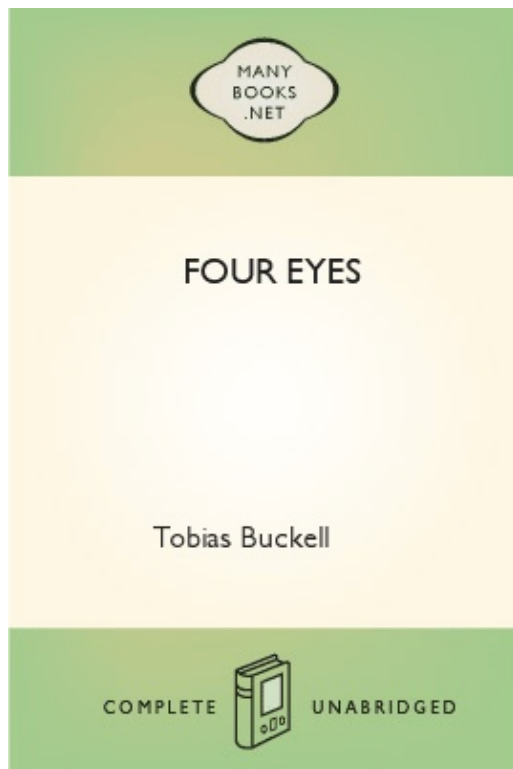


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Four Eyes

by Tobias S. Buckell

Manny had Bob Marley cranking on the stereo, his van was full of passengers, and the air conditioning was working after a long week of giving him trouble.

The sun beat down on the wet-looking asphalt road that ran along the harbor, next to the concrete waterfront. It curved along in front of the brightly colored Dutch Colonial warehouses of Charlotte Amalie, which were now converted restaurants and jewel shops. Tourists in day-glo shirts and daubs of sunscreen rubbed over peeling skin crowded both sides of the waterfront road. Manny slowed somewhat, keeping an eye on them.

On the sidewalk by the shops a tall black man stood by a food cart. The hand-painted wooden sign hanging from the cart's side had faded letters. The man wore a grand suit with tails, like an orchestra conductor, and a top hat perched on his shaved head. A cigar burned in his mouth. For a brief second he held Manny's attention. Then the food cart's owner stepped forward and the strangely dressed man disappeared.

Manny looked at the other side of the road. A white girl with oval shaped sunglasses and pink leather pants stepped off the sidewalk into the road in front of his van.

He slammed on the brakes, trying to dodge her, but the van couldn't respond that fast. Her ponytail flew up towards the windshield and her head struck the star-shaped hood ornament. She bounced along the asphalt. Manny weaved the van to a stop, with swearing from the passengers in the back.

He opened the door and stepped out into the heat. Get up, stand up, the radio cried out, and that was what Manny hoped would happen. He hoped that she would at least just stir and be okay.

But she just lay there.

Manny's stomach pulled itself tight and began to hurt. He looked back at the van. One of the passengers, an elderly lady with a straw hat and sunscreen on the tip of her nose, stepped down through the sliding door. She covered her mouth with the back of her palm.

"Oh my God," she said.

A trickle of blood ran down from the girl's head, muddying the dust in the gutter.

A passenger with a large belt buckle, working boots, and a southern accent, crawled out the sliding door with a cell phone in his hand. A mahogany-skinned man in khakis and a floral print shirt followed close behind.

"An ambulance is on its way here," the southern man said.

The man in khakis walked over to the girl and squatted. He held a small piece of rope in his hand, tied in an elaborate weave of knots. He shook his head.

"She dead," he said.

"How you know?" Manny demanded. The man in khakis said nothing, but looked sad.

The southerner closed his cellphone. "He seems to know about these things," he said. "I met him on the plane here. His name's Jimiti. I'm Stan."

In the distance, Manny heard the low wail of an ambulance start, fighting its way through the snarl of waterfront traffic. The world rippled, and Manny swallowed hard. He hoped she was alive.

"It's a shame," Stan said.

"I never knock into no-one before," Manny said, still stunned.

A bystander, an old lady with a large handbag, called out from the bench she sat on. "Don't fret so, man. She walk right out in front of you. Nothing you could do."

