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NJK Holt

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NJK Holt

Abstract
As I was saying ... 'Sorry?'. Yes man, name's Holt, NJK. Not JK Holt, get it? Boy, as I say, you got to show them what we made of, bit of spunk, can't ever let up; no Sir. Like I remember saying to that boy who favour you, you know, one of them Archibalds from Montserrat; young boy come over in the '50s; good family, mother and three sons. Yes man, as I said to young Archibald that day: you are young, you're going to their schools; show them what you can do. You are the future in this place: leave the past to we. To us. We doing our bit. We cleaning up from behind. Your job is to press on, man. Bruk it up. Used to meet sometimes on a Sunday morning at the Baths. Paddington Public Baths. I call those meetings strategic man. Yes, Sir, the boys were serious. Well, there were two types of boys in those days. The Saturday-night Boys at the Palais handing over their money to the women, and the Sunday-morning Boys at the Baths. Some of them miss out. Fraid to show theirselves in public, going to the Baths.
As I was saying ...

'Sorry?'.

Yes man, name's Holt, NJK. Not JK Holt, get it? Boy, as I say, you got to show them what we made of, bit of spunk, can't ever let up; no Sir. Like I remember saying to that boy who favour you, you know, one of them Archibalds from Montserrat; young boy come over in the '50s; good family, mother and three sons. Yes man, as I said to young Archibald that day: you are young, you're going to their schools; show them what you can do. You are the future in this place: leave the past to we. To us. We doing our bit. We cleaning up from behind. Your job is to press on, man. Bruk it up. Used to meet sometimes on a Sunday morning at the Baths. Paddington Public Baths. I call those meetings strategic man. Yes, Sir, the boys were serious. Well, there were two types of boys in those days. The Saturday-night Boys at the Palais handing over their money to the women, and the Sunday-morning Boys at the Baths. Some of them miss out. Fraid to show theirselves in public, going to the Baths. Like is their fault the English people and them don't have bathrooms in the house they renting to black people. And you say to them: no need to shame. Is not you build house without bathroom. The house don't even belong to you. And even then, you know, I make meself a promise, right there in the Paddington Baths in 1956. Or '58. No, it was '56 because Nasser had just close the canal and make we proud, man. You could have play cricket in the street in Trafalgar Square: the man stop the English traffic dead; turn off they petrol. Anyway, the promise I make to myself was this: whenever black people start to buy they houses, I going be the one to put in the bathroom. And I start to train meself in the art of bathroom-making. There was a little library at the bottom of Shirland Road; I used to go there at night and look up bathrooms, pore over them. Because I was what you would call a man without skills; except the skills of survival which even now they like to under-rate. I taught myself about dealing with your bath and your Ascot and your plumbing – always remember your waste; you is human, you have to be clean. And then the tiling to top it off. This was a task I set myself, ready to play my part converting the houses that used to be English.
Holt was about to go on, but they were in the launderette, and the young man who favoured Archibald seemed to be in a hurry. Hurry for what? Holt had been around in this country for thirty years and he couldn’t see what there was to hurry for now. He was doing a real wash, not like the young fellow who came in only to use the dryer for his jeans and T-shirt and nonsense. Holt had a real wash, most of it belonged to the woman he lived with; he wasn’t proud.

But he had wanted to explain to the boy that he wasn’t boasting about the early days; he just wanted the young ones to get the picture. When he saw someone bright-looking like this, who could be the age of his son or grandson, he felt an obligation to pass on what he knew. No, the Baths weren’t that big a deal; it was only a meeting-place after all, but there the boys somehow managed to lay down plans that put both their character and their future on the line. That’s why he said it was strategic. Take for instance the business of First and Second Class. Well, you took it for granted you always ordered a First Class bath, because what you’re saying to them is this: I am accustomed to baths. It’s my situation in this country in one of your houses that denies me a bath where I live, that brings me here. First Class, please. And double soap and towel. Or two towels and soap. The saggar-boys in they two-tone shoes and Brylcream spending as much at the Palais; and on what?

