

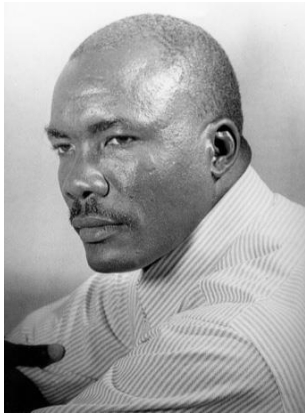
The Taming of Vieux Fort

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The Town

A few weeks ago, I turned off New Dock Road onto the road leading to Moule-a-Chique, then I climbed just above Shanty Town, close to where my father keeps bees, to experience the simple



pleasure of gazing upon Vieux Fort and its surrounding areas, a pleasure I had enjoyed throughout my childhood. Standing up there amid the bushes, my eyes roving over my place of birth, the very place that had kept me coming home every year or two since my departure to foreign soil two decades ago, it suddenly occurred to me that the empty spaces of Vieux Fort were rapidly disappearing. Long gone are the kai planes, plane houses, the half circle, open air, dome-shaped earthen structures that once conspicuously interspersed the plains of Vieux Fort. The days when the Americans used these structures as camouflage hangers for their fighter planes during World War II are a distant memory. Levelled off to make way for a sporting complex that never came, the insides of the mounds no longer provide homes for hogs (after the Americans pulled

out) and their tops no more provide altitude for kids flying kites.

Not too long ago, New Dock Road together with the Vieux Fort-Laborie Highway was a clear, undisputed boundary of where the town ended and where the pastures, the untamed, began. Every child knew that to venture beyond this boundary into the area bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, Moule-a-Chique, and New Dock Road was to expose oneself to *jan gajè*, *ti-boloms*, and old men taking children for the devil. Not anymore. In fact, the town is shifting away from the Caribbean Sea and towards the Atlantic Ocean. Soon, New Dock Road and the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway, not Clarke and Commercial Streets, will be the center of town.

The Library/Town Hall was the first to violate the boundary. Then came the Combined Primary School and a preschool on the very spot levelled off for the sporting complex. Then the Sir Arthur Community College followed suite. All good causes. For who can defend against books and education? But then the flood gates were opened. Out spilled Napa Auto Parts, Cable & Wireless, Lucelec, JQ's Plaza, Barclays Bank, Royal Bank of Canada, CIBC, and the list goes on.

Not to be out done, lower down, closer to the dock, residents of the Mange, ravaged by crack, marijuana, and rum, and tired of waiting for the American second coming, or the government, whichever came first, have taken matters into their own hands. They have crossed over New Dock Road, but unlike the banks and the plaza and the other businesses they didn't pay for any land. They have carried out what I call enforced socialism. They have colonized an area that once served as their toilet and home to their pigs and renamed it Shanty Town. Now, from a distance, Shanty Town with its brightly colored houses displaying red, blue, green, and rusted rooftops (and climbing the hill leading to the dock) is more beautiful, more picturesque, than JQ's Plaza or any other part of Vieux Fort for that matter. Poetic justice is what comes to mind. However, once inside Shanty Town poetic justice quickly exiles the mind when one realizes that it is an illicit drug, prostitution and gun market

where the police rarely dare to tread and where there is no running water and few toilets, pit or otherwise. It is as if a different kind of untamedness has replaced the untamedness of yesteryear.

The Atlantic

Even the beaches that used to mark the outermost limits of the untamed are now tamed. Halcyon Days, renamed Club Med, was the first to do us the honor. If there were any doubt that Vieux Fort wasn't well on its way to being tamed, hoards of tourist hugging the beach was sure proof of that. Lonely Tree Beach isn't lonely anymore. It now has Sandy Beach, The Reef, and Friday Night Karaoke to keep it company. And it is soon to have more company. Lower down, closer to the cliffs that rise to become Moule-a-Chique, the part of the beach that used to be called *an ba koko*, under the coconuts, another hotel is coming.

Coming to the very place whose name, once upon a time, personified the essence of untamedness, of frontier, of danger, of adventure, of the unknown. This was the place with the greatest incidence of children taken for the devil. Crowded with coconut, almond, sea-grapes and ackee trees, and blanketed with *pi-tchwits* (sand pipers, a migratory bird) in the rainy season, it was a place where sling shot carrying teenaged boys tested their manhood. As teenagers, my oldest brother and his friends used to take off from *an ba koko* beach and swim to the Marie Islets and back. Not anymore. Now you would be hard pressed to find teenagers who could swim. Rainy season or not, the *pi-tchwits* are all but silent. Fearless, restless, Mange and Shanty Town, with their patched up, plywood huts, have now extended into *an ba koko*. So ironically, beachfront property, the most expensive residential real estate in many parts of the world, is now occupied for free by among the poorest inhabitants of the island. As to be expected, nothing that good last long. The hotel that is coming is soon to displace half of Shanty Town, including the *an ba koko* settlement. But all is not lost. The government will be giving each of those displaced 3000 square feet of Contonement along with a relocation lump sum. Finally, Mange residents, turned Shanty Town, turned *an ba koko*, will have titled land, making a lie out of economists with their maxim, *there is no free lunch*.

