

GLORIA

Kerry Young

1

1938

“I hear a sigh across the earth.”

I grab a piece a wood and I hit him. And I hit him. And I hit him. And all I can hear is the dull thud like when yu bash open a ripe watermelon and the juice splash all over yu. And then I hear Marcia screaming as she trying to get out from under him. She shoving him off of her but my arm is still moving because all I am thinking about is how he done it to me; and how his hands so rough everywhere he holding me down; and how the coir mattress stick me in the back as I lay there staring up at the rusty old corrugated zinc roof he got on this shack; and how it so hot in here; and how the smell of him, the thick, sour sweat of him, mek my stomach turn and mek me want to heave but I just lay there like a piece of board until it was done.

This is what I am thinking while my arm is swinging and swinging ‘till Marcia grab me and we run outta his stinking pit into the air and the rain. We run past the hole in the ground where he burning the wood to mek the coal and into the trees, through the mango and breadfruit and banana and pear. We just tearing our way past everything. We cut through the cane field and run and run through the bush past branches that catch your arm and roots that catch your foot. Down, down ‘till we mek it to the river. And is then I realise I still got the

piece a wood in my hand. So I smash it. I find a big rock and I smash it and pull it and tear it 'till there was nothing left but twigs and splinters and dust and I throw the bits into the river. And then I jump in after them because the blood is all over me with the rain making it run everywhere. Like its own little river of red rolling down my face and all over my hands and soaking into my frock. And that is when it stop raining.

I say to Marcia to get in and wash herself. We take off our frocks and rub them under the water and ring them out and bash them on a rock and rinse them some more. And then I tell her to mek sure she do between her legs as well and she say to me,

“Him didn’t do nothing to me yu know. Him just get on top a me when you bust through the door.”

“It nuh matter. Wash away what him intend to do to yu.”

We lay out the frocks to dry on a big rock in the sun and I tell Marcia we must go hide in a bush 'till the clothes dry. I don’t want nobody coming down here to find themselves two young girls all naked waiting for them to tempt their nastiness.

When the frocks dry enough we put them on and we start walk back home. I say to Marcia “What yu doing up there in the shack with him anyway?”

“I meet him on top road with a whole heap a wood him carrying to go mek the coal. But him rope bust and he got the wood all over the road and ask me to help tek it down the hill. So I do it, and when we get to the shack him say to me if I want come inside for a glass a lemonade so I say yes and that is when him jump me.”

I don’t say nothing to her because it too late now for any advice I would be fixing to give. Then she say,

“What we going tell mama?”

“We not going tell her nothing.”

“We not going tell her?”

“She only going say to yu the same thing she say when him do it to me.”

Right then Marcia just stop walking and turn to me.

“Him do it to you? Him actually do it?”

“Maybe two years back. When I was ‘bout the same age as you.”

“And what did mama say to yu?”

“She say, how many times I tell yu to stay away from that man? Barrington Maxwell not right in the head. Wouldn’t nobody have nothing to do wid him if it wasn’t for the coal him meking up in them woods.”

“She didn’t say nothing ‘bout what him do to yu?”

“I just finish tell yu. She didn’t say nothing. She just go pick some herb and boil some bush and give it to me to drink. And she say, that going fix anything he might have leave me wid and that was it.”

So we carry on walking and a little later Marcia say, “Yu think yu kill him?”

“Don’t talk like that. We don’t know nothing ‘bout it yu understand me.”

“But what if him not dead? What if him going come and point us out?”

“Point out what? Point out that him got yu in the shack trying to ruin yu? Because him never catch sight of me. I come up behind him and I hit him before him know what was what, him so busy holding you down and dropping him pants. Yu just shut up ‘bout it now.”

All the time we walking my feet stinging from running over the rough ground. When we nearly reach back I find a nice big puddle a water and I throw myself face down in it, and I tell Marcia to do the same. So when we get up the frocks covered all down the front with the sticky red mud yu always get after the rain.

“What the hell happen to you?”

“We fall down mama.”

“Fall down? Yu know how much scrubbing it going tek to get that mud outta dem frocks? Yu might as well have just tek dem ‘round di back and put dem on di fire. You go tek off dem dresses now and put on something decent yu hear me. Then yu go put dem to soak. You two girls got no respect for anything.”

Later, when we sit down to dinner, mama still vex. She slapping everything on the plate. The yam, the green banana, the salt fish and callaloo. When she pouring out the lemonade she almost miss the glass and have to use her cloth to mop up the spill. She not talking to nobody.

After we finish eat she tell Leroy to go fill the kerosene lamps before it get dark and she start tek ‘way the plates. So I go help her and all the time we busy washing the dishes and clearing up she nuh say nothing to me.

Next morning she still vex. She tell Babs to go parcel up the ironed clothes to tek down to Miss Edna and Babs lay out the big square cloth on the table nice and neat and put the clothes in it and wrap and fold the edges good and tight and put the safety pin in the top just like how she see us do it because is usually me or Marcia that do this job. And that is how I know mama still vex with us because she not talking to me and Marcia even if it mean she got Babs doing these chores now.

