

Bun & Cheese: Things that bring me Joy



PLACE
AT MY TABLE
From My Table To Yours

Bun n Cheese: Things that bring me joy

Introduction:

After attending the *Look We Here* programme in early 2024 that I facilitated at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Joseph Jeffers asked me to lead a similar workshop programme with members of ASKI (Advice Support Knowledge Information), which he founded and is CEO. *Bun n Cheese: Things that bring me joy* is a series of three hour long oral history based workshops that took place at Wallington Library, Sutton, over four weeks with a group of black elders of Caribbean heritage.

Workshop participants included: Beverley Dixon, her husband, Ludlow, Carole Young, Elsie Henderson, Emerald Davis, Heather Davi, Marie Brown, Marie Wray-Williams, and Joseph. This culminated in a display and printed zine booklet produced in collaboration with participants.

They shared stories about cherished personal objects that bring them joy: a childhood dress, grandfather's war medals, a tourist souvenir, a hot comb, a suitcase 'grip', a handbag, a pen, a coal iron, and a photo from carnival in St Kitts. Reflecting on the memories embodied in these precious things participants explored through creative writing their aspirations,

journeys, struggles and resistance being Othered towards a place of grace and joy.

Their stories speak to the Caribbean diaspora, indeed global Africa: growing and schooled as colonial subjects, willing to fight and die for Empire, dreams of travelling aboard, the journey as an immigrant and the trauma of arrival, the transactional nature of the barrel culture, being born in a post-imperial Britain, being black British, returning back home to find home, and how we cook, speak, dress and dance.

There was an ethical approach towards caring for these stories in a safe space as they were developed as poetry and prose. Supporting this process included beginning each workshop session with a simple meditation exercise to empower a positive sense of creative energy. What participants produced reflects the creative writing experience they have had with Jamaican British novelist, Jacqueline Crooks, with some pieces being developed further.

Farrah Khan, from ASKI; provided workshop resources and support, and photographer, Aneesa Dawoojee, took portraits of each participant, as well as photographs of their objects. This material, and text pieces are mounted here in the display, and published in

printed zine booklet, which will be available for downloading via the A Place at my Table website - <https://www.placeatmytable.co.uk/>

We hope your experience of the display and zine brings you that same joy eating some bun and cheese.

Michael McMillan – September 2024

Bun n Cheese

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Compiled and edited by Michael McMillan – September 2024

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'When shall we share precious moments?'

(The Three Degrees)

I found my pink dress
made by mum
when I was five years old.
I remember the swish of petticoats
and the hand-stitched swags
fastened with pink rose buds
like newly popped corn.

With my future husband
standing by
I smiled and posed,
in shiny black shoes.
Camera ready
a blinding flash ricochets me
into glorious spacetime.

Peppermint candy from great
grandad's recipe
ice cream cones
pastel-coloured cars with fins
like angelfish in a turquoise sea.
And in the playground
stuck in the mud and hoola hoops
Where did I fit in?

Tea and cake at 4,
jerk chicken at 6.15
understanding patois
spoken English was the dream.
I forged my sense of self
through other people's eyes
and navigated my history
a pride that cannot be denied.

Big suits and felt hats
adverts on silk ties
pencil skirts pert and pristine.
Red eyes from Saturday night
shebeens
in smoky cellar rooms
tears and longing for Jamaica
home.

One room living day to day
sofa beds with herringbone covers
bright red carpets and orange
patterned wallpaper
lick your lips for hard-dough bread,
bun and cheese.

Sunday school gospel songs
best clothes and Easter hats
lace gloves and the smell
of my new tweed coat.
Sunday dinners around the table
taste the hot curry rice and peas.
Trips to the seaside once a year
time invested in family.

Traditions steeped
in the liquor of life
like hot pepper pickles at Christmas
mince the fruit and test the cakes
add a tip of Wray & Nephew
presents galore stacked
under Christmas trees laden
with real candles.
Radiogram blaring
from undulating vinyl's
hold the TV aerial
for the Queen's speech.

Some sixty-five years later
with memories duly stored
I fold my pink dress
and return it to mum's suitcase
and hang my precious photograph
back on the wall.

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Three little birds

Three little birds carved from the
ancient hardwood
tree of Life
transported from small island
you made your way
to the UK.

Your red John Crow eyes
laser beams
that catch my gaze
as I cross the room.

Reliving your journey
as you stare back at me
your body plump
acutely aligned
to show your best side.

Perched on your one leg
next to your mum
and dad
your younger siblings
nowhere to be found.

What you must have witnessed
in your life...
the throb of the earth
the thrill of the rain
the kisses of the sun
the artisan's hand
roughened from years of toil.

Choosing you from the discarded
solid wood offcuts
rescued from the ignominy
of the cutting-saw floor
you were lovingly crafted
by your creators
first father then passed onto son
then back to father for the final run.

Chiselled, sanded smooth
your cellulose fibres glowing
in the setting sun

warm reds and dark browns
blend into an exquisite tone.

Three little songbirds
telling my story
to a rhythm as old as time
Redemption Song.

Chapter One

Rachel paused reminiscing about the marketplace she'd travelled to by local bus on her last days in Jamaica when she first saw the toddy birds and tree. The shelf was at mother's place, only three birds remained on the toddy bird family tree, dusty and broken, its siblings long gone. She picked it up and wrapped it in last week's News Shopper, planning to rescue and restore it, but she had to get it out first.

Rachel was born in north London, St Mary's hospital, and migrated south of the border as a toddler with her mom, Pearl, dad, Clovis and older sister, Margreta. She had the usual intergenerational mother-daughter relationship with the quick to anger tradition of 'yew shuda kiss mi foot bottom' versus the English mentality of 'children are not possessions or extensions of self, but separate entities with separate thoughts and feelings', a very alien concept. When it got to the tipping point where Rachel said 'no more' and walked out the door leaving her key on the sideboard, with nowhere to go, it was the last time she called the family house her home. In her reflective moods, she thought about this taboo past that no one outside the family spoke about or saw except a couple of her closest friends. Other times, she was a breezy, happy go lucky teenager, smiling, always smiling, cheerful, bright and shining.