The Caribbean

Along the Caribbean Sea, the dock—another vestige of American World War II occupation—and its surrounding beach are having their share of domestication. Memories of swimming races, family beach picnics, and fishing and diving off the dock have been replaced by an off-limits container transshipment center. Gone are the days when the loading of bananas turned the dock into a theater. The days when hundreds of women with tightly wound waists and head pads secured with a lace tied under their chin scurried like bees seeking nectar to the galvanized banana shed where men, standing ready, loaded banana bunches onto the women's heads and then, as if the shed had caught fire, the women would rush out from under the shed toward the opened windows on the side of the banana boat. Once there, men standing at these windows that were like the mouths of caves would snatch the bananas from the women's heads and passed them onto the next man in line, who in turn passed them to the next man in line, and so on, until the bananas were deposited deep into the refrigerated bosom of the boat. And not waiting to watch the completion of the relay they had started, the women would rush back to pick up another bunch, and another, and another. Not unlike the time of coal steamboats when a previous generation of our women (charbonniers they were

called), like goddesses carrying oversize umbrellas, and necks taut as pulleys, backs straight as electric post, faces shining with sweat and coal dust, loaded one-hundred-weight basket after basket of coals unto steamships docked at the Castries wharf. As a child I used to watch in amazement and awe as millions of banana stems disappeared from the banana shed; as barebacked men, raining with perspiration, muscles straining and bulging, passed millions of bunches to the man next in line, in nonstop action.

Not anymore. Now, in place of this poetic synchronization, bananas are boxed, palletized, containerised and forklifted onto the banana boat. Safe to say, the loading of bananas no longer holds my interest.

Recently, I tried entering the dock area. I wanted to reminiscence a little. I wanted to walk the full length of the dock, gaze across the sea to the silhouette of St. Vincent. I wanted, if not in reality, at least in my mind, to dive off the dock, to cast my line upon the waters and catch a fish. I wanted to look at the spot in the sea where the current had done pulled my sister into a watery grave and if not for my father's heroic efforts my sister would have been lost to me forever. I wanted to walk along the beach to L'Anse Bayson, towards the extreme end of Moule-a-Chique, and revisit, relive, the many picnics I spent there with my family.

But this was not to be. The security guard at the gate asked to see my pass. I had none. I asked her where could I get a pass. "At headquarters in Castries," she replied. I told her that I have been away in the US for a long time, and that I am just getting back, that this was a place I used to come often. She said that she understood, but policy is policy, I needed a pass to get in. I left, tears in my eyes, climbed the Moule-a-Chique road, where from a distance I could view containers and forklifts in action.

Even the fishermen, arguably the most unbridled of our citizens, haven't escaped this new order, this new discipline. At the mouth of the town, a huge fisheries complex is in its completion, replacing the jetty where I learned to swim and take dives, and the coconut thatched sheds that once housed the fishing pirogues. To provide the fishermen with safe anchors, the Caribbean has been concreted, encircled and contained. Toilets and baths will ensure the fishermen are sanitized. Offices, refrigerated storage rooms, weighing equipment, etc., will make certain that the fishermen's precious cargos are processed, stored and distributed in an orderly fashion. Development is the word. As if offering themselves willingly to the altar, the fishermen have gladly abandoned their pirogues for larger, faster and more stable fibreglass boats. The gommiers, laurier-cannelles, from Choisel to Soufriere, are jumping for joy. To the relief of many a citizen, the sound of a fisherman threatening to chop the arms of an impatient customer who was indiscrete enough to touch the fisherman's hard earned cargo before he was good and ready are to be heard no more.

The Environs

Vieux Fort's Environs with names like Piero, La Ressource, Derriere Morne, La Tourney, St. Judes, Augier, Black Bay, once considered rural, country, hinterlands, *an ba bwa*, *lafowé*, are now bubbling, sprawling suburbs. A tribute to enforced socialism and the housing development efforts of NDC. Whereas the Mange, the ghetto, the poorest, have expanded into Shanty Town and *an ba koko*, the middle and upper income residents have shifted into Vieux Fort's environs. Black Bay and portions of La Tourney are among the most affluent parts of the island. Only ten years ago Vieux Fort's environs, which was largely government land, was a free-for-all. Anyone could claim their share by simply fencing an area or putting up a hut. It was frontier territory. It was the Wild, Wild South. Enforced socialism gone crazy. Not anymore. Black Bay is all built-up, all sold out. La Tourney is

three-quarter built-up, all sold out. St. Judes is all built-up, all sold out. Augier is all built-up, all sold out. La Ressource is all built-up, all sold out, and is as congested as any part of Vieux Fort proper. Recently, I checked with NDC for a plot of land. I reasoned it was time that I own a piece of my country. The only place available was at the back of La Tourney facing Derriere Morne, hence the new housing development was named La Tourney- Derriere Morne.

