fascinating characters of Trinidad and Tobago's folklore, and contains the pronunciations and meanings of many carefully compiled terms and phrases. These include, but are not limited to, Ancient Setian, Canadian, Cyclan, French, German, Jamaican, Japanese, Karellan, Old Cyclan, Osirian, Rastafarian, Setian, Spanish, Swedish, Talisian, Trinidadian, and Urdu.

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AGUE

On a hot, humid, moonless night, in the small Trinidadian town of Coconut Grove, Kaya Abaniah lay awake on his bed, covered in a thick woollen blanket, drenched in sweat and shivering uncontrollably. Experiencing fresh waves of feverish chills, Kaya slowly reached for the glass of water on his bedside table. And, between shaky sips, his teeth chattered loudly, and a soft groan escaped his chapped lips. He gulped the tepid water past sore swollen tonsils and shakily placed the glass back on its bedside perch.

With a sigh, Kaya adjusted his pillow. Thinking of nothing in particular, he stared at the four walls, weakly illuminated by the ambient glow of his old computer's LED standby button. In the gloom, his Bob Marley poster, the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago calendar, and the colourful acrylic paintings of local scenery he had meticulously produced were all reduced to morose shades of grey.

Trying to make himself comfortable, Kaya turned to his left and observed his mother, Josephine. She slouched, fast asleep, in the old wooden rocking chair that once belonged to Kaya's grandmother. For the third night in a row, Josephine had watched over her ill son until fatigue finally got the better of her. In Kaya's eyes, the headstrong thirty-six-year-old single-mother did not look a day older than twenty-six, despite the exhaustion she endured due to her busy daily routine.

Always fiercely independent, she had been the subject of much gossip in the village of Tortuga, where Kaya was born. Josephine never told a soul the identity of Kaya's father, and when the constant whispering and innuendo became too much of an annoyance, she left the Montserrat Hills of Tortuga with her infant son and moved in with her mother in Coconut Grove.

In this seaside town, no one dared trouble Josephine, at least not while her mother was still alive. Most people were utterly terrified of Florence Peters, the dark, imposing woman the townsfolk called Mama Flo. According to a popular local legend, Mama Flo, the proud descendant of a powerful African family, had turned an old suitor into a frog after catching him in a compromising position with her best friend. Several stories exist

regarding the fate of Mama Flo's former friend, but most inhabitants of Coconut Grove agreed that the poor woman had been turned into a blight-infected silk cotton tree.

Years later, having defiantly vowed never to trust her heart to the whims of men, Mama Flo met Ekon Arius Abaniah, a tall, dark, handsome stonemason from Barbados that everyone, except Mama Flo, called Papa Choonks. However, Josephine's parents would never marry. Their whirlwind romance led to an engagement that abruptly ended, when Ekon was struck down, while hurrying home during an unexpected thunderstorm. The local coroner blamed ball lightning for Ekon's death. There had been several eyewitness accounts of the bizarre natural phenomenon that fateful evening. However, privately, Mama Flo never accepted the coroner's verdict. Long before she peacefully passed away in her sleep, Mama Flo told Josephine that Ekon had been murdered by one of the women he spurned in Coconut Grove. This particular woman, she claimed, was secretly a powerful witch. However, to Josephine's dismay, Mama Flo stubbornly refused to reveal the woman's identity, saying she had no proof of her guilt. In her twilight years, Mama Flo often sat in her old rocking chair, softly singing old-fashioned melancholy songs.

And sometimes, she'd look in awe at Josephine, going about her housework, and she'd whisper sadly, "Poor Ekon. Boy yuh never know ah was makin' dis chile when de Soucouyant take yuh from meh. Buh watch yuh daughter boy, look how she grow up strong like she fadah."

In this day and age, most people would treat the old stories of the Soucouyant, a vampiric witch that roamed the night in the guise of a fireball, as the stuff of folklore. But, Josephine knew better. Mama Flo had raised Josephine alone, and Josephine raised Kaya in a similar fashion. At the first signs of illness, Josephine had given Kaya tea made from what Mr Chen, the pharmacist, called chen pi.

At first, Kaya protested the way most normal fourteen-year-old Trin-bagonian boys, in his predicament, would have. "Mammy, I ent drinking Chen pee!"

