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Writing home

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Abstract
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When she venture a comment to Gramps about how Pansy always looking for trouble, though Grace don’t reveal how, Gramps shake his head and say, ‘That one own-way from she small. Your dead Granny Elsie is partly to blame. Is she mind Pansy when your Ma was still doing live-in housework, before Stewie and Edgar born. Is she spoil Pansy rotten. Never say “No” to that child. It’s a sad thing’.

Every afternoon Grace and Pansy walk home from school together from ever since Grace start going to school. Even when Grace is old enough to know the way, it continue like that, which sometimes make her resentful.

‘Gracie, is not that I don’t think you can walk home by yourself now you are bigger,’ Ma explain. ‘But I prefer if you and your sister walk together. Pansy can help you if anything happen, if you fall down, or twist your foot, or anything like that. And you can remind her that she not to take her own sweet time — and you know she is a sweet-time miss — for she have things to do when she reach here.’

The trouble start right as Mortimer arrive. The first time they see him, he is cutting lumber with a big saw on a workbench under a lignum vitae tree near to the boundary of land that used to belong to Miss-Maud-God-bless-Her-Soul. Miss Maud die many years previous, but for as long as Grace can remember that is how people speak of Miss Maud, so in Grace’s mind that is her name.

Mortimer’s shirt is hanging on a bush and he is working with only his trousers on, his bare back looking like somebody spit on it and buff it to a high shine.

‘Ah, Miss Gracie,’ Gramps smile and reply, ‘like the poor, spit we have always with us.’

There are patches of sweat near the waist and on the rear of Mortimer’s trousers and they hold on to his body in those places. The belt he have on is a belt crocheted in Rasta colours, red, green and gold. As he slide the saw back and forth, the muscles in his arms and back remind Grace of a picture of sand dunes in her Geography book. The colour is different but the curves and ripples is the same.

‘Peace and love and Jah blessing, sistren,’ he say very nice and polite as they walking past.
The structure he is building is down near to the boundary line of the property, with the front of it sitting right on the top of the bank side, so their journey take them straight past his workbench.

‘Afternoon, sir,’ Grace say.
‘You not from round here?’ Pansy slow down, smile her best smile and inquire. Mortimer smile back, shake his head, go back to his work.
‘So what you building?’ Pansy now stop to talk.
‘Come, Pansy,’ Grace say soft-soft, holding onto her hand and dragging her.
‘We not to stop.’
‘Then why you don’t go on?’ Pansy hiss her reply.
‘Just a small shop,’ Mortimer answer, then he solve the problem, for he dip his head respectful-like and turn back to his saw in a way that show he done with talking.

After that day, Grace notice that Pansy start staying late at school one day a week, sometimes two. She tell Ma that she doing extra work so she can maybe pass the grade nine exam and get into the Senior Secondary School in Cross Town. Grace don’t think that is true, but she don’t say nothing, just make sure when school done that she hurry home.

One — rare these days — afternoon when she and Pansy walking together by the cook-shop which is now finished and painted in red, green and gold, with a sign that say ‘Ital cook-shop,’ Pansy tell Grace to wait a little outside the shop, because she need to tell Mortimer something.

‘What you could have to tell him?’ Grace ask.
‘None of your business,’ Pansy reply.

St Chris roadside shopkeepers only stay in the shop front when things really busy. The rest of the time, they go in the back to tend to their cooking or stocktaking or other business, always keeping an ear out for customers. All a customer need to do is rap on the counter or ring the bell. Pansy now walk into the front of the shop like she accustomed, go down a short corridor and knock on the door that lead into the room behind, where Mortimer is now living.

Grace see Mortimer open the door, smile at Pansy, then look up at Grace as if to give a greeting, but Pansy shove him back inside and shut the door. At the start, Grace can just barely hear the two of them talking, for is a thick door. After a time, she can hear nothing.

Grace stand up, waiting and waiting. She can’t picture what it could be that is taking Pansy so long to tell Mortimer. She have a feeling that something bad is going to happen. Also she feel like Pansy abandon her, for even if the two of them always fuss, she still love her own-way big sister. She is thinking maybe she should take out a book and read, for it don’t make no sense to just stand up doing nothing, and she start to look around for a place to maybe sit down when she hear Pansy shout.