In fact, most of the remaining unoccupied lands in the Vieux Fort area have been earmarked. Forty-three acres of the land adjacent the Gablewoods South Mall and surrounded on two sides by the Vieux Fort-Laborie Highway, coined Southern Shores by NDC, is being developed for commercial, touristic and industrial purposes. Infrastructure work on Southern Shores is still far from completion, yet more than twenty of the eighty-seven lots have found buyers.

The land bordered by the Black Bay Ravine, west of the Gablewoods South Mall, and between Contonement and The Vieux Fort-Laborie Highway, is being prepared by HUDC, an offshoot of NDC, as a housing scheme in which HUDC will build all the houses and residents will buy land and house as a parcel.

The land west of Black Bay across the Vieux Fort Laborie Highway, going toward the sea, and bordered by the Black Bay River will soon be sold or leased for residential and commercial purposes. Apart from the Mankòtè Mangrove Forest Park, the lands alongside the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway, around the airport, Winera, Club Med and Bwa Chadon, have either been sold or are under lease. In brief, the lands surrounding Vieux Fort have been gobbled up. Soon Vieux Fort will extend into lands surrounding Laborie, so we will no longer talk about Vieux Fort or Laborie, but Vfort-Laborie. Soon, done with the plains, the VFort-Laborie settlement will begin climbing Morne Le Blanc, and the hills and mountains that rise to become Piero, Cocoa, Morne Cayenne, Belvue, Palmist, Joyeux, Grace, La Retraite. If anyone should doubt this, they need just climb the lookout tower at Morne Le Blanc, sweep their eyes across the Vieux Fort plain, then west to Laborie and up the mountains and hills that encircle Vieux Fort, and tell me what they see. The empty spaces of Vieux Fort's environs are disappearing even faster than those close to the town.

Industrialization

Development, tameness, has come to Vieux Fort in many facets. Thanks to government policies, an international airport, a seaport and transshipment hub equipped to handle containerized cargo, and a well paved and developed road system, Vieux Fort is unquestionably the largest industrial belt in St. Lucia, and maybe in the Windward Islands. On last count more than twenty factories were operating in Vieux Fort's two industrial estates (the Vieux Fort Industrial Estate and the Hewannora Free Zone) spewing out galvanized sheets, plastic shopping bags, detergents, industrial glue, body filler, cardboard boxes, furniture, garments, men's brief, women under garments, soft drinks, ketchup, food seasoning, juice concentrates, electronic delay lines, thermistors, transistors, resistors, transformers, bottled water, packaged food for airline service, beers, malts, gifts and novelties. To Barbados, the OECS, America, Europe, these products find their way. Though no cheap proposition (NDC rents the factory shells for \$2610 to \$8700, monthly, depending on size), many more factories are waiting in the wings, than there are shells. So some businesses have had no choice but to build their own. Mr. Compton's vision of turning Vieux Fort into the industrial capital of St. Lucia has finally and emphatically come to fruition.

Yet things are just warming up. Right next to the airport, the Chinese have just completed a large building complex. Seeing the creme-yellow buildings sporting rose-red roofs, and still hungering for more malls although they already have two (JQ's Plaza and Gablewoods South), some

Vieux Fortians thought the Chinese complex was going to be a mall. By the look of it, the largest mall on the island. They were wrong. A mall the complex is not. It is the newest brainchild of NDC, a goods and distribution free zone that with its one administration and eleven (93,000 square feet of total space) commercial buildings have gobbled up 11.5 acres of land. For an annual warehouse rental fee of US\$622.00 and a yearly waste disposable levy of US\$6.89, would be businesses, assuming they will have three or more employees and will incorporate and register their businesses in St. Lucia, will enjoy exemption from custom duties, exemption from taxes and related charges on goods entering the free zone, exemption from dividend taxes for twenty years, and exemption from income taxes the first five years.

The industrialization of Vieux Fort has been of tremendous benefit, not just to Vieux Fort, but to the south, to the whole island. In fact, industrial along with population growth has greatly spurred commerce. Notice the number of new banks that have opened their doors, and the number of long established banks that have moved into larger and improved buildings. Notice also the number of Castries-based businesses that have open branches in Vieux Fort. Indeed, the economic and geographic landscape of not just Vieux Fort, but the whole country is under change. Malls are mushrooming, cars are running out of roads, beautiful houses, mansions even, are to be found in any corner of the island, television has brought America into almost every home, and the differences in terms of amenities between urban and rural are rapidly disappearing.

Once upon a time, one could look at how someone is dressed and determine whether they are from the town or the country, or if from the town from what part of the town. Not anymore. Once upon a time one could look at someone and determine whether they are living here in St. Lucia or visiting from abroad. Not anymore. Still, the one undeniable sign of rising standards of living is people's nutrition, how much protein people have in their diet, and a good sign of that is growth in the average height of the population. On this issue, let me say that one of my biggest shocks since coming back to settle is how tall teenage girls have gotten. Five feet, ten inches, I was utterly taken aback that half of the teenage girls I come across are taller than me.