But you know, the boys didn’t stop at First Class, Soap and Towel. Soon, we was all buying two baths, man One for my baby; And one more for the road. But seriously, to demonstrate you were a clean man, you had to buy a First Class bath just to wash out the bath, to wash off the dirt of the last customer, and then you fill up First Class again and bathe. And I tell you one thing, the bath-attendant respect you for it. Because only the boys from home did that. This is a temporary measure, you telling him; this is a half-way house. Believe what you see, not what you read in the News of the World. And like young Archibald say: even the best Romans used to bathe in public.

Holt would have liked to explain how he got side-tracked from bathrooms into another sort of business, but the two people left in the launderette weren’t the sort of people he thought he could confide in; so he started taking stuff out of the wash, proud that a woman customer was curious about his mainly women’s clothing (and him dressed like a Bank Manager during a boom) something she obviously couldn’t get her own man to do.

They used to call him Holt, just Holt – or JK – but that changed; that changed after he opened his shop. The original JK Holt was a West Indian cricketer from Jamaica who was on the edge of Test selection (in fact, he had had a few Tests at home against England and Australia. Then later,
they took him to India and Pakistan. And come to think of it, even he wasn’t that original – he was JK Holt, Jr). So when Holt opened up his shop in Ladbroke Grove in 1957, the boys decided to call him NJK Holt – Not JK Holt, to distinguish him from the cricketer.

He got into the business by accident. One Sunday morning at the Baths, he ran into the boy from Montserrat, one of the Archibalds from Harris’, who said that his family had just bought a house in Bevington Road from an Irishman, and there was a big room downstairs with all sorts of rubbish and an upright piano they didn’t know what to do with – the room, not the piano, for Archibald was a bit of joker – and why didn’t JK, who looked like a bit of businessman, open up a little shop down there? Only problem was it was bang opposite the public loo and they didn’t know whether it was a good thing to sell eatables just opposite where people were coming to relieve themselves.

Young Archibald had seemed reliable enough in other ways because not only had he bought his two First Class baths – catching on immediately – but he had brought his own soap and towel. Holt was more interested in having a go at putting a bathroom in the newly-acquired house, but Archibald said there already was a bathroom in the house; the reason he was at the Baths this Sunday was that they were having a wedding reception at the house later that day, for a cousin; and since so many people – including the helpers – would be wanting to use the bath, he decided to ease the pressure by coming over to Paddington. What with one thing and another, Holt ended up going to the reception at the Archibald house in Bevington Road.

The public loos didn’t look good just outside, and that seemed to rule out any sort of business, even if you weren’t thinking about food. And his business was bathrooms, not food.

But later, when the newly-married couple and most of the guests were gone, the boys who remained drifted downstairs to the big room where a young fellow from Trinidad entertained them on the piano. They were talking about this and that, how life was beginning to pass them by – one fellow had already been in this country eleven years – would you believe it? – and had been in and out of the army, though he had missed the War. Only the students – and maybe the nurses – seemed to know what they were about, no one was actually setting the place alight. The only thing you owned – except in special cases like this house – was the odd second-hand car which Moseley’s men were attacking saying you got it by putting their women on the streets. In the middle of all this – and some really heavy jazz on the piano – the boys insisted that JK open a shop in this very space, selling groceries. Before they said goodnight they helped him to compose the sign for the shop; the only doubt in anyone’s mind being whether the English, so funny in their ways, would come into the shop and buy from one of the boys.

NJK HOLT (Groceries) was a slight mistake as Holt didn’t go in for
groceries right away, but stocked up on Carnation milk and Omo and bags of salt-fish and brown rice and a few other things in tins and tubes that weren’t grocery. Holt was living with an ‘older’ woman at the time called Betty, and it is she who stayed in the shop while Holt went around organizing supplies and advertising by word of mouth. Betty couldn’t read too well and had her own way of pronouncing things, like looking at the label on the milk and saying ‘Coronation’. So NJK HOLT (Groceries) became known as the place where you could get real Coronation milk; and there were jokes, sometimes lewd, sometimes elevated, about ‘Queen Betty’.

