Do Angels Wear Brassieres?

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Abstract
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‘Beccka!’ Cherry almost crying in shame, ‘Shhhhh! She wi hear you. Anyway she did tell you not to roll them on the floor when she have her headache.’

‘A hear her already’ — this is the righteous voice of Auntie Mary in the next room — ‘But I am sure that God is not listening to the like of she. Blasphemous little wretch.’

She add the last part under her breath and with much lifting of her eyes to heaven she turn back to her nightly reading of the Imitations of Christ. ‘Oooh Beccka, Rebecca, see what yu do,’ Cherry whispering, crying in her voice.

Beccka just stick out her tongue at the world, wink at God who she know right now in the shape of a big fat anansi in a corner of the roof, kiss her mother and get into bed.

As soon as her mother gone into Auntie Mary room to try make it up and the whole night come down with whispering, Beccka whip the flash light from off the dressing table and settle down under the blanket to read. Beccka reading the Bible in secret from cover to cover not from any conviction the little wretch but because everybody round her always quoting that book and Beccka want to try and find flaw and question she can best them with.

Next morning Auntie Mary still vex. Auntie Mary out by the tank washing clothes and slapping them hard on the big rock. Fat sly-eye Katie from the next yard visiting and consoling her. Everybody visiting Auntie Mary these days and consoling her for the crosses she have to bear (that is Beccka they talking about). Fat Katie have a lot of time to walk
bout consoling because ever since hard time catch her son and him wife a
town they come country to catch with Katie. And from the girl walk
through the door so braps! Katie claim she too sickly to do any washing
or housework. So while the daughter-in-law beating suds at her yard she
over by Auntie Mary washpan say she keeping her company. Right now
she consoling about Beccka who (as she telling Auntie Mary) every
decent-living upright Christian soul who is everybody round here except
that Dorcas Waite about whom one should not dirty one’s mouth to talk
yes every clean living person heart go out to Auntie Mary for with all due
respect to a sweet mannersable child like Cherry her daughter is the devil
own pickney. Not that anybody saying a word about Cherry God know
she have enough trouble on her head from she meet up that big hard back
man though young little gal like that never shoulda have business with no
married man. Katie take a breath long enough to ask question:
‘But see here Miss Mary you no think Cherry buck up the devil own
self when she carrying her? Plenty time that happen you know.
Remember that woman over Allside that born the pickney with two head
praise Jesus it did born dead. But see here you did know one day she was
going down river to wash clothes and is the devil own self she meet.
Yes’m. Standing right there in her way. She pop one big bawling before
she faint weh and when everybody run come not a soul see him. Is gone
he gone. But you no know where he did gone? No right inside that gal.
Right inna her belly. And Miss Mary I telling you the living truth, just as
the baby borning the midwife no see a shadow fly out of the mother and
go right cross the room. She frighten so till she close her two eye tight and
is so the devil escape.’
‘Well I dont know about that. Beccka certainly dont born with no two
head or nothing wrong with her. Is just hard ears she hard ears.’
‘Den no so me saying?’
‘The trouble is, Cherry is too soft to manage her. As you look hard at
Cherry herself she start cry. She was never a strong child and she not a
strong woman, her heart just too soft.’
‘All the same right and there is only one right way to bring up a
child and that is by bus’ ass pardon my french Miss Mary but hard things
call for hard words. That child should be getting blows from the day she
born. Then she wouldn’t be so force-ripe now. Who cant hear must feel
for the rod and reproof bring wisdom but a child left to himself bringeth
his mother to shame. Shame, Miss Mary.’
‘Is true. And you know I wouldn’t mind if she did only get into
mischief Miss Katie but what really hurt me is how the child know so
much and show off. Little children have no right to have so many things
in their brain. Guess what she ask me the other day nuh? — if me know how worms reproduce.’

‘Say what, maam?’

‘As Jesus is me judge. Me big woman she come and ask that. Reproduce I say. Yes Auntie Mary she say as if I stupid. When the man worm and the lady worm come together and they have baby. You know how it happen? — Is so she ask me.’

‘What you saying maam? Jesus of Nazareth!’