The Economic progress of the country has not gone unnoticed by the outside world. Perhaps it wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that St. Lucia has become the envy of the Caribbean. With an annual, real percapita GNP of over \$8000, the World Bank recently pronounced St. Lucia an upper middle income country, thus allowing the country to join the ranks of Barbados, Trinidad, and Israel. Good for St. Lucia because it shows we have reached a new plateau in our development march, not so good because international donors will now be less free with their aid.

We St. Lucians can be proud of the development of our country, we can be proud of the leaders who have brought us thus far. For indeed, except the Labor debacle of the early eighties, St. Lucia has been blessed with good leadership. There was George Charles rising out of the Labor Movement struggle to wrench self-rulership from the hands of the British and to lead his people to the doorsteps of statehood. Where George Charles left off, John Compton took over, leading the country from statehood to independence, from a time when flambeaux and kerosene lamps were the norms to a time when a television set sits at almost every home. Under Compton's watch, St. Lucia enjoyed greater economic and political stability than just about any Caribbean country. Yet, I used to sit in my corporate office, dressed in my corporate tie, sipping my corporate coffee, black, without sugar, staring at my corporate computer screen, worrying about St. Lucia after Compton. Because one of the biggest weaknesses of Compton was his inability or his unwillingness to work with people who were just as or more talented than him. As a result the UWP party was never able to groom someone that came close to filling Mr. Compton's shoes. Hence my worry. But my worry soon proved unnecessary, because just as Mr. Compton was ready to step down, two equally qualified candidates (at least on paper) in the persons of Dr. Kenny Anthony, and Dr. Vaughn Lewis, both

working in the region, offered themselves to the people. So a transition that in many parts of the Third World would have been baptized with rivers of blood took place seamlessly. How lucky can St. Lucia be?

A Revolution

I am quite sure that when NDC and the UWP administration first dreamed up the island's industrial zones they only had in mind an economic transformation. Nevertheless, what the factories have done is to bring together young ladies, secondary school graduates or not, from all corners of the island. There, on the factory floor, they meet bringing news from their corner of the island, sharing their common problems, discussing the nature of men. For the first time we have young ladies who, instead of sitting at home waiting for nothingness, are matching into the workforce, empowering themselves economically and socially. No longer do they need to have a boyfriend to afford shoes on their feet. Empowered, they can force men to wear condoms, and to tell those who measure their manhood by how many women they sleep with to get lost. So what is happening is not just an economic transformation, but a revolution: social, political, economical. A revolution not on the scale Karl Max envisioned, but a revolution nonetheless whose full ramifications are yet to be determined.

The women do not make much money. Four hundred dollars per month is the norm. And after deducting money for clothes and shoes (because unlike staying at home one has to look good when one goes to work), and then \$100.00 for lunch and transportation, and also government deductions, they are left with less than \$200.00. No wonder many young men, full of machismo, prefer to remain idle than subject themselves to what they deem as slave wages. Nevertheless, the women, unhindered by testosterone and (women) generally more practical than men, reckon that \$200.00 is better than zero, especially when staying at home means endless washing, cooking and cleaning for the same young men who instead of finding a job are glorifying in idleness and marijuana.

Hurray for the women, but sad for the nation, because what is happening on the factory floors isn't an isolated incident but just one aspect, maybe the smaller aspect, of what is happening regarding the progressiveness of women relative to men in this country. Each time I take a walk down the streets of Vieux Fort or Castries on business days, I see multitudes of smartly dressed women on high heels, heads in the air, and eyes that say that unlike the song, *no where to go, nothing to do*, I am going somewhere, and I have plenty of things to do. The men I see in that kind of business mode are far and in between.

Early last year, I went to the Vieux Fort Comprehensive Secondary School (my alma mater) track meet. I wanted to see Walcott, Lewis (my sport house) and Augier, battle for supremacy. I wanted to be fifteen again. I wanted to relive the pass. Everywhere I went, I saw crowds of school girls, but few boys. So I kept looking around to find out where the boys were hiding. Finally, I was compelled to ask a group of young ladies what have they done with the boys? I have forgotten what they answered, but as I kept walking around, I run into a group of young men, all under twenty, at the far corner of the field, smoking marijuana and dressed in anything but school uniforms. I said to myself, "there is your answer." Before long only women will be running St. Lucia, and the women will be so far ahead of the men that they will have to start importing their spouses. Maybe an overseas ad will read like this: *Looking for a man (no matter the age) who is willing to hold a job (it doesn't matter what kind of job and how much the job earns), who isn't on crack and doesn't smoke too much marijuana, and who doesn't feel to be a man is to carry a gun.*

The Cost of Development

The taming of the landscape, bringing the country under the rules of capitalism, in short the industrialization of Vieux Fort and the rest of the nation has come along with some baggage. Besides the goods the factories produce for the home market and beyond, they produce bads for the land and its people. The bads are called pollution.