‘Oh Lord! Oh Lord!’ she hear Pansy bawl out. ‘Lord help me. Oh Gaaawd, help!’
Pansy’s voice get louder and louder. Grace frighten. She drop her schoolbag, run quick into the shop, and push the door to Mortimer’s room with all her might. After a couple tries, it give way, and Grace is looking at one pair of feet with socks, one pair of feet with no socks, four legs with no covering and Mortimer’s bare bottom rising and falling with a motion that remind her of when he was using the saw. Grace look, turn right around, march out, pick up her school bag and start walking home.

Pansy is panting hard when she catch up with Grace.
‘So… So you going to tell Ma?’ She stop. Take plenty breaths. ‘You going to tell Ma. Right, Miss Goody-goody?’

Grace turn her head, look Pansy up and down, say nothing, turn and keep going.
‘I ask you a question,’ Pansy say, rough and gruff, labouring to keep up again.
‘Somebody have to tell,’ Grace say. ‘So better is you.’
‘Make you couldn’t just wait outside like I tell you?’
‘If is that you was going in there to do, why you never just send me home?’
‘Is not that I was going in there to do…’
‘So what happen? Is force him force you?’
‘After nobody can’t force me to do what I don’t want to do.’
‘So you must be force him.’

Pansy make no response to that and Grace think, Puss thief your tongue, for you know I not wrong.
‘So you going tell Ma when she come home?’ Pansy ask again.
‘No need to tell,’ Grace say. ‘Your clothes mess up, you smell raw and, and you look funny.’
‘I look bad for true?’ Pansy sounding worried now.
‘Couldn’t look worse.’
‘Well, you go in by the front door and talk to Ma, that is, if she reach home already. Make sure to take up plenty time. Meanwhile I will go in through the back and make haste and change.’
‘Pansy, I not helping you hide that business from Ma. You is my big sister but…’
‘Sister?’ Pansy give out. ‘You is most definitely not my sister. After no sister of mine could stay like you. Look how you red and your eye stay funny.’

The rest of the time they walk home in silence, Grace biting her lip and blinking all the way.

* * * * *

Grace win a scholarship in the General Entrance Examination and the whole of Wentley Park Primary school into jubilation. Not that is the first scholarship anybody get from that school, for headmistress is well proud of the results the school get, year after year. But what Grace Carpenter manage to do has not ever been done before, and headmistress, honest as she is, admit she don’t expect it to
happen again any time soon. She get the second highest score in the exam in the whole of St Chris, and furthermore she score highest of all the girls that year. It sweet headmistress so till she give the school a holiday.

Ma and Pa are proud too, but they are careful in their praising up of Grace for no one of the children is to feel that they are any less important than the other, and no one of them is to feel that they are loved because they do well at school, for that is not a reason to love a child.

Gramps is another matter, though. Gramps is not Grace mother or father. Gramps may say what he please and praise who he want. And he is in his gungo. Now it don’t usually happen this way, for headmistress normally get the results before the news reach the world as announced in The Clarion newspaper. On the day of Grace’s triumph, however, the newspaper with the pass list arrive at Mr Wong at the exact same time as the postmistress in Wentley hand the envelope with the results to headmistress. So with one accord the news bruck out in the two places and Gramps is therefore wriggling around on his dancing feet when Grace arrive home early the afternoon.

‘Good afternoon, Professor Carpenter,’ he greet her. ‘May I carry your briefcase, Professor?’ he continue, as he twirl his hand in circles before him and then hold it in at his waist, bending forward in a deep bow. Then he stand up straight and press on. ‘I hear glad tidings, Professor. I hear that you have secured a post that will take you to the big city and away from this humble village. We shall be sorry to see you go but we are transported at the tidings.’

As she give him her schoolbag, Grace trying to hold in her smile so it is not too big across her face. She know Gramps is trying to cheer her up by talking like that, for over the waiting time, they more than once have a ‘Suppose I get a scholarship’ conversation. She confess to him that she want to go to secondary school but she don’t want to leave Ma and Pa and the boys and Princess and Sam, ‘and you too Gramps’. There is no alternative though, for the high schools near to Wentley Park are too far for her to travel to each day, and Ma and Pa can’t afford the bus fare anyhow. In Kingstown she can stay with Pa’s cousin, Miss Carmen, who have a house close enough to school so she can walk. And besides, if she get through to St Chad’s, her first choice school, is a much better school than any of those nearby. So Kingstown it will have to be.

