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Nobody's Business (Extracts from a work in progress)

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Abstract

It was a hot day and the wooden house was stuffy. Probably no one had been in it for more than a few minutes since Othniel had been taken to the hospital. Someone must have come for the clothes he'd been buried in. Danielle opened the windows in the front room and sat down in one of the big morris chairs her grandfather had made himself.

JOHN GILMORE

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(Extracts from a work in progress)

It was a hot day and the wooden house was stuffy. Probably no one had been in it for more than a few minutes since Othniel had been taken to the hospital. Someone must have come for the clothes he'd been buried in. Danielle opened the windows in the front room and sat down in one of the big morris chairs her grandfather had made himself.

The place hadn't changed much. All her life Danielle had been in and out of this house. Her mother was only a few yards up the road, and grandparents were grandparents, but her father had had a lot to do with it as well. When Danielle was two, Martin Ostrehan had joined that great line of men in new felt hats and new wool suits which didn't fit quite right and made them sweat as they laboured up the gang-plank, each with a big-able cardboard suitcase in his hand – a valise they always called it in those days – up the gang-plank and off the island and onto the ship. And a couple of weeks later they would all have gotten off the ship in Southampton and walked down another gang-plank to catch the train to London. Her father did write, though for a while now this meant no more than a couple of lines at Christmas, and from time to time he would send presents, usually expensive and hideous decorative objects which her mother always put on display in the living-room. 'Oh, yes, my husband send that for me,' she would tell visitors, 'it must have cost him plenty money, but he doing real well up in England.' No one was ever so bold as to ask why he had never come back, why she had never gone over there to see him. There was a photograph of the two of them on their wedding day on the top of the television, and as far as everybody was concerned her mother was most definitely Mrs Clarissa Ostrehan. Danielle imagined her father had another woman in England, perhaps another family, but if her mother knew, she wasn't telling.

When her husband had left, Clarissa was only twenty-seven, well below the age at which it begins to be suggested to women that it is time for them to shut their legs and get a tambourine, but, in a society where for many people malicious gossip was as natural as squeezing lime on fried fish, nobody had ever managed to find anything scandalous to say about her. A teacher at the local primary school, she was its head at forty-two, and for as long as Danielle could remember, she had been one of the pillars of the church. Which meant most of the day on Sundays and two

or three nights during the week.

Danielle got up and went into the kitchen. Somebody had unplugged the fridge and emptied it, leaving the door propped open with a folded piece of newspaper. The water was still connected, but the day was so hot that Danielle had to run the tap for some time before the water was drinkable.

So whenever her mother was busy, Danielle had been left in the care of her grandfather and her grandmother Albertine, who was Miss Montgomery's aunt. Miss Montgomery's first name was Mavis, but she was such a sour old bitch that nobody ever called her anything but Miss Montgomery. Not to her face anyway. But Granny Albertine had been a sweet old dear. Danielle had early discovered that the children of the district didn't want to play with a teacher's daughter, particularly not with Mrs Ostrehan's daughter, but this hardly mattered when Albertine was there to share with her the pleasures of an old-fashioned childhood. Riddle-a-riddle-a-ree, Who can riddle this riddle to me? – A white lady in a green dress with black children. Which, as everybody used to know, is a soursop. But the children nowadays are only interested in video games. How often do you see girls skipping in the street?

Mr Jones teaches the scholars
 The best he can
 In reading and writing and spelling
 And doing arithmetic.
 He never forgets to use his whip!
 And this is the way the months go round:
 January, February, March ...

Mrs Ostrehan could be a real Mr Jones at home as well as at school, but Granny Albertine never ever got cross, never complained, even when Danielle, in spite of sincere efforts to please, proved incapable of acquiring her grandmother's beloved skills with a needle.

Danielle rinsed the glass and left it on the draining board. No drying cloth in sight. She started to look through the rooms in earnest. Albertine had been much younger than Othniel, but she had died when Danielle was fifteen, leaving the old man to many years of widowerhood. The press and the chest of drawers were still full of Othniel's clothes; nearly all of Albertine's things must have gone long ago. The framed piece of cross-stitch was something she had done – the large eye and the inevitable THOU GOD SEEST ME. But where was Moses? Yes, in the dark.

How many hours she had spent in this front room, sitting at the table doing her homework, or just listening to the old man. He would talk to her for hours about his childhood, how he had nearly been killed in the mighty hurricane of 1898 which claimed a hundred lives and left so many thousands homeless, how his father had worn a coat of fine black cloth

and great black boots polished till they shone like glass and a tall black silk hat that shone like the sun on the feathers of a blackbird. His father McGregor Bispham had been the best coachman in all the island, Othniel had told her, so fine a coachman that when he died the white people had raised a monument of marble to his memory. And it was true. Or at least that part of it was true. Once while she was a student at the University Danielle had gone out to the country church in the district where none of the family had lived for many years. The monument was a small tablet on an inside wall of the church, but it was marble, and it said that McGregor Bispham was 'for more than forty years the coachman of the Hon. Augustus Perceval of this island, during which time he earned the attachment of the children of his master, by whom this tablet is erected in sorrowful remembrance'. Enough to make you puke – or some faint stirring of the brotherhood of man? Even now, Danielle could not make up her mind.