Mom announced that Grandma was ill, and it'd be her last chance to see her last born's children, who she'd loved from afar and Rachel's

last chance to get to know her Grandmother. Rachel's oldest sibling declined the offer, but she jumped at the chance. She had just started her serious job after several experiments which didn't stretch her considerable brain power or utilise her many talents; skipping from shop work to various support roles, she'd been threatened, patronised, discriminated against and had left one position after being chased by a resident down the street. Jobs at that time came easy in the 70s and 80s, and she had landed a job with prospects and perks, as an Admissions Clerk in a Skill Centre. She'd only been there two weeks or so before, and she was obliged to ask for six weeks off. They reluctantly agreed to keep her position open for her for four weeks without pay, but threatened a P45 if she didn't return on time. Such was how her workplace regarded quality and diligence. Mom had already bought the tickets for six weeks for Rachel's four younger sisters, so she bought hers for a four week return journey.

Chapter Two

Finally, the day arrived when the family would be leaving. Rachel went to mom's with a small suitcase packed with a few belongings, walking the twenty minutes from her bedsit in Blackheath. She found mom tipping the contents of her carefully packed case onto a bed and her loading a massive sports bag with a 20lb bag of rice, canned goods & some clothes for 'back home'. Rachel tried to object, saying that they had food in Jamaica, but was silenced with a

look. The bag was rammed shut and some of Rachel's clothes left behind. She couldn't lift the bag off the bed on her own, ruefully rubbing the angry red bruise deepening on her light brown shoulder.

The plane journey felt interminable. After the initial excitement of being the first-time and amazement at the clouds being below instead of above, tedium set in. Mom noticed one of the young men on the plane and reacquainted herself with him having apparently known his father or some such thing. Unfortunately for Rachel, a rose amongst thorns, she quickly found herself surrounded by eleven footballers, apparently they were traveling to Jamaica for an event.

Her mind clouded and all she saw was her elder sister holding her hand tightly as they listened to the roars above the valley, the racist chants and unkind sneers as they were buffeted through the supporters in red and white scarves as little children, NF slogans scrawled across their council housing estate walls.

The thick smoke upset her asthma making her even more uncomfortable. Closing her eyes, she faced another six of eight hours flight, trying to make herself invisible and block out the world, she thought about her boyfriend left in the UK. They'd met at the Leicester Square Empire. He was a white boy who knew more about JA culture than she did. He loved it and he loved her. Thinking her the most

beautiful girl in the world and vice versa.

The British Airways jumbo jet plane that winged me from the UK to the land of my people where I felt okay unaware of what was missing or where I belonged until touch down in JA.

Fear and rejection evaporated in the 35-degree heat. Rachel's shoulders dropped three inches. She touched the warm tarmac and was overcome by a sense of belonging. A hugged welcome. She absorbed black people in positions of responsibility, not orderlies or bus drivers, but pilots, police, elegant airline stewardess. She noticed the women were all light-skinned, but then being black is more than skin deep.

Mom herded her five daughters into her nephew's car. The bags were expertly stacked on the roof with rope. Winding his way around potholes as big as lakes, heart in mouth. Cousin Gee kept up a steady stream of patois, his mesmerising, beautiful rich tones reminding Rachel of King Lear she'd seen at Stratford upon Avon. Understanding every word as though he was reading Shakespeare himself, ire, vexed and many more. She took in every cadence and turn of phrase.

It was nearly pitch black when they arrived at Grandma's house. They were led by house staff to a palatial tiled floor room with two king sized beds. They gratefully settled down for the night, the three smaller ones in one bed and

older two in the other. Finally, at long last, the awaited moment when they would be together as a family and to meet grandmother for the first time was here.

Chapter Three

The days melted into one, but a few stood out. Grandma sitting on the veranda, in her big chair hugging Rachel like she'd never let go, holding her hand until it hurt making it gnarled and twisted. Small children with names like Misha, Tesha and Laisha jumped and played. Children that Grandma supported with the money mom and her siblings regularly sent home. Rachel's youngest sister chased chickens until she slipped and started crying, their poo covering her from head to foot. Watching the chicken running with no head and without hesitation eating the same chicken that evening for supper.

A few days before her departure, Rachel took the local bus to the market. Dressed in shorts and matching yellow top, she passed without a second glance. That is until she had to open her mouth as she was greeted with curiosity, jealousies mixed with suspicion from passersby. John Crow reared his head and she learnt not to speak in public if she could help it.

Moving with easy grace and confidence in the thronging masses, colourful buses blared reggae music that filling the airwaves, sellers calling out, intoxicating aromas filled the senses. A tall, elegant, rich-toned wooden tree with its beautifully

carved plump little toddy birds stood out, piquing her interest. Stepping forward, Rachel reached out and touched their John Crow red eyes. After exchanging some quietly spoken words with the seller, paying above the odds, but not minding. She happily could afford it and they needed the trade. She tucked her new acquisition under her arm, neatly wrapped in yesterday's Gleaner and carried on her way. A surprise gift for her mom. Maybe it would help heal old wounds, an undercurrent between them. And forgive the unsaid?

On the bus back to Grandma's, her mission accomplished, a heavy weight landed in her lap. Rachel was surprised to find a baby, she looked around and saw a young woman with many bags. She relaxed and smiled as the baby played with her smoothed, shoulder length, jet black hair until the woman took her baby back and without a word got off the bus. Rachel smiled; she was home, for now.

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Hot Comb

Mi remember when...mi sey...mi remember when mi first see de ole tool, de hot comb. Mi was living in Barbados. I was about five or six years old. I didn't go looking for it, but there it was. By accident mi friend ask me to come to her house next door, and her mudda was pressing her hair, de smell was like when yuh swingeing chicken feathers.