Manny looked down at the girl, the trickle of blood from her head growing. The man in khakis, Jimiti, nodded. He put the knotted rope in his hands back into his pants pocket.

"Nothing you could do," Jimiti agreed. The wail of the ambulance began to drown out the din of traffic and town noise.

Jimiti stood up and walked over to Manny. He put a small length of knotted rope into Manny's hand, as well as a business card. The card was simple. Plain white. Jimiti, it said in black letters. Obeah and other practices.

Manny started to put the card and rope in his pocket, but Jimiti's leathery hand grabbed his wrist.

"Keep the rope out in you hand. It suck up you fear."

"Look..." Manny said, annoyed. He met Stan's eyes, though.

"He means well," Stan said. He had a similar piece of knotted rope around his wrist. "He gave me one when I met him on the plane coming down here."

Manny slipped the knotwork over his hands.

The ambulance pulled in front of them, killing its sirens and bringing back the usual wash of background noise. Manny watched as two men jumped out of the doors in the back and knelt by the girl.

Please live, Manny hoped.

#

Manny revved the engine and turned into his driveway. He parked to the right of the out-of-control hibiscus bush and just to the left of the brand new Acura he hardly ever had time to drive. The Acura was painted a glossy gold, fully tricked out with rims, low ground effects, tinted windows, and a spoiler. The twelve-inch speakers in the back had once cracked the rear window.

He knew the car was an extravagance. He had bills to pay, large ones that he owed doctors who had done surgery on his granddad. But since he'd been a kid Manny wanted a car like this. Something that said he was someone, not just a taxi driver ordered around by tourists.

When he got out of the van, Manny took a deep breath.

The sun disappeared just over the galvanized tin roof. It sent streamers of clouds out in all directions, and random bands drifted around the sky like streaks of brilliant colored cotton candy. They started rosy at the horizon, and graduated all the way to off-white over his head.

"Manny," his grandfather called from inside the house. "You late."

"Yes, G.D."

Manny walked up to the door. The house needed painted. Jagged flaps of aquamarine made the outside walls look like they'd caught some sort of scaly disease. His grandfather backed the wheelchair away from the doorjamb as Manny walked in.

"What happen?"

"Some white girl step in front the van."

G.D picked up his glasses with unsteady hands. Once they were on he looked out into the driveway and blinked his super-magnified eyes.

"The girl okay?"

"No." Manny had stood with the police and answered question after question, and signed his name to documents. And strangely enough he stayed calm throughout it all, despite the shaky feelings he was sure would come later.

"You supper up by the microwave."

Manny shook his head. He emptied his pockets and tossed everything into a decorative terra-cotta dish at the edge of the kitchen counter. He pulled the stupid piece of rope off his wrist and threw it on top of the card the obeah man had given him.

"I don't feel hungry," he said. He walked out of the kitchen and passed the door to the guestroom. Still locked,

he saw with relief. He and G.D stayed out of there. Ever since last year. Ever since after his grandmother's funeral.

The continuous whine of the wheelchair just behind him gave Manny the feeling that G.D and the machine were stalking him. He walked the rest of the way down the hall, past G.D's room to his bedroom. The doorknob felt cool to the touch.

When the door creaked open wind sucked in and slightly moved the drapes.

The white girl, in pink leather pants, Gucci sunglasses hanging by her neck, sat motionless on the chair next to Manny's bed.

"Oh God, oh no," he said. Suddenly unable to breathe he stepped back and tripped over the wheelchair. The concrete wall smacked him in the back of his head and the world jumped to the left.

G.D pulled his cane out of the side of the wheelchair and pointed it at Manny's throat. He held the business card up in front of him, the name 'Jimiti' still large in the center of the card. G.D glanced quickly into the room. He licked his lips.

"She the girl you run over?" G.D asked, his voice wavering.

Manny nodded.

G.D pushed the card forward at him.

"The card here, it for real?"

Again, Manny nodded. He glanced into the room. The girl hadn't moved. G.D reached out with the cane and pulled the door closed with energy Manny hadn't seen from him in years. His eyes bulged behind the glasses, and a bead of sweat ran down his papery cheek.

"Go call the man on the card."

"Why?" he asked, still fuzzy.

G.D smacked Manny's leg with the cane.

