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Abstract

When I saw my face on a body no more than two feet long, pumping its legs and crawling towards me, I knew the depths of their hatred: nobody cared enough about me to tell me. It had reached for my leg. I watched it reach for my knee in an effort to stand. I froze. At that moment Miss Cecilly, the dried up one, rushed into the dark gallery and snatched it up. God is good. I let myself out. Nobody should have me for a father.

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THE BABY FATHER

When I saw my face on a body no more than two feet long, pumping its legs and crawling towards me, I knew the depths of their hatred: nobody cared enough about me to tell me. It had reached for my leg. I watched it reach for my knee in an effort to stand. I froze. At that moment Miss Cecilly, the dried up one, rushed into the dark gallery and snatched it up. God is good. I let myself out. Nobody should have me for a father.

I walked down the paved path through the garden formerly called the ‘rose garden’, to the gate. Once upon a time those rose plants were so lush and vibrant, Della complained that they were sucking away her air, and more, messing with her hair as she walked by, pulling apart her bee-hive which she had so carefully constructed. She believed in beauty and particularly hers. You actually saw no more of Della’s skin than of any other girl her age, perhaps less for when the family went out, it was to the Assemblies of God down the road and they tended to cover more than any other church women. No visible flesh or skin, but no cloth could hide the tightly sculptured form and Della knew it. We couldn’t have that along with the mangoes going down to Pastor Henry. That is why we targeted her as the first. If I failed, there were others to do the job. And if she was impenetrable, there were two other sisters to try to humiliate.

I passed through the gate, heard the click behind me and moved on to the almond tree. It would be nice if somebody hearing the gate click, bothered to open one set of the jalousies and peep at my departing back. I would feel real. But the gallery was shut up tight like the angry lips of the black-skinned old woman, Della’s grandmother.

How did I come to be back in that gallery? In that moment of retreat, I couldn’t answer that. I wouldn’t know then what was real. Even leaning my head against the stout trunk of the almond tree could not bring me back to normalcy and reality for I was wandering off in a trance, still in that angry tight-mouthed gallery. Somebody had bitten a star apple, sucked it dry and flung it near to the almond tree. This was a long ago thing for the shell was as crystallised as a coconut shell. It was into this dried up star apple that I crawled on all fours like the being I had encountered in Miss Cecilly’s gallery.

Today a dour helper had let me in. In those days, laughter of any one of those gay sisters was what opened the door to me and there would be a loud call for Della for all knew that she was the purpose of my visit. They would close the door which led to the gallery from the rest of the house, and Della and I would be left alone with the jalousies closed as they were today.

It was really easy, too easy to win that bet. Della had stopped resisting. I had worn her down with my explorations and got her to want more than my hands. Everyone must have known what was happening, for we were unusually quiet. I knew how to quiet her little moans. And the smell of us, so pungent! How could they not have smelled that? Why didn't that old shrivelled-lipped woman in whose mouth I am now trapped just push the door and stop us?

I was not ready to marry. I had no objections to marrying Della if marriage meant days and nights of what we had been doing in the gallery. I am not heartless: I was sad, sad, saddened by the turn of events. The fellows were supportive. I didn't need to tell them. Junior just saw me sad and offered, 'you don't want to throw away your life for a bit of pleasure, you know'. And Nat did admit that to bet on such things was carrying things a bit far. Neville quizzed me: 'did you ever tell Della that you had given up Precious?' No I had not, which was true but I doubted that Della even knew or knew of Precious. They concluded it was Della's fault for she knew I was attached to somebody else.

Those three girls were new in the area. They were from Kingston and thought to know about things. Their parents were separated or dead or something and they had come to stay with their grandmother whom we disliked for no other reason than that she had called the police on us while we were taking her mangoes. We, who were the hottest dudes in the area, were mortified and humiliated by this shrivel-mouthed old woman. Call police for mangoes! We would steal her precious granddaughters to spite her and whom would she call then?

The evening I not only scored but left with a nice Julie mango, I was not only hailed as a hero but raised to another level: They rolled me my first spliff. I should have been happy with this and given up the game, but my hormones were pushing me on, my body could not resist the memories and I went back and back until the shrivelled one even knew my name and seemed to give permission for our meetings; until Della and I were holding hands in public and intimate enough for her to take the cigarette out of my mouth 'for it could give me cancer'. If I hadn't been so greedy and kept going back, I doubt that Della would have felt comfortable enough to tell me why she felt something had gone wrong. We had reached the stage where we were walking out together and discussing issues, one of them being her condition and what could be done about it.