It was at least eighteen months before Holt went out of the grocery business, and instead of organizing his bathrooms, had to do all sorts of drudgery to pay off his debts. And on top of everything Betty went and died. No one knew the operation was going to be serious, no one prepared you for it; but you know what these doctors are like, wrong and strong: they’ve got the knife and you’re unarmed.

And is a terrible thing, boy, to have a woman you don’t love die on you like that; it leave you with this thing they have in this country called guilt; boy it eat into you like that dry rot business into an old house. And you try to cut it out and replace this, replace, that, till you don’t know what else to replace. Even if you fit a whole new bathroom you got to have a house to put it in. Time come, boy, you feel like accepting defeat, and just handing over to the new generation, the offspring. Some people lucky to be able to do that. NJK HOLT iii: that would have been nice. But as I say, things take a long time, and before you know what happen, they already calling it the ’70s; and calling you old.

And boy, it was like there was more deaths in the family; no one much about to share the new jokes, or recall the old ones. Take the new bathroom business, for instance, the Half-Way House: in the old days the boys would have shared the joke that old JK was if not throwing in the towel at least settling for a draw. Or to put it another way: NJK had accepted there was no point in trying to bowl out the opposition; and some of them would have give him hell that in the business of bathrooms he had set his sights lower than in the business with a woman, deciding beforehand not to go all the way (though if the truth be known his new partner, replacing Betty, had developed a way of punishing him just as he had punished Betty, one sister taking revenge for the other – that anyone in his place would have settled for a draw). Even the JK Holt joke seemed stale now, now that all cricket talk was about Viv Richards and Clive Lloyd and the four West Indies fast bowlers. People didn’t even know who JK Holt was. They were asking a man to forget his first family because he happened to be remarried.
Even young Archibald – that was becoming a bit of a joke, a man of his age with a white beard – had gone into decline. Holt sought him out, threw him a bit of a life-line, offered him a partnership in the *Half-Way House* for old times sake: remember, this was the man who got him started in business; this is the man who used to have ideas on putting the world to rights; on the moon-rockets in the ’60s and whether the Moon wasn’t some mid-American desert and America and Russia in this thing together laughing at we. This was the man who told you about Vietnam and why African countries should or should not redraw their boundaries. Now, he was into another sort of struggle.

Archibald turned down Holt’s offer of a share in the *Half-Way House* because his energy was taken up with a woman. That was new. It seems that Archibald and his woman had come together at a level that was not only what you’d call graduate but post-graduate where he was into identifying her needs and fulfilling them and because this wasn’t just old-fashioned sex but something complicated, it turned into a full-time job which left the brother no time for other business and very little for his paying job of teaching in a school.

Holt tried several times to discover the nature of this woman’s needs – because she wasn’t a large lady and she didn’t seem extravagant, but you never know – but Archibald refused to come clean and merely said that his woman’s needs were no different from any other woman’s needs and that his woman was simply teaching him not to be selfish. It was Archibald not Holt who had gone to their schools and universities and maybe they resented you so much for it, they made you sign away the rest of your life like that servicing a woman full of needs, a woman who didn’t seem to have any more needs than anybody else. Holt was grateful that he didn’t have that kind of education and ambition and that the woman he lived with didn’t seem to have that kind of need. Archibald even dressed as if he was doing penance, as if he was still a student – a man with a grey beard – as if he was still going on demonstrations. No one who saw Holt on the one hand, and Archibald on the other, would ever guess which was the teacher fulfilling a woman’s need and which was the plumber in the family.