"Ever since you was just a little child you had go around vexing people with you questions," G.D hissed. He lashed out with the cane again, and it bit down into Manny's shoulder. "Just call the man."

Manny grabbed the cane and wrenched it away from G.D.

Still breathing heavily he walked back to the kitchen. He ran the tap, water pooling in his cupped hands until it spilled over his fingers into the sink, and splashed water on his face. He looked down at the card.

Jimiti, the card still said. But in the corner it now showed the words: Duppy removal and other services.

#

Days passed for Manny. Days of driving taxi, but not paying attention to the small winding roads around the coast. He drove all up and down the fourteen miles of St. Thomas, up the spine of the mountains into the small patch of rain forest, and back down again into dry and dusty town. Days that built and mounted onto

Manny's shoulders. He began to wonder if the obeah man would ever respond.

He even spent one night in a motel, tired of waking up on the couch with crusty eyes and a cramped back. Too scared to walk into his room. Too scared to see the motionless statue sitting by his bed.

When Manny came back and parked his Acura, G.D threatened him with the cane the moment he passed through the kitchen.

"Where you been?"

"Out," Manny said. "Leave me alone."

G.D pointed out the window.

"You should sell that ugly car. You can't self afford it."

"I never had anything nice like that, ever," Manny said. He was tired. He looked around for the keys to his taxi-van. Another day of following the roads for money lay ahead.

"You just a taxi driver, you can't afford no fancy car. You ain't rich."

Manny found the keys and clenched them.

"You think I don't know that!" He snapped. "I feed you, I pay you bills. I been keeping you alive all them year, and all you do is trouble me so. I pay the doctor-man. What you ever done? You useless, that's what you do."

G.D rolled his chair away. Manny continued.

"Yeah, I just the taxi-driver. And I all you got, old man. I ain't selling the car unless we poor, you hear?"

Manny stopped and faced G.D. His grandad's tears ran down his cheeks, magnified by the glasses. G.D rolled away, and Manny angrily made sandwiches for the two of them.

Afterwards he checked the porch looking for G.D, then cautiously peered into his room and shuddered. The ghost still sat there patiently, hands in her lap.

But no G.D.

Manny walked to the guestroom. He took the key from over the door, and with a trembling hand unlocked it. The room swarmed with dust that made slow, lazy spirals and patterns in the air.

In the corner of the room sat the still figure of an old lady with a veil over her face. Her hands were crossed politely in her lap, just like the dead girl in Manny's room.

"I should have gone with she," G.D said from next to the doorframe. Manny jumped, heart pounding. "CarolineÉ" G.D cried. "I miss you so, dear."

Still angry, still feeling he'd been caught between everything and everyone, Manny wanted to both yell and hug G.D's frail body.

G.D wheeled out past him. Manny closed the door and locked it.

"You right," G.D said to Manny. "What I ever done?"

Manny leaned his head against the wall.

"I have to go work, G.D," he said.

#

He drove more. From Red Hook, on the East end of the island where the ferries left for St. John, to Brewer's Bay on the West End. He drove over Crown Mountain and down onto North side to let tourists take their pictures with the donkey by Drake's Seat.

At the end, when he counted the day's take, he had a bit. But not enough.

He sat with a bottle of soda and a pate. He wondered if it was faulty memories that made it seem like he was making less and less, and that fewer and fewer tourists were coming to the islands as the years passed.

He'd once had other things in mind for himself. University. Stateside. Computers. But driving taxi brought in money for G.D and living. Manny had left those plans far behind.

The radio interrupted to tell him he had a last pickup for the day.

"At Magen's Bay?" Manny complained. "I'm in town."

"They had ask for you special."

Manny sighed and shut the door. He drove up the mountain from the back end of town and down into the cooler air of the North Side.

Magen's Bay stretched out, a white crescent in the dimming light. The last clumps of people were leaving, knocking the sand off their feet and getting into cars and taxis to leave.

The sun's last streamers of orange pastels dripped behind the islands off the North Side. The last few vehicles coughed on, then drove off. Manny was alone, slightly nervous that he was about to be mugged.

Instead, Jimiti stepped out from behind a coconut tree, barefoot, his red floral shirt unbuttoned.

"Sorry I took so long," the obeah man said. "I had a lot of thing to reflect on."

"Okay," Manny said.

