

**PAO**

**KERRY YOUNG**

# 1

**1945**

Me and the boys was sitting in the shop talking 'bout how good business was and how we need to go hire up some help and that is when she show up. She just appear in the doorway like she come outta nowhere. She was standing there with the sun shining on her showing off this hat, well it was more a kind of turban, like the Indians wear, only it look ten times better than that. Or maybe it just look ten times better on her.

She got on this blue dress that look like it must sew up with her already inside of it, it so tight, and a pair of high heel shoes I never before seen the like of. I almost feel embarrassed that she come here and find me like this, sitting on a empty orange crate, in my vest with the beer bottle in my hand.

So we all three of us quickly jump up and ask her how we can help. And what she want is for me to go visit her sister in the hospital so I can see what some white sailor boy do to her.

“What he do to her?” Hampton ask.

“He beat her. He beat her so bad I can hardly recognise her, my own sister.”

“So what he beat her for?”

“Just go see her. That is all I am asking of you.” And then she look directly at me and say, “Can you do that?”

And I just say “Yes” even though I don’t know why.

Then she say, “Thank you” and hand me a piece of paper with the details of the hospital where the sister at. The sister name Marcia Campbell. Then she say, “Marcia will tell you how you can contact me if you decide you want to help.” And she turn and walk outta the shop.

No sooner than she gone Hampton start, “The sister a whore man.”

“How you know that?”

“Sure man, sure. What you think she doing with the sailor boy? They most likely arguing over money. And this one, she probably a whore as well even though she look so good and I bet she taste good too, but she a whore man, sure.”

“So what you saying, if she a whore it don’t matter if she get beat?”

“It come with the territory. Like should I get vex if somebody try my patience? No man, it come with the territory.”

I ask Judge Finley, “You think she just a whore as well?”

“Yes. I think most likely Hampton right. But if this white boy really beat her like the sister say then you have to ask yourself what kinda man this is and if it OK for a white man to beat a Jamaican woman and it pass just like that.”

“Cho man, white men been beating Jamaican women for three hundred years.”

“That is true,” I say to Hampton, “but this is the first time anybody come ask us to do something ‘bout it.”

The next day I go up the hospital to see Marcia Campbell, and she is in a state. The boy break her arm and two ribs and he mash up her face so bad her own mother wouldn’t recognise her. Then she show me the bruises and fingerprints he leave all over her body, and her back where him kick her. Is a wonder the girl still alive.

I ask her, “You know the name of the man who do this to you?” And she tell me, and I say, “How can I get hold of your sister?” I didn’t ask her nothing ‘bout what happen because I reckon no kind of argument could justify the condition this woman was in.

When I catch up with the sister she tell me her name Gloria and she ask me what I going to do. So I say to her, “You don’t need bother yourself ‘bout that. You just leave it with me.” And afterwards I tell Hampton to go sort it out.

A week later Gloria Campbell come down the shop with money to pay me. She hear ‘bout what happen to the sailor boy and how him in the naval hospital. I say to her, “I don’t need no money for that. The bwoy had it coming.” So she put the money back in her purse.

Then she say to me, “You know what happen with all of that?”

And I say, “No, and I don’t need to neither.”

“But you know the business we in?”

“I can have a damn good guess.”

“We have a house in East Kingston. We got four girls living there. Men think that just because we a house of women they can come there and do whatever they want. That’s how come what happen to Marcia.” So I tell her,

“This got nothing to do with me. You ask me to help yu and now it done. You don’t need to come here to talk ‘bout it or explain nothing to me.”

“I wanted to ask you if you would consider keeping an eye on us. You know like you watch over Chinatown.”

So this is the first time I look at this woman properly. Look her in the face because it suddenly strike me that she is a serious businesswoman. And when I look at her she catch me the same way she did that first day. And even though my head is telling me not to get involved with her, my mouth is moving and I hear myself saying, “What do you have in mind?”

When I tell Zhang he say, “They have a name for that.”

“I am not pimping these girls. They running their own business. All I am doing is trying to make sure what happen to Marcia Campbell don’t happen again. They paying me the same as Mr. Chin and Mr. Lee and all the rest of them.”