When she going down the track I shout to her, “Hey Babs, you want some company?”

“Don’t call me Babs. My name is Barbara I keep telling yu.” And she keep on walking even though she only 12 years old and she can hardly balance the pile a clothes on her head. So I shout Marcia and the two a us run after her ‘till we catch up.

“I don’t need no escort yu know. I perfectly well able to do this myself.”

Marcia say to her, “We know you able. But who say we cyan just walk down the road with our baby sister on a beautiful morning just so to enjoy it?”

“I’m not no baby. You only two year older than me Marcia and in time that not going mean nothing.”

When I look back I see mama standing up at the gate watching us like she fully expect me and Marcia to go help anyway.

We wait on the porch for Miss Edna to come back to us wid the money. She count it out into Babs’ hand. All in little copper and thing. And then Babs put the change into the purse mama keep special for this and we go on our way. Miss Edna didn’t even offer us a glass a water. Mama been taking in her washing every week for near on five years and she never even say good morning to us or give us a little thank you. Nothing. Is all she can do to count out the one shilling and sixpence into yu hand and then sit back on her porch with that sour face a hers, sipping her cold lemonade. And she don’t seem to think that we walk all the way down here with that heavy load, and we carry the dirty clothes up the hill in the hot sun, maybe we could do with some water to wet our lips. But Miss Edna nearly white and that in her mind make her too good for the likes a us.

But when I think we going back home Babs say she got to pick up a few things Mama want from the shop. So I say ok and the three a us walk up the track to the road and start head off to town.

Every truck that come by Marcia trying to wave it down so we can catch a ride even though I keep telling her how dangerous it is, and she say, “There is three a us. What going happen to three a us?”

But I don’t care. I not having us teking no ride from no man. Next thing yu know he got six friends waiting ‘round the corner just hanging there for us to get delivered to them nice and fresh off the highway. Ain’t nobody stopping for us anyway, so we carry on walking ‘till we get there.

When we go in the grocery store Mr. Chen say to me, “What you doing here on yu day off Gloria? You not get enough of this place all week?”

“Mama need some things urgent.”

We waiting there while Babs picking up this and that like she cyan mek up her mind and that is when the policeman step through the door. He is standing there in his grey shirt and heavy blue pants with the red stripe down the side and the shiny white belt over the red waistband. I think maybe I should run but my feet done stick themselves to the floor so it no matter what I fancy to do. The policeman look at me and then Marcia and Babs and then him say to Mr. Chen to pass him the cigarettes him want. Twenty Lucky Strike. Him stand there eyeing us while him open up the pack and tap out the cigarette and stick it in his mouth. And then he reach down him side and I think he going for his gun but is only the lighter coming outta his pocket. Him flick the lid off the little silver Zippo and roll the wheel and mek the flame, and light the cigarette. And all the time he is standing there he is looking straight at me. Then he start to open his mouth and I can feel the cold sweat break out all over my body but I still cyan move. I just stand there wid my feet glued to the dusty wooden floor.

He got the cigarette in his hand and him sticking out his tongue and reaching into his open mouth. Him fetch out a loose piece a tobacco and flick it off the end of him fingers, and then him put the cigarette back in him mouth and drag on it long and slow, staring at me like him really studying me to see which way I going to jump. Him put the lighter back in him pocket and take the cigarette outta him mouth and blow out the smoke in three little rings and then him say to me, “My, my, Gloria Campbell. You sure turning into a beautiful woman.”

The next day is Sunday and we have to go to church. Mama always want to get there good and early because if you go too late the place get crowded and she cyan get her favourite seat right up front where she see the pastor good and feel the vibration every time

he slap his hand down on the Bible and beg the Lord to forgive us sinners. But the pastor only talk one word at a time, or maybe two, in between slapping the Bible so everything he got to say tek a long time.

“The Bible” slap “says” slap “we are all” slap “sinners” slap. And with every slap we say ‘Praise be to God’ or ‘Yes sir hallelujah’.

“We” slap “have sinned.” Yes sir. Every one of us. Hallelujah. The pastor say that the Bible tell us that the wages of sin is death. And I start wonder if Barrington Maxwell’s death was the wage for his sin or if my death going to be the wage for mine.

He say our sins separate us from God forever but that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to God except through Jesus so we have to ask Jesus Christ to forgive our sins. But I cyan see how Jesus going forgive a thing like what gwaan between me and Barrington especially since I not praying to nobody ‘bout it. Anyway, the pastor say sin hinders prayer and if yu have wickedness in your heart the Lord will not hear you. So I guess that is that, because what is in my heart is wickedness through and through.