The obeah man's hands hung loose by his side.

"Walk with me."

Manny took off his shoes and socks and followed Jimiti. They walked down the long beach, until the water sucked and splashed at their toes. The darker it got, the whiter the beach seemed. Manny slapped at bites to his exposed arms. Mosquitos and no-see-ums hungry for his skin.

"You got duppy?" Jimiti asked.

"That a ghost?"

Jimiti sighed. He stopped walking and faced the huge bay.

"A ghost," he confirmed, with sadness in his voice. "I don't self understand what I doing here. I would have prefer to stay in Florida, helping all them old people over, giving them some company. Instead, I explaining what a duppy is."

"Who you talking too?" Manny asked, because Jimiti spoke to the water.

"You see duppy often?"

Manny hesitated.

"Never mind." Jimiti took one more step towards the water. The steady roll of waves against the beach began to slow, almost to a crawl, and then died away. The wind dropped, the air hushed.

One lone rogue wave washed towards them. It broke, a miniature froth of salty mist spinning off from it's top. And from that, Manny saw it wash against a form.

"You see her?" Jimiti asked.

Manny blinked. The wave died, but a lady stood out of the water. Her skin glistened with rivulets of water that dripped down between her breasts, her stomach, her inner thighs, and then back into the ocean. Her features never stayed in focus, but wavered like a reflection in windy puddle.

"Yes," Manny breathed.

"This La Llorona," Jimiti said. "We meet often at places like these: beaches, rivers, small ponds in parks with ducks paddling around the middle."

"Who is she?" Manny stood frozen in place.

"My spirit guide." Jimiti nodded. "You won't find her on any Vodou altar. And until a year ago, I never seen her. I think all the believing Latinos in Miami that make her strong. Or maybe the world changing this year. I don't know." Jimiti chuckled. "I once tell her she ain't even the right mythology for me to see. And she had ask me 'what the right mythology, Jimiti? You a two hundred-year-old blend of cultural mess! What in you vein? Kikiyu? Ashanti? Grandmammy rock you to sleep talking 'bout Ananzi, or Brer Rabbit? It don't matter where I come from, only that I exist to you.' "

Jimiti stepped forward again.

"I old La Llorona. You tell me everyone here lose they culture. You right. Look this one here. Don't self even know what a duppy is. My coming back useless. You hear?"

The watery figure spoke. It sent shivers down Manny's back. He had never heard a ghost speak.

"So because they don't know, you won't try bringing it back to them."

Jimiti sucked his teeth. "They young. They don't care. Too busy with they nice car, big building, money, technology. I don't have nothing to share with them. The world change past me, and I don't understand them."

La Llorona looked at Manny. Her eyes cleared with a ripple.

"You are right. The world has passed you. But they still need understanding. Compassion."

Jimiti spat. He looked at the amazed look on Manny's face and pursed his lips.

"Compassion. What you know of compassion?" He looked angry, and hurt. "Let me help you understand this spirit here," he told Manny. "La LloranaÉ better known as Bloody Mary."

"Please don't," La Llorona asked.

"Haunting, crying, river spirit," Jimiti continued. "At the youngest age she had take her two children to the river. She grabbed them by they little young neck and pushed them both under river, and hold the both of them there until their palms stop hitting thewater. Then she let go and watch them still body float away."

La Llorona looked down at the water by her waist.

"And after she killed herself," she whispered, "she searched the edges of waters everywhere, hoping to find her two lost children." Her voice hardened. "Thank you for telling him this Jimiti. You are such a kind old man."

Manny felt the water around him vibrate and surge against his legs.

"Please," La Llorona asked him. "Don't think those things about me." Silent tears rolled down her face. They mingled with drops of water hovering on the edge of her chin and fell down into the ocean.

"I'm sorry," Jimiti apologized. He had tears of his own.

La Llorona shook her head.

"Take care of yourself, Jimiti," she said, putting a wet hand to his chest. "I will see you again, soon enough. You know this. Go do what you have to do."

A wave broke against La Llorona's legs. She dissolved into the water with a sigh. A single strand of seaweed that had been wrapped around her small breasts floated free and grounded itself on the sand in front of Manny.

Out past the small reef he could hear her calling for her children, a small plaintive voice lost in the rustle of coconut palms.