‘Yes, please. That is what the child ask me. Lightning come strike me dead if is lie I lie. In my own house. My own sister pickney. So help me I was so frighten that pickney could so impertinent that right away a headache strike me like autoclaps. But before I go lie down you see Miss Katie, I give her some licks so hot there she forget bout worm and reproduction.’

‘In Jesus name!’

‘Yes. Is all those books her father pack her up with. Book is all him ever good for. Rather than buy food put in the pickney mouth or help Cherry find shelter his only contribution is book. Nuh his character stamp on her. No responsibility that man ever have. Look how him just take off for foreign without a word even to his lawful wife and children much less Cherry and hers. God knows where it going to end.’

‘Den Miss M. They really come to live with you for all time?’

‘I dont know my dear. What are they to do? You know Cherry cant keep a job from one day to the next. From she was a little girl she so nervous she could never settle down long enough to anything. And you know since Papa and Mama pass away is me one she have to turn to. I tell you even if they eat me out of house and home and the child drive me to Bellevue I accept that this is the crosses that I put on this earth to bear ya Miss Katie.’

‘Amen. Anyway dont forget what I was saying to you about the devil. The child could have a devil inside her. No pickney suppose to come facety and force-ripe so. You better ask the Archdeacon to check it out next time he come here.’

‘Well. All the same Miss Katie she not all bad you know. Sometime at night when she ready to sing and dance and make up play and perform for us we laugh so till! And those times when I watch her I say to myself, this is really a gifted child.’

‘Well my dear is your crosses. If is so you see it then is your sister child.’

‘Aie. I have one hope in God and that is the child take scholarship exam and God know she so bright she bound to pass. And you know
Beccka hiding behind the tank listening to the conversation as usual. She think about stringing a wire across the track to trip fat Katie but she feeling too lazy today. Fat Katie will get her comeuppance on Judgement Day for she wont able to run quick enough to join the heavenly hosts. Beccka there thinking of fat Katie huffmg and puffing arriving at the pasture just as the company of the faithful in their white robes are rising as one body on a shaft of light. She see Katie a-clutch at the hem of the gown of one of the faithful and miraculously, slowly, slowly, Katie start to rise. But her weight really too much and with a tearing sound that spoil the solemn moment the hem tear way from the garment and Katie fall back to earth with a big buff, shouting and wailing for them to wait on her. Beccka snickering so hard at the sight she have to scoot way quick before Auntie Mary and Katie hear her. They think the crashing about in the cocoa walk is mongoose.

Beccka in Auntie Mary room — which is forbidden — dress up in Auntie Mary bead, Auntie Mary high heel shoes, Auntie Mary shawl, and Auntie Mary big floppy hat which she only wear to wedding — all forbidden. Beccka mincing and prancing prancing and mincing in front of the three-way adjustable mirror in Auntie Mary vanity she brought all the way from Cuba with her hard earned money. Beccka seeing herself as a beautiful lady on the arms of a handsome gentleman who look just like her father. They about to enter a night club neon sign flashing for Beccka know this is the second wickedest thing a woman can do. At a corner table lit by Chinese lantern soft music playing Beccka do the wickedest thing a woman can do — she take a drink. Not rum. One day Beccka went to wedding with Auntie Mary and sneak a drink of rum and stay sick for two days. Beccka thinking of all the bright-colour drink she see advertise in the magazine Cherry get from a lady she use to work for in town a nice yellow drink in a tall frosted glass...

‘Beccka, Rebecca O my God!’ That is Cherry rushing into the room and wailing. ‘You know she wi mad like hell if she see you with her things you know you not to touch her things.’

Cherry grab Auntie Mary things from off Beccka and fling them back into where she hope is the right place, adjust the mirror to what she hope is the right angle, and pray just pray that Auntie Mary wont find out that Beccka was messing with her things. Again. Though Auntie Mary so
absolutely neat she always know if a pin out of place. 'O God Beccka,' Cherry moaning.

Beccka stripped of her fancy clothes dont pay no mind to her mother fluttering about her. She take the story in her head to the room next door though here the mirror much too high for Beccka to see the sweep of her gown as she does the third wickedest thing a woman can do which is dance all night.