And then we start to sing. *Stand up, stand up for Jesus*. And after that, Pastor really strike up the band and the whole congregation is bringing the place down. Everybody inside the church and everybody standing on the veranda and out in the yard is singing and clapping and raising our voices and our arms up to the sky like if we can reach up high enough we can touch God in his heaven.

This little light of mine I’m gonna let it shine. I singing at the top of my voice. Not just from my throat but from deep down in my stomach. I singing because it feel good to just let go even though all I am thinking is what light is there in me to shine.

Next morning when I getting ready for work mama say she coming wid me and we have to go call by the church. She already explain to Mr Chen how I going be late on account of going to a funeral.

“Who die?”

“Yu father.”

“My father!”

My whole life I been asking my mother who my father is and she nuh tell me. She just say it no matter. ‘Him never had nothing good to give yu.’ So I just stop ask, and now after all this long time she going tell me him dead.

“When he die?”

“Last Friday.”

“Last Friday? Yu mean the same day me and Marcia come back wid mud all down our frocks and yu vex wid us?”

“It not you I vex with. It him.”

“Yu vex with him ‘cause he die?”

“I vex with him because he was a wicked man who never did one decent thing in his entire life. He bring shame on everybody that know him and in the end he bring shame on himself. And now he is dead, thank the Lord.”

“So what it matter to you after all this time?” But no sooner than I say it I wish I had bite my tongue because now she going answer me and the truth is I don’t want to know no more. I don’t want her to go tell me now that my father name Barrington Maxwell after I go beat the living daylight outta him. So when she nuh say nothing I just shut up and go finish dress and follow her to the church.

We sit down in the pew. Mama say Marcia, Barbara and Leroy got a different daddy. That not no news to me. But the peculiar thing ‘bout this funeral is that there is nobody there but me and mama. There not even any dead body. So when I think I was going to go look in the coffin to see who was laying there it nuh work out like that because there is no coffin. There is no pastor, there is no mourners. Is just the two a us sitting there. And when I ask her

what 'bout the headstone and all, she say "What headstone? Who yu think going pay for a thing like that?"

The rest a the week I am silently praying to Jesus Christ even though the pastor say he not going hear me, because it seem like I done kill my own father. And then Friday afternoon the police come in the shop and say they just find Barrington Maxwell and he been laying up there in the shack dead all week. That people start wonder 'bout him when he nuh turn up wid the coal and so the police go up there and he is laying there with his head beat in like a watermelon turn to pulp. And he got him pants down 'round him ankle so they have a good idea what going on up there.

I just stand there looking at them while the policeman busy telling Mr. Chen all a this news. And then Mr Chen turn to me and say, "Gloria. You alright?" But I don't say nothing and then him say to me, "All this bad business. Not the sort of thing a young girl like you should be listening to. You go find yourself something to do out back. Go on."

I walk and don't look back. I just go out back and weigh out the sugar and parcel it in the sturdy brown paper ready to go on the shelf.

The police waiting for a special officer to come from Montego Bay to tek charge a the investigation. And everyday one a them is in the shop telling Mr Chen 'bout how smart this Montego Bay policeman is and how they know is two culprits.

"How yu know that?"

"Is simple. Maxwell got him pants down so him doing something to somebody laying on di mattress there. And then di other one come up behind him and bam! Him head mash up. And I mean mash up good. So that mek two. And knowing Maxwell then one a them is definitely a woman."

"Yu think yu going catch them?"

“Yah man. These people got no idea what dem a dealing wid. When di man come from Montego Bay him going sort all a dis out double quick. Yu can bet yu life on that.”

But all the time the police busy talking this way everybody know that the evidence is spoiling with all the waiting. Not that they got any evidence anyway. They not got no murder weapon. They not got no eye witness. They not got anything that going trace back to anybody because the place up there so filthy they cyan decide what to collect up and take to the police station or what to just put in the garbage. They knee deep in muck. They can't even get any decent fingerprint, not that they got anything to compare them with anyway. So it seem like maybe they wasting their time even waiting for this man from Mo Bay.

I say to Marcia “Maybe you and me should go get the bus to Kingston” and she agree but mama not hearing nothing 'bout it.

“What yu mean Kingston? What you two girls going do in Kingston?”

“I get a job mama. Maybe work in a shop like I do for Mr Chen and I look after me and Marcia.”

“And what about her schooling?”

“She almost 14. She nearly done anyway.”

“So yu just going jump pon a bus and leave me here wid Barbara and Leroy to fend for?”

“You tek in your washing and yu do your dressmaking. Rightly yu not have my wages coming in but then you will have two less mouths to feed.”

Mama look at me and then she narrow her eye. “Yu going go all di way to Kingston just so yu can do di same thing working in some shop and go live with strangers?”

But I don't say nothing. So she say, “Unless there is some reason you girls in such a hurry to skip outta here.”

And is now like she not so much looking at me as piercing right into me. Like she burning wid her eyes right into my soul. And then after some long time she say, “Leave di frocks here. I will put dem on di fire when yu gone.”