Not too long ago, while waiting for transport at the junction where the St. Jude's Highway meets the Vieux Fort Laborie Highway, I noticed a stream flowing from under the road and into the bushes. When I saw the stream, I was taken aback. My first thought was: how come I never knew there was a stream there? After all, during my Senior Secondary School days I was up and down that road every day. Besides, I love bodies of water, be it ravines, rivers, lakes, oceans. More so if they are out of the way, and thus when I come upon them I would get the impression that I am the first human to stare upon their waters. I could not let the opportunity of discovering a new stream pass me by. I followed the flow into the bushes. The stream joined a pool of dirty water alongside a pigpen with ranting pigs. I said, "don't tell me that's where the stream ends?" I went beyond the pool to see where the water was flowing out. I saw no outlet. I examined the water with a stick, I noticed it was no ordinary stream water, it looked more like sludge. Following the maxim of when in doubt go the source and forgetting that I was waiting for transport, I climbed out of the bush and followed the stream up the St. Jude's Highway, along a street side canal, only to discover this wasn't a stream at all, but sludge from the factories west of the St. Jude's Highway.

I live in Black Bay, so every day I cross a bridge that allows passage across a ravine that runs parallel to Black Bay, between Black Bay and the Gablewoods South Mall, but apparently reaching as far as Augier. At various times, I kept noticing the ravine taking on different colors. Sometimes red, sometimes blue, sometimes green. Knowing we were in the rainy season, when streams usually took on the color of the earth, I didn't pay the changing colors of the ravine much attention. But the day after I started writing this essay, I went jogging at the back of Black Bay, up to Contonement, and then in circles. At the back there I was taking in some unsettling smells, so I stopped my run and started exploring. I noticed that what was disturbing my nostrils was the scent of syrup arising from a factory. Then to my left I noticed a volley of huge flies rising out of the bush. I took a closer look. Empty syrup bags and other waste dumped in a gully sloping down into the ravine were what had attracted the attention of the flies. I became alarmed, so I kept an eye on the ravine relative to the factories in the area. I soon discovered that each factory had a drain leading into the ravine. I said, "this must be what is accounting for the changing colors of the ravine." The ravine changes color depending on which factory was pumping sludge that day. Another thing. In and around Black Bay, and in my house, there is a strong permanent stench. Initially I had thought it was rat and mice urine that was causing the stench, because I have come across rats in my yard and mice in my house. It was only after the above discovery that I realized that the source of the Black Bay stench was none other than the factories. It made me wonder how long it will take Black Bay residents to desert Black Bay for environmentally more friendly areas, like Moule-a-Chique, for example.

The Soufriere episode came to mind, and I thought of the sludge that Winera has been pumping into the Atlantic, near Lobster Pot, for years. I wondered about all the other factories on the island. Has anyone tested the toxicity of these sludges? Even more critical, is the health of all of those young women, in the prime of their childbearing years, exposing themselves to harmful chemicals. Ten, twenty years from now, will we have an epidemic of deformed births? Have the

newspapers, the television stations, the radio stations, the talk shows, Juke Bois, and the forever visible Rick Wayne looked into this matter? Does the government assess the environmental impact of these factories before giving them the green light? Or is this part of the general lawlessness, *laissez-faire*, don't carishness, everything goes, is so Lucia is, I had no choice, attitude of the country. Where it seems that the person at fault in a dispute is the one who gets hurt or is killed. Where people urinate and throw garbage any and everywhere. Where adults cuss and conduct any kind of conversation with no regard to the presence of children. Where motorist drive at nights with one head lamp. Where bus drivers, full of passengers, drive at such breakneck speeds that one has to conclude that they have signed a suicidal pact, and makes one wonder what miracle is in place that there aren't many more accidents? Where just about any social or cultural activity, be it a nightclub, a blocko, a fashion show, Jounen Kwéyòl, is turned into a vulgar act.

I wondered. It seems while we are intent on taming the physical landscape, our conduct, attitude, and etiquette are getting wilder and more reckless. It would appear that population growth, influx of immigrants, greater mobility facilitated by better roads and more affordable transportation, and greater economic empowerment have loosened the societal and community bonds that use to keep us in check. In other countries when this happens the law—the police force, the court system—fills the niche that community and social restraints left behind. But unfortunately the law in St. Lucia is lagging behind this social and economic reality. So it seems that while the land is no more a free-for-all, other aspects of the wild, wild west, have taken root. Come to think of it, St. Lucia now exhibits certain aspects of both the American West and the days of rampant American capitalism.

In the American West, the man with the fastest draw won the day. The land baron with the most muscle gobbled up the range land. In St. Lucia, it boggles the mind that in a place so small, so many murders go unsolved. Last year Vieux Fort alone had three unsolved murders. These days St. Lucia is jokingly called little New York. Not for its culture, but for its crime rate.

In 19th century America, when capitalism ran wild, when it was at its crudest, the era that the Rockefellers made their overnight fortunes, animal species went extinct and rivers and lakes were polluted beyond animal and human habitation. In St. Lucia, fertilizer, pesticide and weedicides applied to bananas have polluted our streams, and the clearing of the forest to make way for bananas have dried up and are drying up our rivers. Moreover, the full environmental consequences of our factories are an unfolding story. Where the agricultural chemicals left off, the factory sludges and fumes are taking over.