Jimiti put a hand on Manny's shoulder.

"You know what they does call the men that could see duppy?"

Manny shook his head.

"Four eye," Jimiti said. "Not hardly any four eye anymore. Just you and me." They began to walk back up the beach. The mosquitos and no-see-ums returned and started biting. Manny hadn't noticed they had stopped.

"I will come to your house tomorrow," Jimiti said sadly. "We take care of things then."

He left Manny looking out at the sea, puzzled.

#

It rained the next day. Manny didn't drive anywhere, but waited in the kitchen for the obeah man to show up.

Jimiti came to the door well after lunch. His soaked shirt clung to his thin chest and he looked far older than he had last night. He opened a case on the table and pulled out a laptop.

He took a bracelet of rope knots and hung it off his wrist.

"What that?" G.D asked, watching the process from his wheelchair. "That thing on you hand?"

"Celtic knotwork," Jimiti said.

"Don't sound like no obeah I ever see."

"It a form of white man magic. From the English. And my spirit guide is Latino." He looked at Manny. "What the duppy doing? Raising cain?"

Manny shook his head. "Just sitting there."

Jimiti made a note on his laptop, carefully pecking at the keys.

"That a computer?" G.D asked. "How come you need a computer?"

Jimiti sighed and turned to the old man.

"I could leave, you know? I could leave you to deal with the Duppy you self. Then what? How many obeah-man you know? Where is you respect?"

G.D wheeled backwards.

"Sorry. I just... I just a little crazy right now."

Jimiti handed the old man a knotted bracelet.

"Maybe that go ease you someÉ"

"Uh-huh."

"Ébecause you a little stress out with the DuppyÉ"

"Right," Manny said.

"É and you go need to be calm, seen? We almost there."

Then Jimiti pulled a small bag out of the case and started walking around the house carefully. He stopped in front the guest room.

"The duppy here, right?" Jimiti asked.

Manny looked at G.D.

"No," they lied together.

"Nothing in there," Manny said. "Nothing?"

Jimiti looked at the door and nodded. "Okay."

They opened the door to Manny's room. Jimiti looked at the girl by the bed. She hadn't moved. She still sat exactly as Manny had first found her. G.D's left the room, chair whining.

Jimiti began to poke and prod at the apparition. He sat and studied it. Then he finished and stood up.

"I need a second," he said. He sounded tired. "Hold this, it will calm you."

Manny took the piece of rope. He sat and stared at the girl's pale skin for as long as he could. Where had G.D gone? With Jimiti? Suddenly worried he got off his bed and walked into the hallway.

Jimiti stood there waiting for him.

"You tried to keep me from that other room," he said. "I ain't stupid, you know. I could sense you had more than one duppy."

Manny looked at the guestroom door. It was ajar.

"That Caroline," he said, slowly. "My grandmother."

"She waiting for you grandfather." Jimiti put a hand on Manny's shoulder. "She there to help him die. I explain that to them."

"Die?" Manny shoved Jimiti aside and ran into the guestroom. "What you do? You and you stupid spirit stuff. You kill him!" He wailed.

The last outline of a dress faded from beside the curtains as he ran inside. The only body in the room was G.D's small frame lying peacefully on the bed.

"What you do?" Manny cried out. "What you do!" He grabbed G.D.'s hand, pushed his face into the sheets, and wept.

Jimiti knelt by him.

"For some, is time we pass on," he explained. Manny leapt up and raced into the kitchen. He called an ambulance. When he put down the phone Jimiti stood in front of him.

"I can't make you duppy leave," he said. "Only you can do this now. I am old, failing. I don't have the strength. I can barely even see her."

"Then what you even doing here? You useless," Manny snapped.

"I here to offer it to you, Manny. I know it a hard time, but I have a diary and notes. They all on that machine," Jimiti pointed at the laptop. "All my knowledge I spoke into the laptop these last few years. I hear my guides, and my gods, and they are calling for me one last time.

"Everything I have, everything I am, is now yours."

Jimiti walked out the door. He turned into Manny's garden and headed out in the rain. He walked into the

bushes past a tree.

"You go catch a death of cold," Manny shouted. He got no response.

He ran out into the rain after Jimti. But Jimti had disappeared. His footsteps ended by a large puddle of pooling water.