Mi get mi first hair hot comb a couple of months later when uncle Kenneth and he wife to be Delores, announced that for dem wedding dem wanted me to be a flower girl. Dem explained to mi mudda and dada dat all the family was invited. Being a flower girl, Delores said she wanted me to look pretty on de day, but there was one snag. She wanted my hair to be slightly straightened. Mudda agreed to de request. The wedding day came. Mi hair was slightly straighten after using the comb to mek a few curls. Being a girl of African descent I was born with kinky and coarse hair, what we call 'bad hair', whereas to straighten we hair like white women or Indian women, meant it was 'good hair'. My hair was thoroughly washed with aloes (aloe vera) and dried well with a towel. It was then moisturised with a mixture of coconut oil, castor oil and vaseline, and then parted into small twisted bundles before the straightening process begin. De hot iron comb was heated in a coal pot according to my hair texture. Then it was passed through my hair, pressing it with using strong brown

paper (or kitchen foil as I discovered later) to set my hair for styling.

Mi dress was a simple white dress knee length and flared off at the bottom, a pink sash around the waist, tied at the back with a massive bow pink headdress and white shoes, and topped off with a flower basket of pink flowers. All went well on de day. Food and ting was delicious, bajan style.

When mi get a bit older at secondary school, auntie Beryl bought me mi own hot comb, so I could style my own hair. But I could only do this for special occasions, like excursions (church outings), church and school sometimes. Mudda was also a special occasion person, and had long hair, which she allowed me to play with, combing and plaiting it. Some people would curse and get on bad if you accidentally burn dem.'Yuh tell mi to hold mi ears dem and yuh still burn me. Mi nah come back.'

When we moved to the North East of de island mi mek friend too quick wid girls of my age and they liked my hair and style. So dem suggested we dress up and have a gathering outside mi house wid we parents consent. I did the hair straightening. Mi hair style was de Millie Small hair style. We all wear pelpushers in bright colours. I ask mi brother to get de gramophone out to play Millie Small's 'My boy Lollipop' Wow, it was electrifying! We played it over and over. We dance, ska and wine up we waist till we get tired. Dem used to call

me 'Millie Small' because of her hair style, and we were similar ages.

When I left de island fuh de 'Motherland' de hot comb was de first little ting mi put Inna mi Valice (Bajan word for suitcase). I used de hot comb for about two years after arrival in de UK. After dat mi find a professional who did hair relaxing which was much easier. Those were de days. Been there and done dat.

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Home and Away

My sense of purpose flows from my experience of travelling from British Guiana to Britain. My sister and I left our home in Campbellville, a small suburban town in Georgetown. My reason for travelling was to support my older sister, as my father thought it was too far for her to travel on her own. However, because there was a no sibling policy at my sister's hospital my father got out the world map and found the closest psychiatric hospital to hers which was in Sussex. This meant we'd be travelling to different counties.

On the SS St Paulo, my sense of wonderment being on the ship with no sight of Land for several days at a time. My love of music kept me sane as I hummed my favorite tunes over and over, John Holt's *Help me make it through the night* and *Touch me in the morning* and Al Green's *How can you mend a broken heart*, whilst trying to drum out the smell of red wine and boiled cabbage that came from below deck. The horror of having to eat the meals was even more distressing.

We arrived on Wednesday 1st October 1958 at Southampton port. It was a frosty and rainy afternoon, and the sky was grey and cloudy. Feeling the change in temperature, I asked myself 'Where is the sun?' It was as if it had fallen out of the sky. I was expecting it to be cold but didn't imagine in my wildest dreams that it would be so cold. We spent the first night in a hotel arranged for us by the British

Council, where I thought I would die because of the excruciating cold. Back home, we were told that the streets of England were paved with gold, but now, I began to question the wisdom of this journey.

There was no relief from the cold room, the supper they offered us was below substandard, and we went to bed feeling hungry, which only added to our sense of panic. My father had given us our return fares, 'If it doesn't work out come back home'. I remember saying to my sister in the middle of the night that I wanted to go home, and she immediately said, '...and what would he say to us now?' I said, 'He would say its character building'. It made us both laugh which cheered us up a bit, so we got into one of the single beds to keep each other warm and fell asleep. In the morning, we felt less distressed.

We went down to the restaurant for breakfast, which consisted of toast, bacon, eggs, and a cup of coffee. We then went back upstairs and got ourselves ready to be escorted by the British Council agent on a sightseeing tour to see places like the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey, and a few others. The agent was very impersonal, emotionally vacant and walked so quickly that I was felt I was running behind. He turned to us and said, 'Could you walk up, or we will not be able to cover everything I planned to show you'. Then the inevitable happened, we arrived back at the hotel, collected our belongings, and then the

nightmare began for me. When we arrived at Victoria Station, I had to say goodbye to my sister which was one of the most, if not the most, painful experiences of my life, before leaving her to travel by train to Graylingwell Hospital where I was to embark on a Psychiatric Nurse Training course.

When I arrived at Chichester Station the platform swarmed with white people and there was no one who looked like me. Then suddenly as if by magic they all disappeared, and I was left staring at the many train lines. I had never seen train lines like these before. I thought to myself, 'How am I going to get across to the other side where I could see the exit to the street?'

I was wearing a two-piece suit, which I had made myself from light blue Mohair material. The skirt was pencil bottom, very fashionable at the time, a pillow box hat, white gloves and yellow Cuban heel shoes. Sadly, my outfit was woefully inadequate for that time of year and as I shivered with being extremely cold. I thought the only way to get across to the other side was by hitching up my skirt and jumping down on the rails. I would have to take my grip (suitcase) with all my clothes that I had made in the style that was popular back home, also some flannelette pyjamas and other underwear first, and then come back for my vanity case that had all my toiletries.

Then I heard a white man call out, 'Miss, Miss! What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm trying to get to the other side'. I could see him trying not to

laugh, but he had a pinched expression on his face. He was dressed in a pin striped suit and bowler hat, waving an umbrella. 'Not like that, you will kill your bloody self'. He took my suitcase, and without saying another word, took me up the stairs and across to the other side where I could see someone with a badge with my name waiting.

