

Buru - My Earliest Memories

Every summer, my cousins, neighbours, and I were unleashed upon my great-grandmother for safe-keeping, in a small fishing community south west of Jamaica's capital, called Old Harbour. Our gang; half a dozen inquisitive pre-teens, were forced to share a swing my uncle made and fastened to a giant guango tree in her front yard, and a cricket bat my grandfather had since he was nine.

The less athletic among us often grew tired of waiting our turn to bat, wandered off to an empty lot behind her house, and returned as seasoned deipnosophists with dinner-table-stories often imagined, and more often, embellished.

On one adventure, I stepped on a rusty nail near a canoe stall about half a mile from her house and way outside her zone of permission. I was frozen with pain as I watched my foot swell in an instant. My older cousins piggybacked me to granny while I writhed from the excruciating throbbing that inhabited my foot. My granny, who I did not realize was the community apothecary until I was an adult, strapped to my wound a concoction of green banana leaf, pureed green banana, and black shoe polish she previously heated in the can with several strikes of matches.

Within minutes the remedy ignited.

I was certain an unseen force was determined to yank my leg from my body, but with the wisdom of a panacea guru, my granny explained the force was the antidote vacuuming the 'corruption' from the wound.

The agony was unbearable. What I thought was a tiny slit felt like a gaping laceration and I begged to remove the homemade cure. Instead, my granny expedited my slumber with a prescription of her tested and proven somniferous brew. I downed the two shots of rum and warm milk and awoke the next morning with no memory of my eventful night. My cousins, and the stain from the shoe polish on my sole convinced me there was credibility in the story of what transpired the night before.

As though the world was premiering a show in which I was the protagonist and running late, I cut and swallowed breakfast, raced out the door, and discovered an hour into play my wound was healed.

In retrospect, I am certain my granny would have tamed our recalcitrant ways if she had chosen to warn of prophetic trepidations in a language we all understood. Instead, the doyen of idioms disguised her lessons in anecdotes and proverbs. 'Who cyaan hear will feel,' she cautioned, as we took off for another adventure; this time, in my great-aunt's old, firewood storage that was a hop and a skip away from my granny's house.

Two raincoats that hanged from a cobweb- infested hook on a wall, created the theme for the day. Firefighters!

I remember having paroxysms of laughter when my cousin, Tex, kicked into a silly dance after he buttoned his raincoat. When he struggled to rip the gear from his body, with screams to boot, we were sent into a resounding guffaw. We thought he was faking when he fell to the ground without a sound, until the largest scorpion I ever saw crawled from under the raincoat.

Although at least three doctors' offices were nearby, none of us ever consulted them while in the care of granny.

We positioned Tex's limp body on the bar of my bicycle and I pedaled with every ounce of energy in me. My granny met us at the gate and diagnosed the ailment on the spot. She erected a triage on her bedroom floor; bandages, un-marked flasks with home-made medicines, and a prayer under her breath. She stripped him to his underwear and poured a cocktail, potent with the aroma of rum, on the area, now blue with venom. I was curious about the ingredients in the solution that recovered Tex in a matter of hours. 'You haffi fight venom wid venom,' my granny told me. The treatment was a cocktail of bay leaves, rum, and scorpion venom left to ferment for several months.

The next day, armed with sticks, gasoline, and matches we corralled a search for the culprit. We pulled away every piece of firewood in the storage shed but only found centipedes. After over an hour, our search party was exhausted from lifting. As we

contemplated retreat, the giant scorpion appeared and scurried toward my foot. Tex, who was bent on revenge, scooped him from the floor and out the door with one swoop from a broom that was leaned against the wall. We ran after the attacker and circled it with gasoline. On the count of three, Tex ceremoniously lit the circle. After what seemed to be over half hour of attempts to escape the ring of fire, the scorpion relented, hoisted its venom carrier and with what seemed to be a thousand vicious blows, stung itself to death. Tex swept the lifeless arachnid into a flask my granny used as host for the next batch of the miracle cure.

At the dinning table that evening, we swapped jokes about our encounter with the stinger. My grandmother waited for a respite from our laughter before she notified us of her impending talk. The one that made us feel like the worst children who ever walked the earth. The one in which she will not be able to belabour the degree to which we had disappointed her. That train was never late.

'Chicken merry, hawk deh near,' was her preamble. She then listed the virtues of heeding the presage of elders, and for the first time, opened the window to the real reason we should find merit in the obedience she dutifully beseeched. 'I don't want di Buru to scandalize mi,' she declared in earnest. 'If yuh continue fi get into trouble, I get di blame, and I get di shame.'

As minors are exempt from Buru, our insubordination and defiance were interpreted as weak parenting, and stood to enlist my granny as prime candidate for the ridicule meted out by Buru's rod of correction. I do not recall any notable events after that talk. I, however, recall that suddenly, waiting my turn to be cricket batsman was not as paining as I previously concluded. I recalled an encampment of fear around me as she spoke. Buru, whatever it was, was our ultimate boogie-man.

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