



# Brent's FAGENDA

by Brent Dorian Carpenter

## Gone but never forgotten

It had all the inherent trappings of an enchanted evening, that warm October night before Halloween back in 1986. I had not yet had my heart broken and the seeds of bitterness and anguish had not yet been planted in my mind. That night the Nectarine Ballroom in Ann Arbor seemed like something out of a dream.

That's when and where I saw him; that boy. That beautiful, pretty, breathtaking boy. I pursued him all night, but he was like some ephemeral will-o-the-wisp, disappearing time and again like smoke. Eventually, the evening was drawing to a close and I was prepared to leave in frustration, my imagination crafting a thousand scenarios of what might have been. And then, as if from some fairy tale vision, there he was.

His name was Duane. He had the most charming Jamaican accent (I'm a sucker for accents) and was even more beautiful up close than I had realized. We were able to speak only briefly, but in that fragile moment of time, we made a connection, that inexplicable something that passes between two people at times like these. Perhaps - dare I say it? - it was love at first sight.

I discovered that he was born in a small Jamaican town named Clarendon and was a student at the University of Michigan. We decided that we wanted to see each other again. He was coming to Detroit the following night to go out to a club called Todd's. Like some fool in love, I gave him a bangle from my wrist and made him promise me that he would return it to me the next day. To the average person, it may have seemed like a typical night at the club, but for me it was something far greater; one of those surreal, perfect moments in time when all things beautiful spring into being. For me, I had found the love of my life.

For the next four-and-a-half years, we made a life together, first in Detroit, then in Atlanta. As flight attendants, we traveled around the globe together. We shared an apartment and a car, bought furniture, cooked for each other and enjoyed entertaining friends visiting from back home. One of them even had a priceless nickname for him - Pushbooty. I never got the whole story on how he got that nickname, but I can only imagine! Our "ordinary" lives weren't quite Norman Rockwell and white picket fences, but then, whose life really is? We were happy. We were in love. Boy meets boy. Boy falls in love with boy. Boy and boy live happily ever after. Except, we didn't live happily ever after. In fact, Duane didn't live at all.

During a routine visit to the dentist at the end of 1990, he learned that he had AIDS. We were both devastated by the news. It was the darkest time of the crisis. At that time, the disease was a death sentence. Every passing week brought news of more victims. How many of our friends had we already buried? Still, we decided we weren't going to give up. We were going to fight.

All the while, I tried to assure Duane that there were scientists and pharmaceutical companies that were working on finding a cure, or at least better treatment options. All he

had to do was hang on. We were going to be the first people to beat the disease and survive. Little did I realize that I would be only half right.

Duane deteriorated rapidly and by the end of May 1991, he was on his deathbed. The memories of those awful final hours are forever scorched into my mind. Scarcely a day goes by that they don't creep into my consciousness in some form or another. I stayed by his side and watched him slowly, inexorably, drift away. My beautiful little Jamaican Pushbooty.

On May 27, 2001, I visited Duane's gravesite for the first time since his burial. It had been 10 years. How is that possible? How could he be gone for that long? For 10 years I wondered why God chose to take Duane's life while sparing mine. At long last, I think I understand. He is gone but never forgotten. In so many ways, he is with me now more than

ever. I still possess some part of his indomitable spirit. It is that spirit that has ushered me before you today. I live on to carry his voice, now silenced, in his stead. I speak for Duane Ivanhoe Richards as surely as I speak for myself.

Earlier I stated that we were ordinary people. I misspoke. Duane was not ordinary by any means or stretch of the imagination. He was extraordinary. On his behalf, as well as my own, I wish to pay tribute to all those who lost the struggle, as well as those who continue to fight. That makes you extraordinary, too.

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