So Holt wore the tie for him (as long as one of them did it, the pressure eased); wore the tie to his bathrooms, and wore a rose in his button-hole. So they laughed at him. Nice. (If they weren’t laughing at you in this country they were doing something worse: never forget that.) Sometimes he was the funny man in the crowd, patrolling the boundary at cricket, the talking calypsonian; sometimes he was the African, the South American President, his uniform heavy with decoration. Sometimes the threat was more subtle. When it comes in the guise of a woman, a real woman with impeccable taste in bathrooms, what’s a man to do? So one day, this woman, no kidding, comes up and offers her life to Holt. And here’s Holt thinking: no one ever teach me to handle my own life so what
I going do with something really valuable like this? The thought of Archibald helped to clear his head: what sort of servicing did this one want, or need? But you can’t get your mind round that, can you? The enormity of the gift. So different from Holt’s present living-arrangement which was a marriage without foreign risks, where you exchanged gifts you knew the value of. This other thing was like having something you could never own delivered to your house. Made not in any one country. Countless unknown centuries of Kings and peasants putting it together: Here JK. Is yours. Take it. Is not right to tease a man like this. He had already lost one woman to the Health Service and the second one he was making do with also bore the mark of that butcher. He would say No as gently as he could to this new bit of temptation. The little voice that kept saying: ‘JK, Go for it. Go past the Half-Way House’ was drummed out in the jokes and laughter of those who knew him. He wondered how old Betty had managed to pretend not to mind jokes about her Coronation milk.

If he was on the edge of a joke, he would live up to it and dress the part. Hat, umbrella and waistcoat (and a flower in his button-hole) were the uniform of this Master Plumber determined again to maintain the spirit of the Baths; and he paid court to the woman whose gift he had to reject. Naturally, like other people, she had a man somewhere out of sight, so JK was speaking to him, too. JK was redoing her bathroom at the same time as the rest of the house was being renovated; and she was in residence trying to keep it clean. It was a smart, expensive house but a small one and the other workmen (who came dressed in overalls) were putting in new ceilings and making the house smaller.

So Holt, in the spirit of love and regret, observed that workmen should cut away old plaster, not cover it up, not hide it.

And she liked that.

He didn’t like to think of her in this lovely dining-room, the meal laid out, crisp new plaster above her head, but behind that, evidence of discolour, of accident, of rot: an old life.

This was more than she expected.

Apart from other things, if you continued to nail new ceilings to old ones, you would reduce the space for living; it was like what they were doing on the Underground reducing the diameter of the tunnels by up to two feet every time they redecorated. Surely, people must understand the politics of that.

Why are we talking about ceilings? Why are we talking about the Underground?

He apologized at having to take time to change his clothes on coming, on going; and began to wonder if he had been hasty in thinking he could not begin to fill this woman’s needs; and wondered if there was less to it than Archibald had pretended.
At last his washing was done. Everything out of the dryer and folded. It was starting to rain. He’d get a taxi, a mini-cab to take the washing home. Sometimes you were lucky. Last time he called the mini-cab he got his daughter. Her name was Cristobel. Or Mandy. She asked him his profession because now no one was interested in the NJK (even the woman who shared something of his life and was edging him out of it, called him something else). But Holt knew better than to complain of one woman to another.

His daughter said to him that she drove a cab to gain independence. And, in truth, she manoeuvred the car as if she possessed the road. She had a regular job working in Social Services but had been a mini-cab driver in her spare time for six years now.

Holt wondered if he should lie to his daughter, take credit for her, take her back home.

She wanted, she said, to liberate herself from the nonsense with men, and to pay her own way for her travelling, which was her passion. Last year she’d been to Americas for six weeks; the year before – with some women friends – she had gone to the Middle East. This year, it was Athens or Rome. Holt felt that something of the spirit of the Baths was being transmitted through the generations.

Not that it was her ambition in life to be a mini-cab driver.

So true. So true. And yet. As he was saying to that boy – one of our new MPs, you know, boy who used to come to the Baths in the old days: Boy, is not exactly what you want, is not exactly what we want; but you might as well go for it.

The mini-cab came, and this time the driver had a beard.