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Abstract

Well I never know I would make it back much less get in without Matron seeing me and cutting my tail for being outside without permission. Bread and water for a week. Plus, if she ever find out about the commotion I just cause! But I was lucky for as soon as I reach up to the house I could tell from all the noise Matron wasn't there, for the girls only carry on like that when she turn her back leave poor Aunt in charge. So I change into my house dress and I get inside without a soul see me. But my heart was still in my mouth from the running and the fright so that if anybody did say one word to me that evening, I would just start to bawl. Then I would let my mouth run away with me and tell them everything. Then dog would nyam my supper for Matron bound to hear.

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A FATHER LIKE THAT

Well I never know I would make it back much less get in without Matron seeing me and cutting my tail for being outside without permission. Bread and water for a week. Plus, if she ever find out about the commotion I just cause! But I was lucky for as soon as I reach up to the house I could tell from all the noise Matron wasn't there, for the girls only carry on like that when she turn her back leave poor Aunt in charge. So I change into my house dress and I get inside without a soul see me. But my heart was still in my mouth from the running and the fright so that if anybody did say one word to me that evening, I would just start to bawl. Then I would let my mouth run away with me and tell them everything. Then dog would nyam my supper for Matron bound to hear.

But Saturday evening is the only time they leave you alone to read or play games or watch television and nobody to bother you except you're on kitchen duty. So by the time I reach the TV room I'm feeling OK, not like how I was feeling when I throw up all over the stush lady carpet.

I still wish I could tell somebody. Even Aunt, though I don't know how Aunt would take it. Aunt sort of nervous all the time — Ronda Levine say is because Miss Richards — that is Aunt real name — Miss Richards don't have man and she need a good — well, you know. But I can't bring myself to say it though I'm practising to say all these things like Ronda Levine and not turn red and Matron wash out Ronda Levine mouth with soap umpteen times and I never have my mouth wash with brown soap yet.

Aunt is the one that start the whole thing, about how this man is my father though now I have to wonder. But a big person like Aunt would make up something like that? In my heart of hearts I hope it don't go so, for I never want to be family to any of those people.

Aunt is not my real aunt. I call her by her rightful name Miss Richards when anybody else is around for is not everything you must let people know about you. But when is me and her alone, I call her Aunt because I know her long time and I don't have nobody else. That don't mean she go easy on me, she beat and punish me same as everybody for Aunt don't joke.

Aunt is Matron assistant, the one that live at the Home with her when the rest of the staff gone home. And is because she know my mother that I get into Demercado Home for even though it is suppose to be for orphans and homeless girls, they don't take in just any and everybody there, I can tell you. So by rights I should be in Maxfield Park or Eventide or Nathans House like all the other poor people pikni. I hear they give you rat to eat at Nathans Home and wee-wee

to drink at Eventide. Dress you in flour bag. And sleep you four to a bed. Plus the chink. So I glad I end up at Demercado and have my own bed without chink because I would hate to sleep with anybody else, especially that Eppy Grant who moan and groan and toss and turn every night as if cotton-tree duppy riding her.

So I grateful to Aunt and the house not bad; a big mansion, three storey, that old man Demercado die and leave. Though how one family could live in a house so big that thirty of us and Matron and Aunt living there now quite comfortable thank you is beyond me. But is so rich people stay. Rich people always dying and leaving money for Demercado Home though I wish they could come back sometime and see what Matron doing with it, they would cry the living eye water to see what she feeding us. And I wish one of them would leave us some money to get a new television set because this old one is giving me eye strain.

Is my mother ask Aunt to ask Matron to take me and since Aunt working here from the year one, Matron agree. So Aunt tell me, for she and my mother like sister from the time the two of them born and grow in the same district in Clarendon and come to Kingston on the same bus. Aunt get the job at Demercado Home the minute she arrive and she still here for she's the steady sort. That's what she always saying. 'Beauty is as beauty does, Reema. But it's the steady sort that makes the world go round.'