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Have bag will Travel: Journey of a migrating family through a bag

My eldest sister teases me, 'You have it H, we all know how much you love bags- you're the only person I know who carries around a bag within a bag', she chides. I had to agree but couldn't resist teasing her back about her love of shoes. She has over seventy pairs. We are in the family home in North London sorting through the remains of our mother's clothes, who recently died. And so, this is how the prized handbag came into my possession.

However, the journey of the handbag began back in 1950's in a small village in the heart of the 'Bajan' countryside. My aunty Lorraine, first daughter of the family of seven girls, decided that she had had enough of 'slaving for' families on the near-by Drax Hall plantation, and so 'she up she -self and leave' for America. Leaving the family and she only daughter Margaret, in the care of her elderly mother she set sail to join her half-brother Flavin in the USA. Clutching a badly faded black and white photo aunty Lorraine, arrived in Brooklyn, New York, where she stayed for the rest of her life, only ever visiting 'she home' on the last day of her visits to Barbados.

Aunty Lorraine, a beautiful woman with smooth skin and large 'bug' eyes had a big personality to match. She was small of stature, as if rooted to the ground and took up a lot of space. I remember her

having very little to say, but with a raucous laugh, which shook the whole house and lit up her face when she laughed. Unfortunately, this did not often happen. I often wondered what gave her the courage, the guts to up and leave.

Looking back now, I can see there were issues between her and her mother, my grannie. For one, grannie always referred to her as 'Miss Thomas' never by her actual name. Why was this I never knew as us children were told firmly, 'Don't meddle in big people business, that don't concern you.'

My grandmother, Mrs Mosely, the matriarch of the family ruled with an iron-rod. Left alone, with daughters to raise and many acres of land to work, she took no nonsense. A stalwart of the community, she commanded the highest respect and affection from those around her. To us children, she was the centre of our world, a gifted storyteller, funny with an acute sense of timing, which she used in telling us stories, frightened us and keeping us awake at night. Standing on a ridge, hands akimbo, I can still remember her telling cane cutters, 'Don't mess with me, if you don't give me a fair price for cutting me cane, you'll never work in this valley' again'.

There is little doubt that the first immigrant women struggled to find work, places to live and with leaving their own children behind. They toiled from dawn to dusk, often in poorly paid jobs, in abusive households as nurse maids, nannies and janitors to white American

families. It is only now, in retrospect that their daily plight is being recognised. The irony of leaving their own children whilst, looking after other people's children, not lost on them.

Guilt upon guilt frustrated their lives but, folks back home perceived them as living lives of luxury. One way of assuaging this guilt, was by sending parcels home. Hence, the barrels of worn clothes (fur-lined winter clothes) old towels, old sheets and tinned foodstuff like corn-beef, spam and green peas, made its way to those left behind. The arrival of the 'barrel' heralded in a time of great excitement, when families gathered to see what 'goodies' have arrived.

The excitement was palpable. Everyone related turned up to witness the piercing opening of the barrel- everyone grabbing what they could, ignoring size, condition, fit or finesse. One year, I remembered Aunty Lorraine sent a leg of ham, but grannie, the *gatekeeper of barrels*, kept the barrel too long before opening it, only to find the ham 'had gone off' and an infestation of maggots devouring everything in sight.

Another year the handbag arrived, discreetly wrapped in old worn clothes and buried deep in the core of the barrel belying its beauty, elegance and status symbol. The handbag, the pocketbook, the purse, the pouch known, by yet another name was mother's pride and joy.

Pyramid shape and beige in colour. Not unlike the bags carried by Grace Kelly and Jackie Onassis, movie stars of the day. A firm base standing on four solid notches enclosed in a rigid golden frame. The bag is made up of two layers, a hard transparent outer coat of plastic, similar to that used to cover furniture in West Indian homes; and an inner layer of soft delicately folded material.

At the centre of the fold there sits an intricate embroidery of gold and silver threads expertly interwoven to form what could only be describe as a peacock tail or an elaborate flamingo fan. Strategically placed throughout the embroidery, golden eyes run the full gauntlet on the front of the bag. The handle sits aloft the top and closes the bag with 'kissing locks' made up of two golden balls which make a snapping sound when secure. Cold and slippery, the bag makes a squeaky sound when touched. Smelling of the past, a musty old smell of cobwebs and dust the bag embodies the smell of those whose hands it has passed through.

Originally, carried by men to hold small change, but later women to hold personal belongings, the handbag is said to represent the 'womb' hence the carrier of life itself. For women, the handbag is judged as being mysterious carriers of secrets, lies and 'women-things' and even today, men still talk of 'Ladies handbags' never to be entered into without they permission.

In 1960, the bag left Barbados, on the arms of mother to travel to England, never to return. Used sparingly, on a once-a-week outing, it accessorised her 'Sunday best' as she made her way to church. And I am left to wonder to speculate, 'What secrets does it hold; what's being said and what's left untold?'

© Heather Davi - 2024



Gifted Pen

I have always loved to write, but for weeks now, my words has abandoned me. The sadness I felt, rooted in a loss I could not describe, that had silenced my creativity. Every time I picked or looked at my gifted pen I remain empty, as if mocking my inability to express my storm within me. Today, though I felt something different, I traced my thoughts remembering my class teacher, Mrs Agness's voice, 'Hol de pen with yu tum and index finga'. I struggled to form my alphabet letters, and was constantly being hit on my fingers to hold my pen correctly according to Mrs Agness.

I could hear Mrs Agness's foot steps, as this was her custom walking up and down the class room in between the rows of the desks looking at pupil's work and how they held their pens. Thoughts came back and mirrored my emotions of loneliness and sorrow that had wrapped itself around my heart. I had held back every tear, until Mrs Agness suddenly came to an abrupt haul at my desk. Two steps, she was behind me as her hand unfolded from behind her and out came a long wooden ruler that stretched out in front of her, for me to see. I gave a little jump and straightened up, my heart was beating so fast that I think it would have come out of my chest. The hand that I held my pen in was also shaking violently, and to stop Mrs Agness from seeing it, and with the help of my other hand, I managed to hold it down on to the desk.