America was lucky. They had so much land that when an area became unfit for habitation, they could simply leave it dormant and move on, and because they had so much resources at their disposable they could afford the cleaning up of their rivers and lakes. But in St. Lucia, with a population growth rate of 1.6 percent and a government treasury chest that is so meager that each year the government must struggle to find money to pay civil servants, we are not as lucky. The margin for error may be nil.

A Beautiful Country

No matter how often I stand on the side of the John Compton Highway, and my eyes travel across the Castries's harbor, up Morne Fortune and the rest of the hills and mountains that engulf the city, and then back to the harbor and to the opening where the Caribbean becomes open water, I am always taken aback on how beautiful St. Lucia is. The gigantic and majestic, cloud-touching mountains of Soufriere, that dominates not just the town but the Caribbean Sea, leave me no less awestruck. Since childhood, passage through the Barré de l'Isle mountain range, has always filled me with the sense

that I am in a different, cooler climate and that this must have been how the whole island was before Columbus made his entrance. Often I am jealous that it wasn't me but the Caribs, Awaraks, and Siboneys that first laid eyes on this splendor.

The second worry I had while in America was that by the time I return home to stay all the best lands in St. Lucia would be taken, all the empty spaces will be gone, hotels would occupy all the beach fronts, that the beauty of St. Lucia would have been compromised. I was afraid that by that time the St. Lucia of my birth, the St. Lucia I once knew would no more exist. As I said before, I love bodies of water, the ocean most of all. Since I came down, I have been going to the beach three, four times a week. Yet what I love most about St. Lucia are its mountains, its interior. June last year I interviewed for a job and a member of the interviewing panel asked "what have you been doing since your return?" I told him that I was driving around exploring the island. Now, clearly, someone may not want to give a guy that is wandering aimlessly around the island a job. No wonder I didn't get the job. And the interviewer was probably wondering what is there to explore? Yet that was exactly what I was doing. I was restocking myself of St. Lucia. I was replenishing my memory, filling my eyes, so if when it all disappears, I will have my memory to draw on, my eyes to see what used to be.

Memory and eyes that would allow me to tell my grand children of how once upon a time there was a naturalness about this place. The way verdant mountains, rooted in valleys, touching the clouds, were forever encircling the land, and in the valleys flowed rivers, and along the mountainsides streams fed the rivers, which fed the sea, which was ever so present, forming one with the mountains. How there was no ugliness here, because even the shacks had acquired their own beauty. That if poverty spells broken spirits, there was no poverty here. That if paradise was closeness to nature, this here was paradise. That there was an ease here, a poise, a cadence, a pace as leisurely and sure as that of the rivers flowing through the valleys en route to the sea. That there were no divisions here. There was no telling where the banana fields ended and the villages began. The shacks mingled with the mansions, the mountains rose out of the sea. That the transition from birth to childhood, from youth to adulthood, from old age to death was as effortless and seamless as the changing tide. That there was a closeness, a coziness, like the way the mountains hugged the land in a tight embrace. And where the mountains loosened their hold on the land the sea came to their aid. A time when no one could deny the presence of God, because God was as palpable as the Atlantic breeze blowing over Vieux Fort. That there was an acceptance here; an acceptance of love, of life, of death, of babies, of youth, of old age. Like the way the forests that used to cover the mountains drank the waters of the clouds so unquestioningly, the way the rivers joyfully welcomed the waters of the streams that sprang from the mountainsides, the way the sea received the waters of the rivers, muddy and all, without a sigh. That there was a time when there were no broad sweeps of identification here, because each uniqueness, each shade of color, had its name

A Beautiful Town

Somehow I have always thought of Vieux Fort as the last St. Lucian frontier. In some regards Vieux Fort is to St. Lucia what the American West is to America. An obvious comparison are the open pastures of Vieux Fort were cows, horses, goats, sheep, and even hogs once upon a time, grazed freely.

Imagine on a late afternoon you are making your way down south along the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway for the first time. You have suffered a whole day of Castries' suppressing heat and humidity, its human congestion, and its suffocating traffic. Your head is dizzy from breathing in dust and leaded gas fumes. Yet as if this wasn't enough suffering, the many precipitous inclines and declines, twist and turns that you encounter on your way keeps you at the edge of your seat. Then

suddenly, after about an hour of driving, the land opens up, and for the first time since you left Castries you find yourself on a stretch of land where you don't feel suffocated by mountains and where you can look ahead of you for a mile or so without one land mass or another blocking your view. And just as you begin to relax for the first time that day, a sudden blast of wind slams in your face, forcing you to breathe in the poignant aroma of seaweed mixed with the salt of the ocean, as if the perfect medicine the doctor ordered for Castries' sickening fumes. Well the way you feel the first time is the way I feel every time. This is Vieux Fort. Once you have gotten use to it, and you move away, like your first love, you will miss it forever.

I love Vieux Fort. I love the forever angry Atlantic Ocean on its eastern border, the peaceful Caribbean Sea at its front. I like the open, green pastures and the low-lying hills of La Tourney, Derrière Morne and Beausejour that interrupt the plains. I like the unvanquished Moule-a-Chique, allowing ships safe passage and guarding the southern boundaries of the island. I like the mountains, beyond the low-lying hills, that mark the end of the Vieux Fort Plain and which rise to form Piero, Belvue, Grace. I like the idea of animals grazing freely in open pastures, even the herds of cows that I often have to wait on for several minutes when they are crossing the road. The same cows that have written-off a vehicle or two, and with whom I have had several close calls.