Aunt always say 'Beauty is as beauty does' when she talk about my mother and I never know what she mean except I can tell she never like how my mother pretty and glamorous because Aunt not any of those things. She never like the kind of life my mother was leading no good could come of it Aunt says. Though I was too small to remember what kind of life. Well, one time my mother had a job in one of Mister Canaan store and I don't know what happen, but Mister Canaan is well and truly my father. So Aunt tell me one day and my mouth drop open for though I name Canaan, is off a shopping bag I think my mother did get it. For you can't go anywhere like into a supermarket or the ten biggest store in town, or go to buy hardware or do a hundred other things in life, and don't come out without a bag with Canaan name on it.

By the time I born my mother living with Uncle Nelson so I think Uncle Nelson was my father. But no, Aunt say is because of Uncle Nelson why my mother gone and leave me, for Uncle Nelson get green card for America and when he go there he send for her, but say she have to come without the baby for he never want to mind another man pikni. Especially not one with brown skin. So Aunt tell me.

Well, at least I have Aunt and I know my mother, not like some of those other girls like Eppy Grant who they find wrap up in paper bag at Coronation Market. Can't even say they come from this place or that. Can't say they related to a soul. Still, my mother didn't have to treat me that way, because the day she leave me at Demercado Home she say she coming right back. That I should stay with Aunt and be a good girl and she come back soon and bring sweetie for me. I definitely

remember that. So I really think she was coming back. Is only when I grow big that Aunt tell me my mother never plan to come back, my mother never even write to hear how I growing, never even send her an address from the day she leave. Is only then I realise my mother trick me in truth. To this day I don't understand how she could lie to me like that. Sometime I think no matter what Aunt say, my mother is going to come back. For Aunt keep telling me to practice speaking nice and not sound butto like the other girls because my mother always speak nice and dress nice and carry herself nice and that is how she would like to find me when she come back. I try to do all these things Aunt say though I only have two dresses outside my school uniform and sometime I would rather have a dirty mouth like that Ronda Levine so I could curse off Matron whenever she bother me. Maybe even curse my mother off if she ever come back though the Bible say to Honour Thy Father and Mother that thy days may be long. Oh yes, Aunt show me right where it say so, in black and white. But I don't care for my days here long enough as it is, sometimes I just praying for the day to end so I can lie in my bed, by my own self, with nobody bossing me around. And maybe since my mother leave me here and gone bout her business, cussing is what she deserve.

Ermalinda curse her own mother sometime, but only when she really vex and in punishment and crying for her mother gone and dead and that is why she cursing her. Ronda Levine say that Matron letting Ermalinda stay because every weekend Ermalinda father come and carry Matron to market in his taxi and she don't have to pay him because he getting payment some other way. When I ask Ronda Levine what other way, she do something screwing her finger around in the middle of her other hand and she laugh but she won't tell me what it mean. Ronda Levine is worse than Ermalinda. Her own mother carry her to the judge and beg him to lock her up, she so unmanageable. Since she come here, she don't mess with Matron though, for Matron not afraid to cut her tail. For Aunt sake, I trying hard not to follow Ronda Levine too much and to keep myself nice in case my mother decide to come back for me.

The father thing is different because is not like I ever feel I have a father except for that Uncle Nelson and I sorry now I ever have good feelings for him. After Aunt tell me this big important man Mister Canaan is my father, I never tell a soul for here I am like poor-ting-pikni sitting in Demercado Home and I don't want people have me as poppyshow. Everybody know about my father. But nobody know about me. That he is my father, I mean. I don't know if even he know. Well, I should hope not for it would be a real disgrace that he never pay me the slightest bit of mind. But I used to look at him on TV and his picture in the newspaper and everything. And I could really see a resemblance. Well, I could see it after Aunt point it out. Aunt keep this big picture of him she cut out of magazine in her bureau drawer and every time I visit her she take it out and make me stand with my face set like how this big man have his (though it don't look natural to me) and she start pointing out certain things.

‘See there Reema, look at your nose. The living stamp of his. Those big brown eyes? Look!’

I would look but in truth I think Mister Canaan two eye looking like stale fish. But I don’t contradict Aunt, I politely agree for she is big woman that know my mother before I born. But I didn’t feel no way about this man. He don’t mean a thing to me. If he wasn’t so rich and important, I would maybe feel different. But I see him the way I would see a movie star or somebody like that, or a rich old person like Mister Demercado who die and leave this house after he and his family finish rattle round in it. Rich people different. They strange can’t done.