Mrs Agness was a tall but stocky built person, with solid broad shoulders. You could tell that she had long straight black hair, because with one big twisted plait her hair fell back and formed in a bun at the back of her head. Speaking clear and confident speaky spokey English gave her authority, so whatever she said was accepted. There was no messing around or any room for mistakes. Her class was regimental in order and everyone was afraid of her.

'Is wah yu have yah so'. She barked. Using the ruler to hit me on my fingers, I quickly move my hand out of the way still holding my pen. 'Yu Ms and Bs are not in line'. The whole class was learning to write their names. Some children held their pens awkwardly, with tongues peeking out as they concentrated, while others work with ease. Every desk was filled with the quiet sound of scratching lead. While others erased what mistakes they have on paper, determined to get it just right before Mrs Agness saw it. 'Write let mi si', she commanded. I held my pen in the middle of the pen as if on its side, showing the length of the nib. As I was about to write my 'M' another stroke of the ruler connect to my fingers. 'Grip de pen between yu tum and index finga'. I was about six years old at the time, and so I didn't know where my index finger was. I began to cry with tears streaming down my face and before I know it, another stroke of the ruler came down on my fingers again, but this time there were no tears. It seemed I had built an intense feelings of hate and dislike towards Mrs

Agness. I decided from now on, that anything she said, or should she hit be again, it would not affect me any more. 'Dis is de last time mi ago tel yu Brown'. Her voice changed from soft and relaxed to firm, aggressive and angry.

She grabbed hold of my hand, placing her hand over mine and at the same time holding the pen within the line of the exercise book to demonstrate her instructions. I didn't feel I could trust mama and papa to be on my side, letting them know what was happening to me and how I felt, since I knew what they would say. 'Listen to wah yu teacher a tel yu, yu deya fi learn'.

The stinging pain served as a constant reminder to grip the pen upright with a slight angle, to shape each letter with precision. These moments were tough, but they become a part of my learning experience pushing me to perfect my handwriting. Looking back I will never forget, the mixture of frustration, anger and determination that shaped my writing and my resilience too.

© Marie Brown - 2024



Coal Iron Burns

George was awakened by the early morning dirge of the voice of Ras Cudjoe next door. *Better Must Come One Day*, which was the song by Delroy Wilson since the People's National Party (PNP) won the general election on February 22nd, 1972. Where is the better he pondered? Lately, he had been in a foul mood with palpitations of his heart string, clutching and drinking more frequently glasses of Johnny Walker Black Whisky and puffing on Craven A cigarettes which were in short supply. Even his slim, slender body was becoming a bit zigzag. He had got used to being called 'storm' by some of his staff and rather liked that reference to how fast he could move. The members of his family realised how less jovial he had become. His white English wife, Kathy, wondered why she left England to come to Jamaica. She hated the sun that scorched her skin and not ignoring her heavily pregnant body which also added to the discomfort she was experiencing. His dear mother who couldn't wait to return to the 'Big Apple'- New York and Gwendolyn his maid, who he was 'eyeing up' every opportunity he got. She was chubby, innocent and always smiling nervously. She was always eager to meet his domestic requests, except for the one thing she kept from him, and he was convinced that Ras Cudjoe had his name branded on it.

'Hm, idiot rasta bwoy. De only ting him good fuh is fi chop wood, burn coal all night and smoke ganja.' It's funny but his mother seemed to like

him and encouraged Gwendolyn to talk to him.

Kissing his teeth with vigour he was interrupted by the pleading voice of Gwendolyn. 'Mrs G, ah can't find the Sunbeam electric iron yu bring from 'Merica de odder day.'

'Oh Gwendolyn, I meant to have a word with you about the new ironing arrangements'. When Gwendolyn heard her tone of voice, typical middle-class Jamaican, talking through her nose like she had catarrh and her lack of eye-contact, she knew that something was coming, but she didn't expect to be told that as of next week she would have to use the coal iron to iron out the family's attire.

'What yuh mean mam? Mi never ever had de opportunity fi use ah coal iron even when I was ah child. Where mi come from in Black River, St Elizabeth was de first place inna Jamaica to get electricity. Mi granny did tell me 'bout di coal iron, but after she get electricity she did buy a Morphy Richards electric iron downtown, and she did use her previous coal irons to kotch de doors open in her cottage.'

Responding without being convinced, 'Well my dear, this government has brought all of this austerity nonsense on us. You always play the radio and I'm sure that you heard about the strikes by JPS (Jamaica Public Service)'. Oh yes, she had heard the term load shedding, information regarding the pending strike by JPS workers, the effect of austerity on energy

and the current cost of living. Strikes were occurring which was having a destabilising effect on Jamaica. Most workers were demanding higher wages to help cope with increased prices. The last time George's mum went to the supermarket she had to buy goods that she didn't need, some syrup in order for her to get rice. Marrying of the goods was happening on a daily basis.

Desperately, Gwendolyn waited for the coast to be clear. She needed to escape and the only person who would understand her plight was Ras Cudjoe. She climbed over the barbed-wire fence with little or no fear of her frock being ripped. There she saw Ras Cudjoe cleaning his teeth with chew stick, gleaming white as ever. He quickly wiped the froth from his mouth and moved towards her.

'I can't wait fi get mi visa fi go a foreign. From what mi know it gwine be very soon.' Ras Cudjoe held her arm gently and told her to remain calm and patient because Jah will work out 'everything'. However, he hastened to add that him nuh like dem Babylon country like England and America.