I met a friend on his way to a community meeting on what to do about goats that kept entering school compounds and people's gardens, eating everything insight. The options ranged from fining the owners to eliminating the goats all together. It was hard for me to imagine a Vieux Fort without cows, horses, goats, and sheep grazing freely. They are part of my concept of Vieux Fort, part of the untameness of the land I would like to hold on to. Without them Vieux Fort would be something different. Besides, these same animals have put quite a few kids through school. So I played the part of Abraham in his attempt to get the angels to spare Sodom and Gomorrah.

"I like the idea of goats running freely," I said. "It adds a quaintness, a uniqueness to the town."

"This may be true," said my friend. "But the goats have become a menace to the community."

"Can't the schools and gardeners fence up?" I asked.

"Fencing cost money and goats are determined creatures. Besides, why should people pay when they aren't the ones benefiting from the goats? And how about the cows causing fatalities on the road."

"Maybe we need to put signs on the road, *Slow down, cows are crossing*, like in other places where they have deer and other wildlife crossing the road."

My friend left for his meeting, the conclusion of which I never found out. He was right, of course. People come before animals. Didn't God Himself put them here at our service? Clearly, nostalgia or not, the days of roaming animals in Vieux Fort are numbered. They are a luxury development, progress, cannot afford.

Early morning, when I'm on my way to Vieux Fort from Black Bay, early enough to give me the sense that the world was freshly created and just for me, and after rounding the bend by the Marina, behind me the tips of Morne Gimie and the omnipresent Pitons, but straight ahead Moule-a-Chique kindly looking down upon me, greeting me good morning, to my right the Vieux Fort River joining its waters with that of the Caribbean Sea, to my left Hewanorra International Airport, the tall green fields it encircles, a few white cattle egrets on the green fields enjoying breakfast before the sun warms up, beyond the airport, beyond the Vieux Fort plain, the mountains, still clothed in the early morning mist, reinforcing my sense of a freshly created world, I rejoice that I was finally able to return home to stay.

Save Us Some Empty Spaces

Over the Christmas holidays a couple of my teenage relatives were visiting from St. Croix. While traveling with them from Vieux Fort to Castries at the back of my brother's pickup truck, their biggest criticism of St. Lucia was that there was so much bush, so much void. Yet here I am clamoring about the disappearance of our empty spaces. But the way to look at this is not in terms of a year or two, but in terms of generations. How did St. Lucia look a generation ago, and how will it look a generation or two from now? We need to be aware that what this present generation puts in place will greatly determine how the country looks in the next generation.

The fertile lands of Union, where I studied general agriculture, has been turned into an Industrial zone. Factories are now sitting on some of the very land on which I learned how to grow crops. Land hungry, I notice that Castries is gradually moving into the Cul-de-Sac Valley. The newly opened, four-mile, seventy-five-million-dollar Tunnel Highway turned Millennium Highway that takes you to the valley by avoiding the messy and slow business of climbing and descending the Morne, yet gives you a lovely view of the Hess part of the Caribbean Sea, will do nothing but hasten the taming of the valley. Factories are already sitting in the middle of the banana fields at Odsan. Moreover, given the rate of household formation along the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway, between the Barré de l'Isle and Dennery, it may not be long before the Mabouya and La Caye Valleys are swallowed up. The once fertile Balembouche estate, sitting between Piaye and Choiseul, Vieux Fort aside, probably the largest stretch of flat land in the south, is now being chopped up into residential parcels. Soon, most of our rich fertile valleys near population centers will be gobbled up.

A few years back I told a friend about my fear that soon development would gobble up the whole island. He said, "don't be ridiculous, not with all these mountains. The same way the mountains provided our ancestors a sanctuary from slavery, they are going to protect the island from over congestion." He assured me that St. Lucia with all its mountains will never become as crowded as Barbados.

"You are right," I said. Nevertheless, not long ago, I was exploring at the back of Castries, the area in and around Grand Riviere, Monier, Babonneau. Roads climbed hills I would have thought impassable, and there were houses on hills I thought even goats would have difficulty getting to. I kept climbing and climbing, hoping I would reach a point where I would run out of roads and houses. But the more I climbed the more the road twisted uphill ahead of me and the more houses I run into. Finally, I accepted defeat, and turned back. I said to myself, "my friend was wrong. The mountains cannot protect the island from over congestion. This is a decision left only to population growth and economic development."