But, Josephine, the sole proprietor of Josephine's Flower Shop, knew a thing or two about herbs, plants and Chinese medicine.

She explained to Kaya, "Chen pi is de Chinese name fuh dried orange peel. Yuh doh remember yuh granny used to give yuh orange peel tea when yuh were small?"

Of course, Kaya remembered this. He recalled Mama Flo telling his mother on more than one occasion, "*Josephine, doh bother wit any ah dem fancy capsule or tablet. Give de boy orange peel tea fuh de cold an' tuh stop de ague.*"

Ague was what people of Mama Flo's generation called fever, and that's exactly what Kaya had now. Orange peel tea, perhaps the most pleasant of Mama Flo's medicinal concoctions, certainly tasted a hundred times better than karaili juice. *Momordica charantia*, known as karaili, bitter melon or bitter gourd is without exaggeration one of the bitterest vegetables known to humanity.

Mama Flo often warned Kaya, "*If you doh drink dis down, crapaud smoke yuh pipe.*"

And, he knew if he did not drink the foul-smelling, bitter-tasting mixture, he'd have a painful appointment with a guava whip. Kaya thanked God his mother did not share his grandmother's grim zeal or her unshakeable faith in the dubious medicinal properties of the green, warty-looking menace. But, since Mama Flo's death two years ago, unwilling to take any chances with his precious taste buds, Kaya had developed the habit of ripping up and burning any of the karaili vines and fruit that occasionally sprouted in the garden. The mere memory of the evil taste of karaili made him shiver even more as he tucked himself back into the security of his thick blanket.

Because of his illness, Kaya had already missed the first three days of the college term, and it bothered him that he could not do anything to stop Artimus Corbeau from harassing Raima Khan. Artimus, a fifteen-year-old spoilt rich kid, a class prefect and bully, had the honour of being Kaya's enemy. Kaya delighted in frequently reminding Artimus that corbeaux, pronounced cobo, was the name Trinidadians gave to the local black vulture; an incredibly ugly bird with a tendency to congregate in the vicinity of garbage dumps. Raima also came from a wealthy family, but had no airs and never uttered a rude word or a condescending remark, at least not to Kaya. For this reason, Kaya appointed himself Raima's knight in shining armour. And, the fact that Kaya considered her to be the prettiest girl at Paria College had absolutely nothing to do with it.

A loud crack of thunder woke Kaya. Lying on his back, he opened his eyes to be temporarily confused by silvery-blue flashes and deep shadows dancing on the ceiling. Confusion transformed into fear when Kaya realised that he could only move his eyes. Instinctively, he looked to where he remembered his mother had fallen asleep, but no one occupied the rocking chair. Utterly exhausted from her three-night vigil at Kaya's bedside, Josephine had retired to her room, and not even the thunderstorm could have woken her now.

Nevertheless, Kaya felt a presence in the darkness. Did a thief use the thunderstorm to mask a forced entry into the house? It would not be far-

fetched for a criminal to assume that Josephine hid some of the takings from her shop at home. Kaya wanted to call out, but his mouth did not function.

He heard a deep, earthy voice say, "Go back to sleep, Hezekiah."

Hezekiah? Nobody call meh Hezekiah.

"It is your name."

Yeah buh.... Who is dat?

"I am a figment of your imagination."

Yuh t'ink ah schupid, awa?

"Not stupid. Delirious. You are experiencing a hallucination."

So yuh mean tuh tell me, dis is ah dream?

"Yes, Hezekiah, you are dreaming."

How come ah dreamin' if yuh askin' meh tuh go back tuh sleep?

"You are in a transitional state between wakefulness and sleep."

Is dat why yuh talkin' funny?

"What do you mean?"

Yuh soundin' like ah real Englishman.

"I am communicating in English, but I am not an Englishman. I am your subconscious mind."

Ah never realise meh subconscious mind could tell lies in perfect English.

"Go back to sleep, Hezekiah."

Kaya was about to think up another witty retort, but the shadow of a man glided towards him, and he felt overpowering fear.

"Your illness is not natural. You will be better by sunrise, but be careful what you eat or drink. There are those who would do you harm."

Kaya noticed that the silhouetted man held something in his right hand, which looked like a baton or cane. He heard a low hum and his eyelids felt suddenly heavy; and, as the thunderstorm headed out to sea, Kaya drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