Outside they stood, taking refuge under the cool mango tree with its green unfit mangos hanging as if waiting to be picked. Sterling Castle was one of the largest and most historically and architecturally important castles in Scotland. Now today, Sterling Castle, Red Hills, Jamaica, bears some resemblance to the one in Scotland. Sterling Castle was known far and wide for

its damp and often cold weather where rain fell intermittently, and your clothes covered with mildew and shoes dry-rot. The rain did not compensate for the shortage of water for domestic use. The area was peaceful and undisturbed. The tranquil air made the place welcoming. Especially if you worked on the plains in the capital, where the sun scorched your skin and drinking iced water was a regular occurrence. Its steep hills, winding, narrow weed filled roads was a threat to commuters on public transport and pedestrians causing both to pause regularly when having to make a journey. With three hundred metres above the sea proved to be an advantage, because with such an elevation the view was breathtaking.

The clear view was dotted with smoke from the Esso Oil refinery and the Wray and Nephew distillery. At nights, twinkling lights formed a kaleidoscope of colours from vehicles, crawling like ants heading home. The hills in all its shapes and forms did not block the view entirely. In fact, it helped to enhance the picturesque red rich soil, green lush trees with trunks like the legs of an elephant with geometric shapes. The precipice that lied adjacent to many of the parochial roads gave that feeling of fear, especially at nights with the absence of street-lights, relying heavily on the 'peni wali' (fire flies) that turned on and off their lights independently.

People went to their beds early, but it was then that the nocturnal

creatures came alive. The sounds of wide-eyed owls gurgling from their throats, crickets screeching non-stop and dogs howling in harmony made up the night choir of the constituency of East Rural St. Andrew. This once sleepy little place lent to basking quietly without fear of intrusion.

The rising cost of living, the threat of communism, devaluation of the dollar, difficulties procuring basic food items and crime forced many of the middle-classes to migrate, abandoning their homes and businesses, taking their families to Miami, where the Prime Minister advised them that five flights a day leave Jamaica, and they should feel free to go. A new generation resulted where they were seeking distance from the hustle and bustle and beginning to purchase prime property for almost next to nothing.

Today, Ras Cudjoe was pleased that Gwendolyn had come over to see him. He could see that she was becoming anxious about using the coal iron. He wanted to pacify her and give her a lesson in ironing with coal and using a coal pot. He related the story of the Chinese who brought the coal iron to Jamaica. At one time they called it the 'sad' iron and it was made of metal.

'Well, it making me sad fi true' she whispered under her breath. In his philosophical manner he demonstrated and explained how to grip the iron with a pad or thick rag, trying to remember that the handle would become as hot as the rest of the iron. He showed her

his coal stove that belonged to his granny when he was a boy. Jokingly, he enquired if she knew what it was and for the first time that day she gave a smile. The smile that he loved and the smile that caused both their eyes to glow. He held up the heavy cast-iron coal pot and said what needed to be done like a list of instructions, 'Place de coals in de basin-like top, an de ash falls through ah grill into de hollow floor. When de coal light an piping hot, then do wey mi did tell yuh earlier'. She grunted and was still filled with doubt, confusion and lack of enthusiasm.

Just next door she could hear Mrs G and her daughter-in-law, Kathy frantically calling her. Gwendolyn did not climb over the fence this time, but walked through the iron ornate gate. On arrival she noticed that Mr George was also present, and they were not looking pleased at all.

'And where have you been all day they chanted'?

'Ras Cudjoe was showing mi how fi use the coal iron, so mi was nex' door'

They looked at each other and went their separate ways. Gwendolyn was losing her patience with all of them, and at night all she could dream about was New York and the postcards she received from time to time from her relatives abroad. The bright lights from the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge were amazing. 'America pretty fi true,

they must be anxiously awaiting mi arrival', she chuckled.

'America here I come as the words of Stevie Wonder echoed in her ears 'Sign, sealed delivered I'm yours'.

Nearly asleep, that night she heard an all too familiar voice whispering

'Open de door an let mi in'. No way she thought to herself.' Why him nuh go look him wife and leave mi alone'. She pretended as if she was asleep and forced some heavy snores immediately hoping to distract him. The flip-flop sound of his slippers told her that he had given up, walking away reluctantly.

The following morning, it was as if nothing had happened as she served the family their breakfast, and proceeded to do some washing in order to catch the early morning sun. As far back as she could remember, it rained at one o'clock, everyday in Sterling Castle.

Today was going to be her big day. She knew she had to face the challenge ahead. It was Wednesday and Wednesdays were always the days for ironing. Ras Cudjoe promised her the day before that he would watch her handling the iron, but he would light the coal for her. For this she was grateful.

Attempting to balance the iron on the coal was not proving as difficult as Gwendolyn had imagined. Mrs G handed her four coal irons and instructed her to use them all. She sat down and watched the sparks

from the coal dancing as it changed colour. 'Let me give it two more minutes', she thought to herself. Just as she was about to lift the coal iron and wipe it with a wet cloth, she felt the familiar hand of George embracing her.

'Ah going bun yu up if you nuh lef me. Yu nuh see mi a hole hot iron'. The nagging voice of his mother in the background brought the altercation to an end.

'Thank de Laud', this is a narrow escape she moaned nervously. She decided to try ironing Mr George shirt weh him wear out every Saturday when him a go meet him fren dem. Tilting her head and hands from side to side she started to press. It was not a smooth flowing electric iron press. In fact, the iron felt rough rubbing against the shirt. She tried doing it to the rhythm of the song 'Stop that train I wanna get off, my baby she's leaving me now' that was coming from the radio on the buffet. She struggled and just about managed with the other pieces of attire that she was presented with. One thing for sure was that this arrangement would not be permanent. She desperately needed to find a way out, sooner rather than later.

It did not take long for Mrs Gibson to start her social climbing activities, and she involved her entire family. She had forced herself on the board of this new women's group founded by the Prime Minister's wife. The rights of women and children she claimed has always meant so much to her. Even George could not afford to be

gullible this time. He knew that his mother thrived on fame and popularity.

Ras Cudjoe had not been seen for the past week or so, and Gwendolyn had to admit to herself that she was missing him. It was mating season, and the dogs were busy mating and making merry, but through all the commotion she could hear Ras Cudjoe's serenading voice like that of Derrick Harriott singing, 'Stop that train I wanna get off, my baby she is leaving me now'. He repeated the words to the song three times until his voice was hoarse. She was elated. He was back.