Now that the news is here, she confuse as well as frighten. She not surprise that she pass and win a scholarship, for she never think that the exam was hard. In fact she not even surprise that she win a place at St Chad’s. But she wasn’t expecting to come so high, and now it happen she don’t have a plan in her mind. She don’t know how she is to feel about it or what she is to think or say.

So she is scared about a lot of things, starting from how to fix her face when she is getting all the praise, and going along up to how she is going to manage all by herself when she leave Wentley Park and go to a strange city.
She and Gramps walk up the path between the cosmos plants that are yellow, purple and orange and grow thick and full, even in the dry time, for they drink up Ma’s soapy washing water and keep coming back year after year.

‘The Professor is very pensive,’ Gramps say. ‘Have you had a difficult day, Prof?’

Grace look up at Gramps and nod, and fat tears run down her face, jump from her chin onto the starched bodice of her uniform, leap off from there to plop on the ground.

‘I think you’ve had too much excitement, Miss Gracie. I made some Seville orange lemonade and there is bully beef and crackers left over from lunch. How would you feel about some vittles to celebrate?’

Gramps say nothing about the tears. He fix up lunch while Grace go inside and take off her uniform, change into her day clothes, and take out her homework books. Then she go and sit at the table where Gramps set out lunch.

‘Father we give thee thanks,’ Gramps pray, ‘for this food, which we ask you to bless unto our bodies and our bodies to your service. We give you thanks especially for this great success that Gracie has had news of today, and ask you to help her to be joyful at this time, and not be afraid, knowing that your grace will be sufficient for her. Amen.’

‘Amen.’

‘Now eat up, Prof. Ma send to say congratulations. Mrs. Sampson too. Ma say she leaving early.’

‘Pa coming early too, Gramps?’

‘He will come as soon as he can, Gracie. But you know he is not his own master.’

Gracie wonder why, if slavery so long done.

* * * * *

Never mind that Grace gone off to secondary school in Kingstown, she and her brothers are still thick as thieves. For one thing, she write them faithfully every time she write Ma and Pa and Gramps. Quite apart from school, there is plenty else to write about, for life in Kingstown is as different from life in Wentley as barge is from brown sugar.

For one thing, in Kingstown day and night is the same, at least in that part of the city where Grace is boarding. People forever on the street, cursing, laughing, shouting, dancing to sound system music till morning come, so Gracie have to learn to sleep with a pillow over her head and to go down into a deep dark underground of unrest from which she get up drugged and headachey, instead of refreshed from sweet dream-filled slumber, warm and safe against the bodies of her siblings rain or shine, which is what she is accustomed to in Wentley Park.

Grace boarding with Pa’s first cousin. Miss Carmen is plenty older than Pa, well past sixty, while Pa is fifty-one on his next birthday. She is the most straight-
and-tall woman Gracie ever see, not stiff, but she walk always with shoulders back and chin up, like she own St Chris. Her thick hair is completely white and mostly she wear it in a long plait coiled on top of her head like a crown.

And she always wearing clothes make out of African cloth, blue and gold, green and red, purple and orange. They old, plenty of them, with the colours wash out, but the patterns are still spectacular. The tops are large and loose fitting with long matching skirts and sometimes trousers.

‘Miss Carmen,’ Grace make bold to ask after she been staying at 127 Manfield Park Road for a week, ‘how come you wear those clothes?’

Miss Carmen raise her eyebrows enquiring and ask, looking down on herself, ‘These clothes? Why? You like them, Grace?’

‘Yes, ma’am. I never see anything like them before.’

So Miss Carmen tell Grace how she is a long-time member of the United Negro Improvement Association, and how she meet the great Marcus Garvey as a girl, and how she go with her mother to the plays and parades in Jamaica that he organize. Miss Carmen born in St Chris, but she go to Jamaica as a child, and grow up there, and only return to St Chris as a young woman.

Gramps long time tell Grace about the UNIA and Marcus Garvey. But Gramps never meet Mr Garvey, though one time as a young man visiting Jamaica he squeeze into the back of a hall and hear the end of a speech Mr Garvey was giving about the need for the negro race to be proud of itself and proud of its descent from the peoples of Africa and glad of their inheritance of those ancient cultures and civilizations.