Auntie Mary is a nervous wreck and Cherry weeping daily in excitement. The Archdeacon is coming. Auntie Mary so excited she cant sit cant stand cant do her embroidery cant eat she forgetting things the house going to the dog she dont even notice that Beccka been using her lipstick. Again. The Archdeacon coming Wednesday to the churches in the area and afterwards — as usual — Archdeacon sure to stop outside Auntie Mary gate even for one second — as usual — to get two dozen of Auntie Mary best roses and a bottle of pimento dram save from Christmas. And maybe just this one time Archdeacon will give in to Auntie Mary pleading and step inside her humble abode for tea. Just this one time.

Auntie Mary is due this honour at least once because she is head of Mothers Union and though a lot of them jealous and back-biting her because Archdeacon never stop outside their gate even once let them say anything to her face.

For Archdeacon's certain stop outside her gate Auntie Mary scrub the house from top to bottom put up back the freshly laundered Christmas Curtains and the lace tablecloth and the newly starch doilies and the antimacassars clean all the windows in the house get the thick hibiscus hedge trim so you can skate across the top wash the dog whitewash every rock in the garden and the trunk of every tree paint the gate polish the silver and bring out the crystal cake-plate and glasses she bring from Cuba twenty-five years ago and is saving for her old age. Just in case Archdeacon can stop for tea Auntie Mary bake a fruitcake a upside-down cake a three-layer cake a chocolate cake for she dont know which he prefer also some coconut cookies for although the Archdeacon is an Englishman dont say he dont like his little Jamaican dainties. Everything will be pretty and nice for the Archdeacon just like the American lady she did work for in Cuba taught her to make them.

The only thing that now bothering Auntie Mary as she give a last look over her clean and well ordered household is Beccka, dirty Beccka right now sitting on the kitchen steps licking out the mixing bowls. The thought of Beccka in the same house with Archdeacon bring on one of
Auntie Mary headache. She think of asking Cherry to take Beccka somewhere else for the afternoon when Archdeacon coming but poor Cherry work so hard and is just excited about Archdeacon coming. Auntie Mary dont have the courage to send Beccka to stay with anyone for nobody know what that child is going to come out with next and a lot of people not so broadmind as Auntie Mary. She pray that Beccka will get sick enough to have to stay in bed she — O God forgive her but is for a worthy cause — she even consider drugging the child for the afternoon. But she dont have the heart. And anyway she dont know how. So Auntie Mary take two asprin and a small glass of tonic wine and pray hard that Beccka will vanish like magic on the afternoon that Archdeacon visit.

Now Archdeacon here and Beccka and everybody in their very best clothes. Beccka thank God also on her best behaviour which can be very good so far in fact she really look like a little angel she so clean and behaving.

In fact Archdeacon is quite taken with Beccka and more and more pleased that this is the afternoon he decide to consent to come inside Auntie Mary parlour for one little cup of tea. Beccka behaving so well and talking so nice to the Archdeacon Auntie Mary feel her heart swell with pride and joy over everything. Beccka behaving so beautiful in fact that Auntie Mary and Cherry dont even think twice about leaving her to talk to Archdeacon in the parlour while they out in the kitchen preparing tea.

By now Beccka and the Archdeacon exchanging Bible knowledge. Beccka asking him question and he trying his best to answer but they never really tell him any of these things in theological college. First he go ask Beccka if she is a good little girl. Beccka say yes she read her Bible every day. Do you now say the Archdeacon, splendid. Beccka smile and look shy.

'Tell me my little girl, is there anything in the Bible you would like to ask me about?'

'Yes sir. Who in the Bible wrote big?'

'Who in the Bible wrote big. My dear child!'

This wasnt the kind of question Archdeacon expecting but him always telling himself how he have rapport with children so he decide to confess his ignorance.

'Tell me, who?'

'Paul!' Beccka shout.

'Paul?'
‘Galations six eleven «See with how large letters I write onto you with mine own hands».’
‘Ho Ho Ho Ho’ Archdeacon laugh. — ‘Well done. Try me with another one.’