In recent times, and in not so recent times, Vieux Fort has become the undisputed Mecca of football in St. Lucia, an honor once Castries guardedly held and which it grudgingly gave up. Last year, for example, Roots Alley, a Vieux Fort team that was only half the strength of previous years (one of its best players left to play professionally and some others to join other Vieux Fort teams) won both the Heineken FA Cup and the Premier League Competition. The Vieux Fort side defeated Marchand 2-0 to win the Inter League Zonal Competition, and the Veteran Team beat VSADC 1 - 0 to retain the Veteran Cup. Since all the empty spaces of Castries are filled, one wonders to what extent the lack of practice fields has contributed to this shift of football dominance away from Castries to Vieux Fort. Unlike cricket (another sport that requires large space) which for the most part is an individual performance sport, football is very much a team sport, it is impossible for teams

to reach their full potential without practicing separately as a team. Because how else would they develop teamwork and team chemistry? The congestion of Castries doesn't allow space for teams to practice by themselves. The Heineken Five-A-Side competition was the only tournament a team from Castries (VSADC) won. Five-a-side football doesn't require much space. Teams can adequately practice five-a-side football even on an empty street.

As if sensing that its open spaces had given it a comparative advantage in football, Vieux Fort had just about abandoned cricket. Up until a few years ago, the town hadn't had any organized cricket competitions. The youth of Shanty Town, the Mange, and the Macadere, meccas of football within mecca, were no longer aspiring to making the West Indies Cricket Team, instead they were dreaming of playing professional football in Trinidad, Europe and America.

Another recent phenomenon is that football has equalized across the rural, urban divide. There used to be a time in St. Lucian football when Castries was number one, Vieux Fort number two and Soufriere a distant third, and then no one else worthy of mention. Not anymore. Just take a look at the Mabouya Valley. I think opening the island to nationwide team and district competitions has helped. But one problem we have always had is that the rural areas never had proper playing fields. It is only in recent times that more attention has been given to football in the out districts and some banana fields have been ploughed over, leveled off, to become football fields. So it seems that what they say about leveling the playing field is true after all.

Even as a teenager I often wondered that given so small an island with such a paucity of flat land, did Hewanorra International Airport have to take up so much land? To my teenage eyes it looked like an awful waste. Now, whether it was a waste, I wouldn't complain. Because it is beginning to dawn upon me that the field of tall grass the airport encloses may be one of the few green, open spaces that would be left in Vieux Fort. I know we will preserve this land because the airport brings in our precious tourists. Yes, we have the Beauséjour Farm. A picture-perfect piece of rolling countryside, rimed by hills and the Vieux Fort River, a model of the motherland's countryside. But beauty is never enough to save anything or anyone. The day may soon come when Beauséjour, though of great value to farmers, may be a luxury development cannot afford.

I travel the country, and on early mornings I am greeted by multitudes of school children, the morning sun reflecting off their brightly colored uniforms, some emerging out from under the banana foliage, some from the towns and villages, joyously walking, skipping, and hopping to school. I have often wondered what will become of all these children? How could we provide all of them with higher education? Where are we going to find jobs for all of them when we already suffer from a perennial 20 percent unemployment rate and hundreds of our secondary school graduates have no jobs to go to? This was another one of my worries as I toiled for corporate America. My only answer is we have to develop even more rapidly, we have to devour some of our hills, valleys and beaches to grow the economy. In short, we have to tame the landscape, bringing it under our will and control. This is exactly what is happening. The price of development. Economists maybe right after all. There is no free lunch.

Being an economist, no one knows better than me that I would be asking way too much if I were to say that Vieux Fort and St. Lucia should remain as it was in my youth, or as it is now. But please in the midst of our development let us maintain some islands of green, so that at least when I tell my grand children that there was a time when Vieux Fort was a vast plain of grazing animals, they can look at the islands of green and get an inkling of what I am talking about. We have a park (Independence Square) in Vieux Fort, a symbol of leisure and entertainment, right on the spot of where a sugar factory, the very emblem of enslavement, and brute work, use to be. Yet if some years ago someone hadn't the foresight to claim this land for a park, we may not have had a square in Vieux Fort, and the spot would have already been built over. Still, who says we need just one

square. How about several squares?

It's decades now a sports stadium or sporting complex has been planned for Vieux Fort. The first site of this sporting complex was the area east of New Dock Road, between the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway and Shanty Town. The area was graded, the American's camouflage anglers leveled off in preparation for the sporting complex. The complex never arrived. Instead schools came. Who can argue against schools? Then the stadium, still in planning, moved to the area alongside the St. Jude's Highway, between Heineken Brewery and St. Jude's Hospital. Again, the area was graded, at last we would have our stadium. However, history waits for no stadium. The Government changed hands. The St. Jude's area was deemed unfit for a stadium. So the stadium, still in planning, has moved to Eau Piquant, the area to your left as you approach the Piero gap on your way to Castries along the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway.

My plea. Build the stadium. Turn the St. Jude's area rejected for the stadium into a sporting complex of proper football and cricket fields. Closer to town, Independence Square aside, create and maintain two or three other squares, public parks. Officially (in Law) designate several tracts of land, for example the lands across the Highway from Sandy Beach where teams currently practice, strictly for sporting and recreational activities. Develop the country, its towns and villages. Yes. But protect our rivers, ocean and air; leave some of our better agricultural lands intact; preserve and maintain some of our empty spaces for current and future generations. After all, the good book said: *Man shall not live by bread alone.*