‘I wear these clothes because I like them,’ Miss Carmen say. ‘They suit me and make me feel…’ She do a slow spin to show off the pattern of splashes and circles, and finish off, ‘special!’ with a smile. ‘But,’ she go on, ‘I wear them too so people will notice. I want folks here to learn about where our ancestors came from and to understand the great struggles we faced to get where we are now.”

Miss Carmen is always talking about heritage: British heritage, which she say some Christiphonians do have in their blood but all have in their head, since, from they capture it in the seventeenth century, the British running St Chris till Independence which they just get, nine years ago. She also talk about her Indian heritage. Right at the minute she is busy finding out about it for she just discover that her father’s father’s father was a indentured labourer from Calcutta, come like so many others to work in the sugar cane fields of St Chris.

Grace think a lot about that word, heritage. She wonder if your heritage could get into your genes, into your blood. And Miss Carmen is not even as black as Pa or Gramps or Ma. She is a brown woman, though her hair is curled tight. Maybe one day she can talk to Miss Carmen about heritage, about where the red in her and the puss eyes come from.

Grace walking home from school thinking about this, thinking too that Manfield Avenue is one long stretch of bar and dance hall, though there is really
never room enough. People dance in yards on dry hard-packed earth or on cement that they pour over dirt, so it break up quick and they patch it and patch it again and a lot of the time it so crack up and bumpy she wonder how anybody can walk on it, much less dance. The bumpy floors of poor people ballrooms don’t stop nobody, though. People jump and wiggle and wind to the music, night after night, same way.

As for the signs that tell about the dance sessions, Grace find them so funny that she write them down and send them to Stewie and Edgar and Conrad. In one part of the Avenue, the signs always rhyming and making fun.

‘Cosmo as Butch Cassidy, Carl as Chaka Zulu and Fenton as John Shaft invites you to celebrate The Year of the Water Rat at Steve’s Hideaway, A Nite of Passion in the Latest Fashion. Come even if Your Bones Squeak. We Got the Tonic to Make you Feel Sonic.’

‘Lord Nineymoon and Lord Tennysun with Don the Juan and Sancho the Pancho Call One and All to the Original Manfield Dance Hall for a Knight of Stir-it-Up and Dance Till You Drop at Huntley’s Honeypot House. Pay the Cover and Be a Lover.’

Stewie’s English Language teacher want the class to write poems and send to the St Chris newspapers. The idea of writing a poem is a big joke to Stewart, but he tell Edgar, who been writing songs since ever. So Edgar start to send poems to the paper. He make sure to enclose in his letters a copy of any poem he send to the papers. No poems don’t come out in any paper yet, but he keeping on with his efforts.

More than anything Grace is glad for the letters from Edgar, Stewie, Ma and Pa and Gramps. Even Conrad send a short note every now and then, which Grace is happy to get even if it is under orders from Gramps and, as she well know, a way to get him to practice his penmanship and teach him letter writing skills. Ma also send a parcel every so often by someone coming in from Wentley Park on business, banana bread or St Chris spice cake, or Ma’s special sweet potato pudding, as well as a bit of pocket money and toiletries that Grace suspect are courtesy of Mr Wong.

Grace know she can go home when Christmas come. Till then she have to live with the noise and confusion of the city and make what she can of her school of first choice, and new-found place of torture, the great St Chad’s.

* * * * *

After she board one month with Miss Carmen, Grace start staying late at school every now and then so she can complete the better part of her homework in the library. Nobody with ordinary human powers of concentration is able to focus their mind on serious brainwork in the musical commotion taking place on Miss Carmen’s street almost every night, so Grace decide in third form to stay every day and do her homework at school.
The assignments increase each year and now, in fourth form, she is starting the University of Cambridge ‘O’ Level exam syllabus, and most days it take her over four hours to finish her homework.

Sometimes, late in the year, it is well past dark when she is getting home. As she walk down Manfield, it seem to Grace that the dance party phenomenon is getting more and more widespread. These days, the speaker boxes are set up outside for they will take up too much space in premises that want to jam in the biggest possible number of patrons. The enormous black rectangles are like small residences. If a hurricane blow down your house, you could easy take up shelter inside one of them. Grace wonder who is responsible for making them. She is sure it is a local effort for they look sturdy and stout in a way that says they are home grown machines, make to take hard knocks.