Beckka decide to ease him up this time.
‘What animal saw an angel?’
‘What animal saw an angel? My word. What animal...of course. Balaam’s Ass.’
‘Yes you got it.’

Beckka jumping up and down she so excited. She decide to ask the Archdeacon a trick questions her father did teach her.
‘What did Adam and Eve do when they were driven out of the garden?’
‘Hm,’ the Archdeacon sputtered but could not think of a suitable answer.
‘Raise Cain ha ha ha ha ha.’
‘They raised Cain Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho.’

The Archdeacon promise himself to remember that one to tell the Deacon. All the same he not feeling strictly comfortable. It really dont seem dignified for an Archdeacon to be having this type of conversation with an eleven-year-old girl. But Beckka already in high gear with the next question and Archdeacon tense himself.
‘Who is the shortest man in the Bible?’
Archdeacon groan.
‘Peter. Because him sleep on his watch. Ha Ha Ha.’
‘Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho.’

‘What is the smallest insect in the Bible?’
‘The widow’s mite,’ Archdeacon shout.
‘The wicked flee,’ Beckka cry.
‘Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho.’

Archdeacon laughing so hard now he starting to cough. He cough and cough till the coughing bring him to his senses. He there looking down the passage where Auntie Mary gone and wish she would hurry come back. He sputter a few time into his handkerchief, wipe his eye, sit up straight and assume his most religious expression. Even Beckka impress.

‘Now Rebecca. Hm. You are a very clever very entertaining little girl. Very. But what I had in mind were questions that are a bit more serious. Your aunt tells me you are being prepared for confirmation. Surely you must have some questions about doctrine hm, religion, that puzzle you. No serious questions?’

Beckka look at Archdeacon long and hard. ‘Yes,’ she say at long last in
a small voice. Right away Archdeacon sit up straighter.

'What is it my little one?'

Beccka screwing up her face in concentration.

'Sir, what I want to know is this for I cant find it in the Bible. Please sir, do angels wear brassieres?'

Auntie Mary just that minute coming through the doorway with a full tea tray with Cherry carrying another big tray right behind her. Enough food and drink for ten Archdeacon. Auntie Mary stop braps in the doorway with fright when she hear Beccka question. She stop so sudden that Cherry bounce into her and spill a whole pitcher of cold drink all down Auntie Mary back. As the coldness hit her Auntie Mary jump and half her tray throw way on the floor milk and sugar and sandwiches a rain down on Archdeacon. Archdeacon jump up with his handkerchief and start mop himself and Auntie Mary at the same time he trying to take the tray from her. Auntie Mary at the same time trying to mop up the Archdeacon with a napkin in her mortification not even noticing how Archdeacon relieve that so much confusion come at this time. Poor soft-hearted Cherry only see that her sister whole life ruin now she dont yet know the cause run and sit on the kitchen stool and throw kitchen cloth over her head and sit there bawling and bawling in sympathy.

Beccka win the scholarship to high school. She pass so high she getting to go to the school of Auntie Mary choice which is the one that is furthest away. Beccka vex because she dont want go no boarding school with no heap of girl. Beccka dont want to go to no school at all.

Everyone so please with Beccka. Auntie Mary even more please when she get letter from the headmistress setting out Rules and Regulations. She only sorry that the list not longer for she could think of many things she could add. She get another letter setting out uniform and right away Auntie Mary start sewing. Cherry take the bus to town one day with money coming from God know where for the poor child dont have no father to speak of and she buy shoes and socks and underwear and hair ribbon and towels and toothbrush and a suitcase for Beccka. Beccka normally please like puss with every new thing vain like peacock in ribbons and clothes. Now she hardly look at them. Beccka thinking. She dont want to go to no school. But how to get out of it. When Beccka think done she decide to run away and find her father who like a miracle have job now in a circus. And as Beccka find him so she get job in the circus as a tight-rope walker and in spangles and tights lipstick and powder (her own) Beccka perform every night before a cheering crowd in a blaze of
light. Becca and the circus go right round the world. Every now and then, dress up in furs and hats like Auntie Mary wedding hat Becca come home to visit Cherry and Auntie Mary. She arrive in a chauffeur-driven limousine pile high with luggage. Becca shower them with presents. The whole village. For fat Katie Becca bring a years supply of diet pill and a exercise machine just like the one she see advertise in the magazine the lady did give to Cherry.