I had got the scholarship that was waiting for me in the wings. Marriage and fatherhood sounded to this twenty-year-old like a trip to Mars. How about doing away with it? Wasn't that what people did? That's what the fellows said and they knew a doctor and knowing of my lack of funds and the need for same to buy the necessities of a new geographic space, pooled together to make the doctor's fee but when I went to meet Della at the agreed place, there was no Della. It is true that she had told me that she was embarrassed by this picking up of collection by my friends; that her condition was her business and she would see to it. I did not know her well enough to know what resources she had available to her but coming from Kingston as she had, I assumed that she knew all about such things.

Della had disappeared, run away. I was not unhappy about this turn of events and continued to pursue my path to my diploma comfortably even when the gallery opened up and the relatives came out like bad dogs rushing from their cages to ask me what had happened to their sister, niece, granddaughter. I could truthfully say that I didn't know. I did very well at school, giving not a thought to Della and her dilemma: I topped the class and came home with my diploma.

Nobody invited me to that house on my return. I don't know what powers drove me there. I don't know how I came to be knocking at the door of that gallery; how it happened that there was someone at the door who didn't know me and let me in; how I came to be sitting on that day bed, its flowers faded now; how I came to see my face on that flesh which I don't want to see or claim.

The almond tree is in the school yard. It is in the public space. No one can deny me this space. It is tough on them that it is near to their house. She hated my smoking. Cigarette was bad enough, but the spliff was more than bad. I am bad. I have stuffed what would normally last me two weeks into one big spliff and am sucking way. A spark hit the house and it is smouldering. My house and I will soon be gone. No one will be sad, not even me. I am thinking that I will rise like a phoenix out of the ashes, a new man, even a man. I would like to know what that feels like.

I knocked at their door but no one answered it. I know she of the withered mouth who does not speak, was standing behind it, so I addressed her. 'I have risen from the ashes a new man, I have burnt my old housing,' I said. My companions tell me that they called the police complaining that I had threatened to burn down their house. They took me to the station but without evidence no charge could be laid so they left me alone. I continue to sit in the old woman's mouth where I have been sitting and quietly, for I know that one day if I sit quietly and behave myself she will spit me out, will reproach me verbally and I will be even more reformed. I hope this happens in time for me to walk my child to school. I sit quietly for I know when I am fortunate. I could be on her chest as I was at the beginning. That is a boney place and encourages little movement.

My parents cannot figure out what is wrong with their son. Why have I gone off? Why I am fixated on this old woman and her house with its closed jalouise windows. My mother has taken my handkerchiefs somewhere supernatural to detect what is wrong. The fellows know that they are boys and are vexed with themselves but they can't help me now. I remain in the mouth of the withered lips. The teeth have not chomped me. There are few of them and what is there are placed so irregularly that the upper cannot close down on the lower, so there is a fairly comfortable space for me. I think she has the worst of it for she cannot get many chances to open her mouth and talk baby talk to my flesh. They love each other so this must really be a trial for her.

One day, as he was in her arms with her playing and kissing him, he poked her jaws with his fingers and out I am, plop upon the floor, no bigger than a frog.

He watched in fascination as I grew and grew until my face was beside his. She couldn't help talking, the resemblance was so stark. 'I actually approved of you! How could I have guessed so wrongly? What was so difficult with your coming forward?' she asked. 'To say what', I asked. She looked nonplussed. I took pity on her. 'I knew no more than you,' I said, and we went silent but not my flesh who opened his arms and reached for me and I responded by opening mine and taking him. If there was a cat in a bag, it had been let out. We were all over the place together. The fellows stopped being angry with themselves when they saw my happiness.

When my mother saw us she said: 'If that stingy one had only taken the child out to church or somewhere, all this mystery that she has stored up in her mouth and on her chest would have been solved. Calling the police on my son! Such foolish lies about your threatening to burn down her house! This is the spit and image of you, of your father and of your grandfather and perhaps more of the Moore men that I do not know. This is ours. I am not asking for the story'. I told her what I knew and my mother, Miss Marple, has gone with her microscope to find Della. All the grandmother knew was that an aunt told her that Della had gone into a place for pregnant teenagers from which she was telephoned and told about a birth. The family had gone and taken the child and decided that it should stay with the old woman in the country away from inquisitive eyes. Della had run away again. But Della, poor girl, is the mother of my mother's grandchild so she is on the warpath, 'for a child needs his mother'. I am quite prepared to be mother and father but she doesn't want that. Poor Della's name had been on every radio and television programme devoted to joining families.

She came, more I think to ask them to call their dogs off than to see the child. She did come to my home. My boy was sitting on my lap. There was no stretching out to her nor her to him. She looked as good as ever but my hormones are in check. She has found her way to teacher's college and has promised to be seen more when her course is over. I hope she believes that I can manage. We live with my parents but we know we have a home with her grandmother who is old and needs attention. I have offered to be her adopted son. I walk my boy to school and we are very often in the house with the closed jalousies. When I am there the windows are open and good air flows through. I am in charge of mangoes. My boy needn't steal them; they belong to him.