“Chin and Lee run honourable business. What these girls do not honourable.”

“They making a living. You want me not do it?”

“Is your business now, I tell you that the day I retire. You must run it way you see fit.”

The first time I go over to the East Kingston house Gloria invite me to dinner to celebrate Marcia coming home from the hospital. They make a traditional Jamaican dinner, stew chicken and rice and peas with coleslaw and cho-cho that Gloria cook herself. The only people that is there is me and these four women. And what I discover is that these women are just ordinary people who talk ‘bout everything from the price of rice to how Bustamante come outta jail and go set up his own political party and win the election from Manley. And that was after a year and a half detention at Up Park Camp because his union call so much strike him nearly bring the country to a standstill and Governor Richards couldn’t take it no more.

To me the whole thing was a joke because after 300 years of British rule the Queen decide she going let us go vote but the House of Representatives we elect didn’t have no power to do nothing. All it could do was talk, and make decisions that the Governor have the last say over anyway. They call it a partnership between the Colonial Office and the ministers. I call it a stupid waste of time.

But these women take it all serious, like they think all this going actually make a difference to something. Then just the same way they want set the country to right, the next

thing is they laughing and joking and getting up and dancing with one another when the mood take them.

What I discover 'bout Gloria is that she got a edge but she also kind and gentle. And when she walk with me out to the car I notice how her arms look like black satin in the moonlight, and my nose catch the sweet, spicy smell coming off of her. Afterwards I discover it a perfume called Khus Khus.

After that I find I am going over there almost every other day. I take something with me, like a hat or a newspaper or something like that, and I leave it there on purpose so I have to go back and fetch it. Then it seem that every errand I am running take me by the house and I step inside because I am passing. It get so bad the rest of the girls just start laughing when they see me coming. So then even I know how it must look. And all I am doing there is drinking tea with Gloria Campbell. I am sipping Lipton's Yellow Label at 10 o'clock in the morning and 10 o'clock at night. And I am talking about god knows what because half the time I can't remember.

Then one day Gloria smile at me and say, "You know when I ask you to watch over us I didn't mean for you to be sitting down here everyday looking at me. I already broadcast the news that we under your wing so everything is fine."

I rest the cup in the saucer, and I put the saucer on the table, and I stand up and say, "That is good", and I walk out.

Some days she have to tell me to go away because the poor woman can't get no work done. Every day I promise myself that I will stop going there, and that last maybe two or three days.

Next thing you know I become a odd job man, fixing up the cupboard door, sawing and hammering even though I don't know a damn thing 'bout what I am doing. I swear every time I fix something and leave they must have to call a carpenter to come sort it out.

Then one day me and Judge Finley sitting alone in the shop and him say to me, "What you doing with Gloria Campbell?"

And I say, "Nothing."

"Well you better make up your mind to do something or stop going over there. You got things to do and I'm damn sure she got plenty to keep herself busy as well."

So I say to him, "What yu think of Gloria?"

"What you asking me this for?"

"I just asking yu that's all."

“Well now you asking me to give an opinion about a woman I hardly know, a woman I seen maybe five or six times when I happen to take a envelope from her. She beautiful, I give you that. And she got style. She carry herself well. And I think she have some brains as well running all them girls and turning a profit. Well, I reckon a man wouldn’t mind to be seen out with a woman looking that good on his arm. But he wouldn’t marry her.”

“Who is talking ‘bout marrying?”

“Well maybe it time you thinking ‘bout it at least.”

“So what you know ‘bout it? You not even married yourself.”

“Oh yes, I get married last year.”

“You get married and you don’t tell nobody ‘bout it?”

“Her people from St. Thomas, we go over there and we do it.”

“And you don’t invite nobody to come join in the celebration?”

“Marriage is not for celebrating. It is something you do to give your children a name.”

After that I stop going to see Gloria, but it don’t stop me from thinking ‘bout her. I am thinking about her so much it like I am in a daze. I drive the wrong way from Half Way Tree to Red Hills and have to turn ‘round. I count out the pai-ke-p’iao money two, three times but I can’t make it add up. I have to keep asking Hampton and Finley what they say to me because I can’t remember.