Stewie, Edgar and Conrad still writing her faithfully. The Clarion has taken three of Edgar’s poems, and he is proud as punch. They even pay him a few dollars for each one. She has the clippings of the published ones that he carefully cut and send to her pasted up on her wall. She don’t know if her brothers share her letters to them with Ma, Pa and Gramps. She don’t ask. It seem to her that they are getting big now, and have a right to their own business.

And they are looking out for her interests still.

‘Mind how you staying on the street till late at night,’ Stewie write.

‘Careful and don’t take no chance in that Kingstown city,’ Edgar write.

‘Take care of yourself!!!’ That advice is from Conrad who is learning about punctuation.

There are four other lodgers who live with Grace and Miss Carmen in the house, for that is how Miss Carmen make her living. Two are sisters, very old ladies with all their family gone abroad. Nobody connected to them left in St. Chris, but they refuse to leave and go to the USA or Canada or England, where they have relatives.

‘We can’t stand the coldness and furthermore we not able for anybody to treat us like we have no nose on our face.’ So say Miss Isoline.

‘We live here as people for too long. Better to be poor and somebody, than rich and no better than a mus-mus.’ So say Miss Glosmie.

Miss Carmen do everything for Miss Isoline and Miss Glosmie: cook food, wash clothes, clean their room, get medicine, write letters if need be, take them to doctor if need be, take them to church when they feel up to it, see that every day in good weather they take a walk around the small patch of yard in the back. Every month their children send money to take care of them. Miss Carmen manage their bank business too, make sure to pay their tithes at church, put something in their savings accounts, make their contribution to the Burial and Benevolent Societies.

There is space for two other boarders, and in the time Grace been in Kingstown, two young lady students from America come and go. The two boarders who just arrive since September to take their place are connected to Miss Carmen
distantly. Mr Philmore Buxton is Miss Carmen’s dead husband’s second cousin once removed. (Grace is not sure how that work but she vow to ask Ma or Pa or Gramps.) He look to Grace as if he is maybe forty or so. Mr Buxton’s wife, Ermina, looks plenty older than him. She is on leave from her job as a schoolteacher to get her BA degree and she is in her second year at the University. He is supposed to be looking for work. They don’t have no children.

Grace help Miss Carmen with the old ladies, doing some ironing of their clothes, fetching things from the grocery and the pharmacy, making them tea and lemonade, walking with them around the yard, reading to them sometimes. Pa and Ma pay a little something for her board, but this assistance is part of the arrangement, and Grace don’t mind, for Miss Carmen is a gracious lady. It is always, ‘Please’ when she appoint a task and ‘Thank you’ when it is completed.

Grace don’t see much of Mrs. Buxton who in addition to her studying give extra lessons to make a bit of money. Mr Buxton is not in the house very much either — Grace presume he is out hunting for a job — except on Sundays when Miss Carmen provide everyone with a dinner fit for a bishop, complete with special beverage and dessert. After Sunday dinner, the Buxtons are accustomed to go to visit Mrs. Buxton’s sister that live outside Kingstown in a settlement called Emancipation Heights, almost an hour’s bus ride from where they live on Manfield Road.

So one Sunday afternoon when Miss Carmen is taking her once a week sleep after dinner, and the old ladies are taking their regular afternoon sleep, Grace is surprised to hear somebody tap lightly on her door. This is when she get her school things ready: iron her uniform, darn any little tear in her middy blouse or her school tunic or in any of her clothes, clean her shoes, brush her hat, wash and oil her hair, cut and clean her nails. Sometimes, if she manage to finish her homework, she read and maybe take a nap.

When she open the door it is Mrs. Buxton.

‘Miss Grace, I am sorry to disturb you.’

‘It’s okay, Mrs. Buxton. Something wrong?’

‘Well, I don’t really know. Mr Buxton leave just after dinner, say he was going to the corner to buy cigarettes — you know, from one of those fellows that sell on the road?’

Grace nod.