Morning couldn't come fast enough. George Gibson was awake viewing his mansion and examining his mother's flower pots, dug up crotons and overturned garbage. The dogs had a good time. Here he was wishing that he and Kathy were having a good time too – mating. Over by Ras Cudjoe in no time Gwendolyn sat on Ras Cudjoe's bed excited to cast her eyes upon him again.

'So how comes yu never tell mi sey yu a go weh', she enquired. 'Well mi did get a call from mi boss Mr Chung, telling mi seh mi fi go look fi him brother inna Santa Cruz and get some money from him fi pay di bills and buy food fi myself. Remember seh him lef' mi in charge a di house, because him gone ah Miami fi live. Him hate dis ah government ya'.

'So when him ah come back?', she blurted. 'Mi nuh know, but him sey

him ah go work up a visa fi mi come a foreign to be the gardener at him new split level mansion. Him seh Miss Chung and de pickney dem really miss me'.

'But tink yu never like foreign' Gwendolyn muttered. 'Jah will take care a everything as he displayed a playful grin.

Sleepless nights, agitation, her temper like a volcano, ready to explode was what Gwendolyn was experiencing. Not knowing where to turn, on the twelfth night she devised a plan that would help her overcome this despair. A plan unknown to anyone else but herself. Instantly, the words of the Dub poet Mutabaruka came to mind 'Every man have a plan...'. .

What transpired over a week ago was no joke. The first person to alert her was Mrs G. She shoved her gown made of polyester mixed with crimplene and adorned with sequins under Gwendolyn's nose. 'See the damage you have done madam. My gown that I wanted to wear to the dinner party was totally destroyed. The burns resemble fried crispy bacon forcing me to wear the one that they have seen me in already'. Gwendolyn found it difficult to defend herself and listened.

Later that day she found out that the whole family's attire was destroyed in some way. Mr George's long sleeved rayon shirt looked like the action taken by the stray puppy who came unexpectedly one night and never returned to his former home further

down the road. He chewed everything making them threadbare. Kathy's 'going out' maternity dress with its 'peter pan' collar hanging off was the only thing that was a blessing. She had confided in Gwendolyn how much she hated these social events and was literally sick each time she found out that she had to attend them. One day out of the blue she thanked Gwendolyn privately for destroying her dress.

With the plan formulated in her mind, she rubbed her palms together and uttered yes, yes, yes. As soon as she heard the revving of the car engine, she knew that the house would be empty except for Kathy who was always curled up in bed unaware of what was going on. She didn't have to search for the Sunbeam electric iron. It was hidden in the trunk at the foot of the bed. She lifted the lid and took it out gently. She stroked it like it was a person and headed towards the laundry room. Plugging it in a little gash occurred and she proceeded to iron the Gibson's clothes. Gliding and sliding across the fabric, she hummed to the tune on the radio 'If you only know the blessing that salvation bring'.

To her surprise she heard the familiar sound of Mrs Gibson's Ford escort coming up the driveway. She hastily unplugged the iron, not bothering to allow it to cool, dipped it in cold water, wiping it off, placing it in the box and shoving it back in the bed trunk. This happened on several occasions and for several months.

One Thursday morning Mrs Gibson approached her with a wide smile. 'I see that you are doing much better now with the coal iron. I told you that practise makes perfect'. Gwendolyn shook her head, giving a sheepish smile.

The Christmas spirit was in the air. Carols blasting from the radio, ruby, red sorrel soaking in the yabba pot, fruits drenched in Wray and Nephew rum and the Christmas tree covered in tinsel, a white-faced Santa Claus cut-out grinning from the top of the tree and Mrs Gibson worrying where she could purchase a star to complete the scene. Gwendolyn had to admit to herself how much she liked the Christmas season, but she couldn't express that to Ras Cudjoe, convinced that Christmas was the white man festival and chanted 'fire bun' three times then spat.

Washing up the plates and scouring the dutch pot one evening, she felt a heavy arm around her and someone trying to nibble her ears. 'A weh diyu tink yu a do' she exploded.

'What do you mean' George screeched. 'You have burnt several of my best shirts that mother brought from the USA. I need to be compensated for all this damage that you have created.' She looked at him scornfully and full of fright. He grabbed her trying to lead her to the maid's quarters. Planting a kiss on her dry lips, opening the top button of her blouse he thought he was in heaven. She was nowhere near heaven with him. She punched him in his chest and tried

to run, she stumbled unaware that Mrs G was watching them with her four eyes as her twitching which she thought was under control returned immediately, urine running like a stream cascading her legs, thinking that history was repeating itself when she remembered her dear husband, Sylvan Gibson, who fathered the child of her very first helper and eloped with her.

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My Grandfather's Medals

As I reflect on life here in England, holding replicas of First World War (WW1) medals, I think about my grandfather, Oscar Dixon, who received medals like these at the end of WW1. I am smiling, because he survived the Great War, and most significantly I am here.

His story begins long before I was born in Jamaica. As a young man, my grandfather would have been doing what most men of his age did; running around Jamaica and enjoying life in the sunshine. He would be aware of world events arriving in the country, but probably not how this would have an impact on his ambitions and future.

One piece of news he received, was about the outbreak of the WW1 in 1914 in Europe. The British military had many losses. Jamaica, like Ghana, Nigeria and India, as British colonies, were obvious places to recruit eager young men for the war effort. There was already an army on the island. In May 1915, the British government announced that contingents from Jamaica and all the West Indies would be accepted for the war effort. In October, it was declared that a corps had been formed and would be named The British West Indies Regiment (BWIR). This army's formation was King George V's personal decision, who wanted the British colonies, that he was head of, to fight for King and country. At first, the British war office, because of racist attitudes, did not want anyone from foreign colonies to

fight alongside their soldiers. It was only when the King personally intervened, that they allowed soldiers from the Caribbean to volunteer and enlist.