Then one evening me and Zhang sitting at the table in Matthews Lane. Ma at Temple and Hampton out on the prowl. Zhang ask me, “You sick?”

And I tell him “No.”

“So it must be a woman.”

What Zhang know about women I don’t know because as far as I know he has never had one. He and my father was just boys when they busy fighting for Dr Sun Yat-sen and the Republic and when that was done he leave China and come to Jamaica and live like a hermit, until my father get killed and Zhang save up the passage and send for us. And in all that time I don’t think he even talked to a woman.

“How you feel?” he ask me.

“I feel like I am under water and everything is just out of reach. Everything is muffled. I can’t quite hear. And I can’t touch or feel anything, my arms just waving about in the air. Except when I am with her and then it is like my feet are on the ground. Everything is sharp and focused and when I put my hand on the table like this, I can feel the wood under my fingers. And it feel like it matters. That it matters that I am sitting there with her. That it mean something. I feel happy just to watch her pour the tea and stir in the milk.”

“This is the whore in East Kingston?”

That word hit me so hard because it don’t seem to describe anything about Gloria. It don’t seem to be associated with her in any way. But I know what Zhang mean and I say, “Yes.”

And he just get up from the table and walk away up the yard.

The next Friday night when I go to make the weekly pick-up everything seem different. I don’t know what. The music is playing, the liquor is flowing, the women is busy. The place look exactly the same. So I decide that it must be me that is different. Maybe it because I decide to harden my heart against her.

So now it seem like this is the place that is under water. Like I am inside some invisible bubble and I am just looking out. And when I reach out to take the envelope from her I not even sure that my hand is going make it outside of the bubble to pull in the money. But somehow I manage to do it, and she just stand there and look at me like she know something is different as well. But she don’t say nothing ‘bout it.

After that I can’t stand to go over there so Hampton is doing the weekly pick-up on his own. And then one Friday morning I bump into her, just like that, standing up in King Street after I finish drop off some cigarettes.

It seem rude not to even say hello so we standing up there passing the time of day when she say to me, “You keep thinking all the time about what I am. But maybe you should concentrate on who I am, the sort of person I am, and maybe that way you might get to know how you feel. I see the way you look at me. And how you stand far from me in case you might touch me by accident. And how when you have to come close to me you hold your breath like you think something bad about to happen. Well maybe you just need to let yourself breathe.”

I don’t say nothing to her. I just stand there feeling like it is me and her now trapped inside this bubble and the whole of King Street is going past us ‘bout its business like it can’t even see we standing there.

Then she say, “Next Monday and Tuesday the rest of the girls are taking themselves up to the north coast to Ocho Rios. They reckon we not so busy then and they can spare the time to have a break. But I am not going with them. I am just going to close up the house so I can get some time to myself. So Monday night I will be there in the house on my own. And what I am saying to you is you can come over for the night if you want to.”

All of this time she is talking to the side of my head because I can't bring myself to look at her. I am staring out into the street watching the cars fight with the buggies and pushcarts for road space while I feel her eyes burning a hole into my temple.

"You don't seem to think that maybe I have some feelings as well." And then she stop.

And then she start again, "But I have to tell you that this is a one time offer. If you decide not to come then it will be strictly business between you and me from that point on because we can't carry on like this." And she step out into the noise of horns and cross the street and walk away into the crowd.

I don't go do the pick-up that Friday night but all weekend I think about what Gloria say to me. And what Hampton say about whores. And what Judge Finley say about marriage. And how Zhang just get up and walk away. And I know they is all right. No matter how you feel, you can't marry a woman like that. So I think on it, and I think on it. And when Monday night come, I take a shower and go to her house in East Kingston.

Next morning when I set foot inside the gate at Matthews Lane I see Ma up the top of the yard feeding the ducks, and Zhang sitting at the table finishing his tea. So I walk past him and I head to my room. But just as I put my foot on the step with my back to him, and him sitting at the table with his back to me, he say, "Your mother start to fret last night when you don't come home, but I told her it was alright because I knew where you were."

And I say, "Thank you," and step into my room.