Well about a year or two after Aunt tell me this big man is my father, he go and die. Not that I cry or anything when I hear it on radio. Is like the Queen die or something. I never feel no way about it, so to this day I could never explain to anybody, why, just like that, I decide to go to the funeral. Is like something come over me between the time I’m there wringing out my school blouse over the basin and I move to hang it on the line. It just pop into my head that I should go to the funeral and next thing I rushing round trying to find Matron Gleaner so I can see which church the funeral keeping. It’s four o’clock on Saturday so I know I can get away easy without anybody see me. I hide my white dress and white socks and patent leather T-strap shoes in a bag behind the big mango tree near the fence and I stand behind the tree and change my clothes and dodge under the fence through the hole Matron don’t know about and I reach the road and catch the No.6 bus that drop me off right in front of the church.

There was a big crowd of people everywhere and plenty car but I just squeeze myself through and I see a nice looking lady going into the church by herself so I walk in like I come with her and take a seat beside her as if I have every right to be there. The lady smile at me so I smile right back. And since I never been to a funeral before, I settle down to enjoy myself. The whole thing come to an end and what happen next is the lady fault for as we leaving the church (I’m still trying to stick close to her for I never seen such a crowd of people in my life), she turn to me and she say, ‘Would you like a lift?’

Well, am I going to turn down a chance to drive in a car? So she tell me her name is Mrs. Henderson and I tell her my name is Marva for that is what pop into my head and she start to talk even before we get into the car and I don’t think she stop talk yet. Is like she don’t have nobody to talk to at home though it hard to understand her sometimes for she talking in this funny way, like when she ask me, ‘And what is your relationship to the deceased?’ I have to think before I figure out is Mister Canaan she talking about so I tell her my mother used to work for him but she is living in the States and couldn’t get to come to the funeral so she say I should go. Well it wasn’t a big lie and it satisfy Mrs. Henderson for she don’t ask me nothing else, she just keep talking. I paying no attention to what she is saying for I passing through a part of the world I never see before. Is not often we get out of Demercado Home apart from church and school and is the first

time I ever drive in the front seat of a car though is something Ermalinda get to do every week when her father pick her up in his taxi and she never let us forget it. So I am thinking what a pity none of the girls from Demercado Home can see me primping off in the front seat of the lady nice new car, looking boaside as if is something I do every day.

I go and see them bury Mister Canaan and then I think Mrs. Henderson going drive me back to the church or some place that I could get a bus. But she say she is a friend of the family and she going to the Canaan house for a minute to pay her respects and I can come with her and not to worry for afterwards she will drop me at my aunt in Beverly Hills (which is where I tell her I living). Well, I was going to pass up a chance like that, to see inside his house? Plus I get the feeling Mrs. Henderson kinda lonely and liking my company for everybody else at the funeral come with other people, she's the only lady there alone. All the same I know that once I got there I have to get away from her, so I can get a bus back to Demercado Home. By now, I know dog nyam my supper long time, for it almost night, but I feeling so excited by everything that I don't start to worry about Matron yet and the palampam when I get back.

Well this house is just like Mister Demercado big three-storey house but it clean and pretty can't done, like how rich people house suppose to be. And the garden full of lovely trees and flowers and grass, not like ours which is dirt and bush. Plenty people here too, standing out on the lawn, but I just march in behind the lady and behave as if I am with her, proud that I listen to Aunt and keep myself well and know how to speak properly, not like that Michelle and those other ones who drop their aiches all the time. Some people even hold out their hand and I shake it but nobody paying me any mind everybody so busy chatting and drinking you'd think it was a party. Some fellows passing around with trays full of food, not a good hearty meal — little dainty kind of things, but every time one come by I grab as much as I can and stuff myself, for supertime at Demercado Home gone long time now and Matron going to be so vex, she might starve me for a week.

So I am wandering around the garden and eating and drinking and taking it all in and looking at the rich people in their spiffy clothes and thinking how I going to get away so Mrs. Henderson don't see me. And then I find myself standing by the veranda and I look around and not a soul watching so I climb up the steps a little and then a little more till I reach right on the veranda. I go further till I can peep inside this room for the doors are wide open and this is the most beautiful room I ever seen in my life with carpet on the floor and nice soft furniture you could just fall into and statues and pictures on the wall and all that kind of thing.