‘I don’t see him since, and if we don’t get the next bus to go to my sister it will be too late, and we can’t not go, for she not well and she count on us…’ She pause, like she don’t quite know how to put the next thing she have to say. ‘She count on us for certain little things.’

Grace nod again, this time to indicate she get what Mrs Buxton is saying delicately. ‘Certain little things’ could mean they take her money or foodstuffs or toiletries. ‘Certain little things’ could also mean she is mental, or handicapped in
some other way, and the once-a-week visit is the only time she see caring people. Grace understand the subtle possibilities of these little things.

‘The ladies downstairs are all asleep, so I am asking you to tell Mr Buxton when he come back, for he will come looking for me when he don’t see me at the bus stop, that I have gone and he will see me back here at the usual time.’

‘I’ll be certain to tell him, Mrs. Buxton.’

‘Thank you very much, Miss Grace.’

Gracie listen as Mrs. Buxton hurry soft down the stairs and go out. When she hear the door close, she turn back to her book. She read for a while and her eyes get heavy until they make up their mind and close and she is under the arm of the big dolphin mama fish, so that together they gently bruise the bright water, leaving behind fine veins of froth in a train of disappearing webs. Suddenly the water is turning dark and cold and something wake her, not a noise, more a funny sensation in the air, a feeling of stifling, like the room is different and not in a good way. She half lift her lids to look through the window opposite her narrow iron bed, but there is nothing strange outside. The sun is setting, and the late Sunday afternoon settling on the city make it so the music blasting out of the mega-speakers seem muffled and the noises of people shouting seem not quite so loud.

She rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, swinging her legs on the ground, bending down to take up her shoes, when she look towards the door and see a man at the head of her bed. It flit across her mind, ‘He must be come for the message…’ In the self same minute, she find herself frozen with fright, for who is there but Mr Philmore Buxton, stink of sweat, and stinker of liquor, with his belt loose and his hand on his pants front that is puffed up like a pyramid-shaped balloon.

He is between her and the door and there is no other way out of the room. He is a big man, not tall, but thick and meaty.

Oh Jesus! Try as she try, she cannot move hand, foot, finger or toe! She can’t blink. Her mouth can’t open to scream. Only her eyes are crying, tears following after each other down her face like children in a line at school.

Mr Philmore Buxton get the zip down so his trousers now sliding onto his hips, penis poking through the slit of the pants, stiff and swell up like a ripe cucumber. The falling-down trousers don’t hold him back. He take two steps forward, throw her on the bed, drop himself on top of her. One hand hold tight round her neck, the other one shoving her skirt up round her waist, dragging down her panty. The stiff penis poking her, the force and tribulation of it freezing up her brain. She think her lungs going burst, only take a breath when the thing settle in the V between her legs. The air crank her brain.

And she think of Ma, what Ma tell her and Pansy again and again since they small. She distracted for a second when she hear her panty rip and feel the elastic sting her, for it is only a flimsy nylon thing. She panicking now, fear in her belly, for if him shove that baseball bat into her parts, she know she will just burst wide
open. But then the stinking penis that pushing into the hair between her legs not getting through the thick tangle, and in that minute Grace remember.


Grace cannot move knees or elbow or fist, for he is heavy on top of her, pinning her down, but one of his ears is now and then close by her mouth for he is moving up and down, trying to get inside her. When next it come up, she open her mouth and bite the ear, determined that top teeth going meet bottom teeth, like Ma instruct.

She hear a monstrous scream come out of the man’s mouth, and he rail up on the bed and grab onto the side of his head, face squeeze up, mouth twist. She spit out something gristly in her teeth.

‘Take him by surprise and run!’

Warm wetness in her mouth and blood on the side of his face and she don’t stop for nothing more. She heave him off of her, race through the door and down the stairs with the tear-up panty dropping down her legs. She drag it down and step out of it at the door, pull down her skirt, gallop out into the street. Barefoot and bawling, she run and run, up Manfield Avenue, past the Telephone Exchange, past the butcher shop, past the pharmacy, round the corner by Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses, up along Meinster Road past the Anglican Church of St Bride. The cuts and slices on her foot-bottom bite every time she touch ground, but the pain only register in her head.

When she come to herself, she realize she is running for her friend Olive’s place. Olive is boarding too and always telling Grace how she is sorry that she, Olive, is not boarding with family.