Now Becca ready to run away. In the books, the picture always show children running away with their things tied in a bundle on a stick. The stick easy. Becca take one of the walking stick that did belong to Auntie Mary's dear departed. Out of spite she take Auntie Mary silk scarf to wrap her things in for Auntie Mary is to blame for her going to school at all. She pack in the bundle Auntie Mary lipstick Auntie Mary face powder and a pair of Auntie Mary stockings for she need these for her first appearance as a tight-rope walker. She take a slice of cake, her shiny eye marble and a yellow nicol which is her best taa in case she get a chance to play in the marble championship of the world. She also take the Bible. She want to find some real hard question for the Archdeacon next time he come to Auntie Mary house for tea.

When Auntie Mary and Cherry busy sewing her school clothes Becca take off with her bundle and cut across the road into the field. Mr O'Connor is her best friend and she know he wont mind if she walk across his pasture. Mr O'Connor is her best friend because he is the only person Becca can hold a real conversation with. Becca start to walk toward the mountain that hazy in the distance. She plan to climb the mountain and when she is high enough she will look for a sign that will lead her to her father. Becca walk and walk through the pasture divided by stone wall and wooden gates which she climb. Sometime a few trees tell her where a pond is. But it is very lonely. All Becca see is john crow and cow and cattle egret blackbird and parrotlets that scream at her from the trees. But Becca dont notice them. Her mind busy on how Auntie Mary and Cherry going to be sad now she gone and she composing letter she will write to tell them she safe and she forgive them everything. But the sun getting too high in the sky and Becca thirstry. She eat the cake but she dont have water. Far in the distance she see a bamboo clump and hope is round a spring with water. But when she get to the bamboo all it offer is shade. In fact the dry bamboo leaves on the ground so soft and inviting that Becca decide to sit and rest for a while. Is sleep Becca sleep. When she wake she see a stand above her four horse leg and when she raise up and look, stirrups, boots and sitting atop the horse her best friend, Mr O'Connor.
'Well Beccka, taking a long walk?'
'Yes sir.'
'Far from home eh?'
'Yes sir.'
'Running away?'
'Yes sir.'
'Hm. What are you taking with you?'
Beccka tell him what she have in the bundle. Mr O'Connor shock.
'What, no money?'
'Oooh!'
Beccka shame like anything for she never remember anything about money.
'Well you need money for running away you know. How else you going to pay for trains and planes and taxis and buy ice cream and pindar cake?'
Beccka didn’t think about any of these things before she run away. But now she see that is sense Mr O’Connor talking but she dont know what to do. So the two of them just stand up there for a while. They thinking hard.

'You know Beccka if I was you I wouldnt bother with the running away today. Maybe they dont find out you gone yet. So I would go back home and wait until I save enough money to finance my journey.’

Beccka love how that sound. To finance my journey. She think about that a long time. Mr O’Connor say, ‘Tell you what. Why dont you let me give you a ride back and you can pretend this was just a practice and you can start saving your money to run away properly next time.’

Beccka look at Mr O’Connor. He looking off into the distance and she follow where he gazing and when she see the mountain she decide to leave it for another day. All the way back riding with Mr O’Connor Beccka thinking and thinking and her smile getting bigger and bigger. Beccka cant wait to get home to dream up all the tricky question she could put to a whole school full of girl. Not to mention the teachers. Beccka laughing for half the way home. Suddenly she say —

'Mr Connor, you know the Bible?'
'Well Beccka I read my Bible every day so I should think so.'
'Promise you will answer a question.'
'Promise.'
'Mr Connor, do angels wear brassieres?'
'Well Beccka, as far as I know only the lady angels need to.'
Beccka laugh cant done. Wasnt that the answer she was waiting for?

'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' is from Summer Lightning and Other Stories. See p. 114 for review.