"Jimti left, gone for good," said a man from Manny's side. Manny spun around. A tall thin man in tails, cigar lighted despite the rain, smiled at him.

Manny heard the ambulance coming up the hill and ran back up his yard towards the house. Nothing today made sense. He was beginning to fall apart. It was as if he were standing at some sort of crossroads.

#

After the paramedics came and left, Manny threw the laptop into his car. He left the house resolving not to ever go back. And he left the van in the driveway, telling himself he would never drive it again.

He drove all the way to a point where the rocky edge of the island butted out against the ocean, not far from Magen's Bay. Here water hurled itself against the rocks, shaking the ground with booming explosions of salt water spray that perpetually hung in the air.

"I want nothing to do with spirits, or ghosts, or witch-doctors," Manny muttered.

He walked as near to the edges of the wet rocks as he dared, and flung the laptop out into the air. It arced slowly down into the foaming water and sunk.

"Please," a voice implored. "You must help."

Manny looked down at the rocks beneath him. Massive waves roiled up, swept over the boulders, and retreated. A man sat on the top of a dripping rock, the water passing right through him. He wore a suit, and glasses, and held his shoes in his right hand.

"I think I slip down into the rocks. But my son still here. Help me find him?" The man stood up and began to look around.

The next wave crested the boiling waters around the rocks, reached up into the crags, and the man disappeared. A spirit, Manny thought. Another duppy only he could see.

For a moment he stood still, then he sighed and cupped his ears to see if he could hear a child calling for help.

He heard the child crying behind him. It took only a few seconds for Manny to search through the rocks and find him. A small child, his hands cut, crying for his dad. Manny picked him up and took him back to the car.

"Where you live?" Manny asked, leaning over the back door. The child wouldn't say anything, and kept sobbing.

Manny got in the front seat. He almost jumped out of his skin to see the tall man with the cigar sitting across from him. Somehow the smoke failed to fill the inside of the car.

With a deep breath Manny started the car and turned around. He would take the child to the hospital.

As he drove he ignored the apparition in the other seat. He would not speak to it. He would not acknowledge it. He would give it no control over him.

But finally the man spoke.

"The child name Timothy. He mother waiting for him and she husband. She real anxious, you know. You won't do them no good if you take him to the hospital, because tonight all the doctor there from stateside. They won't hardly understand her when she call, and they go treat her like she dumb. You would make an easier messenger. You like to know where they live?"

Manny drove on, clenching the steering wheel. He bit his lip. Still not willing to speak, he nodded.

The tall man smiled and gave him directions, and fifteen minutes of tense silence later they pulled into a sloping concrete drive lined with palms. Manny pulled the parking brake up, and Timothy in the back seat stopped crying.

"Okay, what is it you want from me?" He asked the man next to him.

"To do things like this for me." The cigar was waved in a long gesture. "Some things little, some things big. Sometimes you go like it, other times you go hate it. But you always guiding people in this world."

A screen door banged. A thin, worried looking women peered hopefully around the edge of it at the car.

"I can't," Manny said. "I ain't right for this. What I know about helping people? Plus, I throw away that laptop already."

The man shook his head. The top of his hat poked through the ceiling of the Acura.

"Look under you seat," he said.

Manny felt around and grabbed the edge of something plastic. He pulled the laptop out and set it on his lap.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. But only because I want help people." He looked over the man, who was fading away. "But who you is?" he demanded.

The thin man smiled again.

"Most call me Eshu."

Then he was gone. And Timothy's mother was walking up to the car. From the look on her face Manny could tell she suspected something was wrong.

He took a deep breath and opened the door.

#

Later that night Manny returned to the house. Inside he wandered around, laptop in his hands.

There was no girl sitting next to his bed, or any other ghosts in his house.

Outside the crickets made their song. The wind rustled the leaves outside, and cars passed by his house on the nearby road. Manny closed the window and turned out the light in his room.

Tonight he would start to become more than just four eyes. Tonight he would become obeah.

He sat at his desk and lit a single candle.

Then he carefully cracked the laptop open and turned it on.

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Four Eyes 2004 Fantasy about Caribbean and Caribbean identity and technology,

Originally published in DAW anthology New Voices in Science Fiction

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