The strange foliage carved on the large mahogany-framed couch with its caned back and seat was dusty now. For years Danielle had thought it the most desirable object any member of her family possessed. Othniel had made it himself, what for most people would have been a lifetime ago. The arthritis in his hands had forced him to give up his cabinet-maker's work before Danielle was born.

Once he had spent the best part of an afternoon telling her about how she ought to be glad it was so easy to make a cup of tea, how she should reflect upon what a blessing it was to have a pipe bringing water right inside her house. Danielle had never had to carry a pail of water more than a few yards; Othniel told her to 'T'ink bout carrying a big-able conaree-jar a milenahalf to de pond, an' den you got to carry it all de way back wid de weight o' de water in it.' He told her how he used to fetch wood from the gully for cooking, and the seeds off the mahogany trees, and which woods were good for cooking, and which would burn well even when green and which ones would smoke too much. And she had forgotten. Perhaps she should have tried asking him questions in a methodical manner. Perhaps she should have made the effort to write everything down. Regrets were useless.

Danielle tried to bring to mind some image of her grandfather as a small boy. Rags? No, they must have been better off than most. Carefully patched hand-me-downs, perhaps. Long trousers, bare feet. A collarless shirt, maybe a man's worn jacket several sizes too large. A limeskin hat, the brim drooping, felt worn smooth and shapeless ... Clear enough, but it was some other boy she had seen in a turn-of-the-century photograph at the Museum.

Othniel stubbornly refused to be anything other than an old man. Othniel lying in his coffin, dressed in his Sunday clothes with as much

care as a shop-window dummy, except that his collar and tie were loose about the tortoise scrawniness of his neck. Othniel well past his hundredth birthday, slowly oh so slowly walking the length of the short street to the church on the corner where he had worshipped since before the memory of man. Sitting where he always sat, in the corner at the back of the church, in a pew he had made himself, like all the others in the church. Sitting in the kitchen at home, while Danielle trimmed his hair; thin, like peppercorns scattered over his yellow-brown scalp. She held up her hands, her fingers remembering the shape of his skull, the firm fleshy lump as big as a guava at the nape of his neck ... At the back, so you couldn't see it when they'd laid him out ... Danielle clenched her fists to drive the thought away and then thrust them into the last of the cardboard boxes.

More church programmes, more tracts. Recipes clipped from magazines, all at least twenty years old – these must have been Granny Albertine's – more newspapers, and – wrapped in plain paper, a photograph of a young black man wearing a white linen suit and a bow-tie. There he was, posed against some obviously painted vegetation, leaning one elbow on a classical column and holding a straw hat in the opposite hand. The words 'Mother with Best regards Othniel' trailed across the backdrop in much the same writing as the signature in the schoolbook and prevented any doubt. On the heavy card mount, in gilt lettering, it said 'Antônio Pessoa, photographo, Av. 7 de Setembro, Manaus'.

Manaus?

What on earth had he been doing eight hundred miles up the Amazon? Danielle had never heard her grandfather, or anyone in the family, give the slightest hint that he had ever been out of the island.

Wait ...

De year after my fader dead was de year de hurricane come, chile. I was only twelve years old, but dere does be some tings yuh kyaan furget, no matter how long de Lord spare yuh life. Everybody from de village go up at de Great House to shelter when de wind start to blow. An' it blow so hard Mister Perceval frighten fuh de roof an' bring he fambly down in de cellar to pass de night wid de niggers an' de yams.

De Great House roof ain't lose summuch as one shingle, but de nex morning Kinnoul village gone, gone, gone. Sandymount ain't too bad, cause de hill did shelter it some. Mister Perceval build back de people houses, but he put everybody at Sandymount, cause all two estates did belong to he. Kinnoul village gone. No person hear bout Kinnoul village from da day to dis one.

My mudda move into de servant quarters at de Great House an' she send me an' Albert to town to live wid she brother pon she mudda side. That was my uncle Theophilus an' is he dat learn me all bout carpentry an' cabinet-making. Muh mudda nuse to come to town now an' again to

look fuh we, an' muh uncle an' he wife Phoebe treat we real nice. Dey had a son too, de same age as me, an' de t'ree o' we did have some real good times till Albert go way to Panama to wuk pon de canal an' never come back.

Oh ... What was Theophilus son name? He name Oscar Weatherhead, a good-looking clear-skin fella. All de girls did like he too bad. He was a real good carpenter too. He fader did mean de shop fuh he, but he never come back from Sout' America, which is how it come to me instead ...

Chile, yuh don'wanta hear no more bout my young days. King Solomon tell we dat Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him. I do some terr'ble wicked tings before de Good Lord send salvation to my soul. Yuh don'wanta hear bout dem tings. To besides, I too tired ...