The doors wide open, nobody could say is me open them, so I take a proper look inside and the room is full of all these women in hats, real rich women sitting around and when I look good I realise a lady with her back to me is Mister Canaan wife for I seen her in the church. That make me jump a bit, but nobody notice me, they so busy chatting and eating and drinking, so I walk in and sit on the carpet

just inside the door. I really can't tell anybody why I do that, is like a spirit was moving me because the room so pretty; because of the perfume and the ladies in their silk dresses and their hats and their diamonds and gold, well I never in my life seen nothing like that, so is like I drinking it all in till I sort of forget myself.

I just wanted was to catch a little bit of that life so I sitting there for a while feeling so peaceful. And everything was going fine for nobody notice me except like a spite I have to see something in the room I cannot believe so I find myself getting up and walking across the room to stare at it but sort of behind all the chairs and sofas so I'm not in their way. What I get up to look at is this picture in a fancy gold frame. Is a picture of a woman, and she's blue, everything about her blue, even her hair. But the real funny thing is that this woman all chop up. Well, she looking like she get chop up then put back together again but not quite right and her two eye real funny for one big to everlasting and take up half her face and the other one slipping down the other side and so small you wonder what she could be seeing out of the two of them.

I'm thinking this is a real funny thing for these rich people to have on their wall for right away I know is Delores Stephenson mother that die in the train crash. That's why Delores come to Demercado Home and been acting special ever since for the train crash was the biggest thing that happen and their picture and name in the newspaper and everything, all of those people like Delores mother who get so chop up in the crash they couldn't even fit their body back together. Up to now, they not sure they bury all of Delores mother. Or so everybody at the Home been saying from Delores arrive which is why ever since we looking at her like she strange to have a mother like that.

So I looking at this picture and thinking why anybody would want a picture of this poor dead woman who get cut up all in pieces by the train on their wall and she dead for sure for her skin and everything is so blue when they could have a picture of a nice bunch of flowers like what Matron have in her office. But then again I thinking it can't be Delores mother, what these kind of people would want with her? So the whole thing have me totally confuse.

Matron always telling me my mouth going to get me into trouble one day but sometimes I can't help myself, things just pop out. So I never even know I was saying it loud: 'What this picture of Delores dead mother doing on the wall?'

Well, the minute it slip out I wish I could drop through the floor for every woman in that room turn and staring at me with their mouth open and nobody saying a word. I can hear what I say in my loud coarse voice going round and round the room and I know the minute I make the mistake and open my mouth they know right away I not one of them. No matter how nice I keep myself or how nice I look or how nice I try to speak for Aunt's sake. These people just know. For I can't get my tongue around the words soft and round like them so they know I have no right there and every one of them staring. It's like we're all in a picture, nobody moving. Then as if to break the spell, this lady, Mister Canaan wife,

suddenly jump up and start pointing her finger at me, a fat finger with blood red nails and full of flashing rings.

She get up out of her chair and she shouting: 'What is the meaning of this? Where have you come from? Whose child are you?'

I so frighten same time my head swell up big like the time I see the duppy and is like I want to run but something is holding me to the spot. And suddenly, I couldn't help it, I feeling so sick all the food I been eating just rising to my throat and before I can take a step everything coming up on the lady carpet. That give me a little time to get hold of myself for everybody so shock, they just sitting there and I know Mrs. Caanan stop dead in her tracks. But though I feeling so bad, I not so frighten that I don't see Mrs. Canaan with her long nails coming awake and stepping across the room. And like everything else I been doing I don't know how it happen I just feel my two feet lifting me up and I take off like lightning, out the door and down the veranda steps into the garden and through the crowd of people. I knock a few and even slam into a waiter with a tray but I not stopping for nothing, for I can still hear Mrs. Canaan screaming in my ears, 'Who's that child? Catch her, the little devil. Don't let her get away'.

But the crowd so noisy I streak off before anybody can take it in and by the time I hear people calling out after me, I gone clear cross the lawn through the gates and right across the street. I hear running and shouting behind me but I don't look for I pelting down the road to the crossroads where I take a right then a left and I running so fast is like I flying and taking the corners as I come to them without paying no attention to where I going. Well I run and I run looking every which way to hide, till I see a place like a park and I cross the road and crawl under a fence and I'm running on grass now, nothing in sight but grass, and I'm flying like a bird, till I come to a wall and I have to stop. Braps!