As a patriotic loyal colonial subject, my grandfather bravely volunteered. Through my research, I found that on 31ST May 1917, he travelled from Jamaica on the HMT Briton May and arrived in Brest, France, on 18 June 1917. Once in Europe, he played his part in the war effort, but the BWIR were initially kept in the background and ordered to transport weapons, guard captured soldiers, maintain the latrines and digging trenches. These were degrading menial tasks for proud patriotic men. They were also not given weapons and allowed to fight, because the British War Office did not want a person of colour from the West Indies shooting a white man, even if he was the enemy. This must have been very disappointing for my grandfather.

After what must have been a traumatic experience at the end of the war, my grandfather returned to Jamaica. He subsequently, got married and had a son, my father Hoffman Dixon, who later got married and had me, Ludlow Dixon.

This was when the good times soon began from then with my grandfather. I have extremely strong and joyous memories of this time as a young child. We were able to share laughter, love, and joy during our time together in Jamaica. I didn't see much of him during the week as he worked irregular hours delivering timber, but

at the weekends, my mental clock knew this was the day and time that we would be spending together. I had no idea how to read a clock or work out what day it was, but instincts took over, and after waking up, I would without being told to do so, get my shoes on, then be on the way to his plot of land in Clarendon and the house of fun. Once there, it was a time of great enjoyment and laughter until it was time to return to Kingston.

Woe betides anyone who chose to interrupt our fun and games together. He would allow a break in our merriment for lunch to be served on the dining table. However, once lunch was laid out, the dining room had to be vacated so that we could have our private meal together. I can still remember the spices and peppers laid out on the table. My granddad loved his hot peppers, but because of their taste I was only allowed to smell them in their jars along with the pickles and spices. The seasoned meats, rice and peas, avocado's, fruit etc. still make my mouth water. This was me and my granddad's day. The meal would be accompanied with white rum.

My grandfather died while I still lived in Jamaica and was buried with his war medals pinned to his suit. These replica Victory and Service medals which I hold, fill me with pride when I think of the brave sacrifice he made as a young man, to travel and fight in WW1 on the battlefields of Europe. After the war ended, my grandfather returned to Jamaica limping from frostbite. I wonder if he suffered from what

people call today, post-traumatic stress disorder. Maybe this is why he never talked about his experience during WWI, and I never asked him. However, this did not stop him devoting his time to my happiness in life as a small boy, living on a beautiful island in the Caribbean.

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I am we are

Born in the UK, I was adopted at three years old by two extraordinary people from St Kitts & Nevis. From five to eleven, we travelled regularly to St Kitts, where its culture and warmth had a significant impact on my childhood development.

My dance journey began in Birmingham at seven, spurred by my mother's desire to nurture my creative spirit. From my very first lesson, I felt an undeniable connection to dance. What started as a Saturday morning escape soon became a genuine commitment, with classes expanding three or four times a week. However, the shadow of bullying during my secondary school years led me to step away from the dance floor. Yet, as the saying goes, a true passion never fades. I

It was the 1970s, it was disco, tight jeans and tank tops, and I found my way back to dance, reigniting a flame that had long been dimmed. With the release of the 1977 film, *Saturday Night Fever*, disco went mainstream, and by 1980, I found myself in Leicester, embarking on a dance degree at Leicester Polytechnic. Three years later, I was travelling the globe as a dancer with Caribbean Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean visiting 47 countries. Seizing opportunities in an industry, which at the time had few male dancers, I worked with Next fashion, Pat Keeling and Liz Spokes modelling agencies, performed at the Royal Albert Hall:

seizing opportunities in an industry that, at the time, had few male dancers. This unique position allowed me to select my work, although I often noticed that companies frequently included only one dancer of colour. These harsh realities, injuries and becoming 28 ended my global trotting adventure in dance.

I was compelled to pivot towards the voluntary sector, and in 2012, I founded ASKI (Advice Support Knowledge Information) a registered charity, after recognising that older individuals from the Black and Brown communities (global majority) were underserved. Having previously navigated various charitable organisations, I observed a glaring absence of culturally sensitive services tailored to diverse needs—an oversight I was determined to rectify.

Throughout my journey, I have been fuelled by a desire to confront injustice, primarily when it manifests through the lens of race. The stark reality of frequent marginalisation faced by specific communities ignited my passion for fostering an inclusive and equitable society.

One of my core missions has been to harness the power of dance to combat social isolation among older adults. While many organisations offered seated dance classes, I soon realised that genuine joy was often needed among participants. This revelation inspired me to shift from a traditional medicalised exercise model to a more expressive and

creative approach. I recognised that many individuals in my classes were grappling with mental health challenges, dementia, Parkinson's, and various other conditions. By integrating creative dance into our practices at ASKI, I witnessed a transformation—participants grew happier, attended more sessions, forged friendships, and began to share their stories. Through arts-based activities, including creative writing, I catch glimpses of the deep-seated traumas borne by individuals from the global majority. Often unrecognised, these traumas can echo through generations, impacting their children as well.

As CEO of ASKI, I also have the privilege of working with older men of colour. I seek to change the disheartening reality of the stark under-representation of older individuals, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, in the dance community. My goal is to cultivate community dance that champions inclusivity and activism.

During our dance sessions, we engage in meaningful conversations and workshops that tackle social justice and equality. I use movement to allow participants to express shared experiences, challenging societal norms in the process. By bringing together older black and brown individuals, I strive to create a nurturing and inclusive environment where every voice is cherished. Together, we embark on a journey of movement, rhythm, and expression, celebrating each person's unique qualities and experiences. Through our collective

practice, we weave together beautiful choreography, fostering a sense of community and empowerment that resonates far beyond the dance floor.

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BUN N CHEESE

THINGS THAT BRING ME JOY

An exhibition based on a short workshop project in Autumn 2024, led by artist/writer/academic, Michael McMillan, with older black folks exploring the things that bring them joy in a Black British cultural context. Michael will involve older black folks exploring the things that bring them joy in a black british cultural context.

More information: placeatmytable@aol.com



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