I cringe up against the wall and try to catch my breath and I look around but I don't see a soul, though that don't mean they not still looking for me and I don't know how much time they give you in prison for throwing up on rich people carpet and nobody to plead for me. I listening out for any sound and then after my heart stop beat so hard I hear this roaring coming from behind the wall and when I listen good, I realise is traffic I hearing. So I look around some more and I know where I am, I'm on the big golf course next to the main road where I get the bus that day. All I can say is Thank God Thank God for is like a miracle I know where I am and is not far from Demercado Home. I take a good look round again and I don't see a soul and that frighten me too for is me one and God out there. But I can't stop to worry now, I look and look till I find a little hole in the fence for every fence must have hole is Ronda Levine motto for she always running away though she don't escape from Matron yet and I squeeze through and I come out on the main road. By now my nerves really jumpy for I swear I hear people calling out 'See her there!' But I don't wait to find out, I start running again as if the devil behind me and I run up the street until I come to the traffic light and it's green so I

don't even slow down I just run through and cross over to the other side and I see the big cotton tree at Demercado Home gate but of course the gate lock to keep everybody in. And my blood is pumping so much I don't even have time to worry about the duppy that living there I just run past the gate and crawl through the hole in the fence and run straight up to the house.

Mark you I don't show myself right away. I stop and I listen to see if anybody behind me. My heart going boom! boom! so hard that for a long time is only that I hearing. But then it slow down and I know nobody follow me home and I can hear from the noise and confusion coming from inside that Aunt in charge and I'm safe for she so busy trying to keep order she won't notice nothing. I sit down on the ground for a good long time to collect myself, then I go down to the tree for my house dress and I put it on. Then I realise I better do something about my white dress that I can see have all kind of grass and stain on it. And though it late and I can barely see I know I have to go to the wash room and wash it or I will be in even worse trouble though everybody know the wash room haunted but I try not to think of that. I go and wash my dress and I hang it on the line with other people clothes that not dry enough to take in and I know I must remember to come down before day break and check to see if I leave anything for Matron to see.

Well, for a long while after that, I still fretting that those people will find out I come from Demercado Home. I jumpy all the time and I listening out for every car coming up the driveway. But nobody come for me. At first, I couldn't bear to think of what would happen and how I would end up in Eventide or Maxwell Park or even one of those place where they put bad girls for sure. But once I start to relax, and I run the whole thing over in my mind it start to look very funny to me. I have to stop myself from laughing every time I think about it and everybody saying I mad laughing to myself like that. But I can't tell a soul for no matter how much somebody is your best friend today, they will throw everything you tell them back into your face the minute you quarrel. And I decide I not telling Aunt for Aunt is behaving real strange.

A little after the funeral, she call me to her room and hug me (which frighten me for she never do that before) and she say, 'Reema I am sorry your father is dead but he was a wicked man and a good thing you never know him. But I am sure he do right by you in his Will. So Reema, I hope when you are rich you won't forget your poor Aunt who bring you up'. And she start to cry. To God!

I never believe a big woman could so foolish, honest. Is like I am the big people and Aunt the little girl the way she behaving. I almost open my mouth and tell her everything but something tell me no. The way Aunt carrying on, I start to wonder if she make up the whole thing. I wanted was to tell her that if she did see those people at the funeral, she would never think I could be family to them. When I was little maybe I believe something, but now I thinking the whole thing is foolishness. As soon as I leave her that day, I rush to the bathroom to look in the mirror and I'm sure I never see a single thing about myself that look like

Mister Caanan. After Aunt carry on like that, I stop worrying about the whole thing because you know what? I'm still feeling so good about how I run away from everybody that night so fast that nobody could catch me.

And that is how it come to me I could beat Ermalinda on sports day. That make me feel so good that when I sit in the TV room the next Saturday night, I forget myself and I give her a cut-eye right to her face because is her big mouth that cause the whole thing, going on all the time about her father. Just because he come to visit her and take her driving in his taxi, Ermalinda always going on bout how she not no orphan like the rest of us though it couldn't be me she calling orphan and how she only there because her mother die and her father soon take her away and who don't have father is cockroach. All this time she there playing with the wristwatch her father give her. All of us vex but nobody answer her for is true plenty girls at Demercado House don't have father or mother but they don't like to talk about it and nobody else have wristwatch. Anyway, Ermalinda is such a big-shot at Demercado Home and so own-way I don't think she believe what she see, that I would have the nerve to give her cut-eye right to her face. I could see her blinking her cow-eye and looking at me but before she say a word I get up and rush outside I laughing so hard. When I come back, I could see Ermalinda looking at me the whole time as if she confuse, but she never say a word to me.

Ee-hee, Miss Ermalinda, I saying to myself now, you just wait till sports day. And that is making me so bold the next chance I get, I find I giving a cut-eye to Ronda Levine of all people, who is bigger than me and the best fighter at Demercado Home and have everybody afraid of her. She beat me up all the time because she jealous I always get my sums right and Matron say that is the only good thing about me, and my handwriting. Ronda don't like how I speak nice neither but that is only because Aunt beg me. Nobody could say I look for trouble, so normally I would only cut my eye at Ronda behind her back but this time I do it right to her face. Which really surprise me for I never plan it. But she even more surprise than Ermalinda and can't believe I could so bold, for she don't say a word neither, she just keep looking at me all evening. This just make me feel badder than ever so the next chance I get, I not even thinking, I just walk straight up to her and give her a shove and she shove me back, hard. I pitch right in and butt her in her stomach so she fall and she come back up and hit me so I see stars but I ready to hit her back if somebody never part us. From the way she looking I could tell that I frighten Ronda for nobody ever fight her back before. So I just give this big smile showing all my teeth right at the moment Matron come to see who making noise and she tell me I lack contrition or whatever and punish me worse than she punish Ronda which not fair for Ronda don't even have to do anything to deserve punishment.

But you know, I never mind because from I run like that, and come home by myself past the cotton tree duppy, and go by myself to the wash house to wash out my dress and go out the back in the dark to the clothesline to hang it out, I feel I can take on the whole world.

Every time Ronda look at me, I screw up my face and I saying some bad things but not out loud. I can tell I'm looking tough, for now Eppy Grant looking at me the way she used to be looking at Ronda, real scared, so I decide I will take on Ronda next time she start to pick on Eppy Grant or the other girls.

The next thing I consider is that since I can run so fast, maybe my real father is somebody who can run fast fast too like those guys you see on TV running in the Olympics. Because you have to get these things from somebody, you know what I mean? Else, how I could suddenly run so fast? I don't think it come from my mother for Aunt say she always dress up in high heels. And that Mister Canaan was fat with plenty cars so he never have to walk, much less run.

But I'm also wondering if my father is somebody who can sing, for I can't carry a tune and Christmas coming and Matron won't have me in the choir which is wicked for if you're in the choir you get to dress up and go to all kind of places to sing for rich people and sometime they give you cake and ice cream and I never get to go nowhere. So I'm thinking that just as it come to me by accident that I'm a runner, I might find out suddenly that I'm a singer. Boy, what a thing! I'd be the most famous girl in Demercado Home. The fastest runner on sports day and on top of that I would get to go out to sing Christmas Carols with the choir. Yea, I bet I have a father like that. He can sing, he can run. Though I don't know. Sometimes I consider how if I had a real father like that he would be bound to come and find me by now.

Then again, I think I better keep myself quiet and just stick to the running. For next thing you know, at Christmas I going to be standing there in the choir singing away — in a church, or the plaza or even the veranda of some rich people house. And you know what? This rich Mrs. Canaan going to be there. Maybe — worse than that — we might end up having to go and sing in her very own garden. And just as everything is going good like in the middle of Silent Night Holy Night All is Calm All is Bright she going to recognise me and point her fat finger with the rings right in my face and scream: 'That's the girl! That's her, the little devil! Whose child is this? Who are you?' And boy, I not lying, if that should ever happen, I swear, this time I would too frighten to run.

No sir, I going to sit and keep myself quiet and concentrate on beating Ermalinda on sports day for nobody big and important ever come to that. Even if my father should turn out to be the greatest singer in the world, and my voice suddenly come so pure and true that Matron herself get down on her knees and is begging me please, please Reema, nobody is going to catch me going out there to sing with any choir.