

# 31

12:00 noon. He rushes from the yard; Mama's complaint about no shirt fading fast. Dadda needs the glock.

As he flies along the sidewalk, John crows circle elegantly above his head, gliding in the high Kingston breeze that ignores his sinewy frame awash with sweat from the punishing sun.

"Bad man cum firs'.

'Im doan wait.

'Im nuh axx nuhbaddi.

Ah im fly di gate..."

He laughs at NikiNax's song, blaring from a route taxi soliciting passengers, as he remembers being first to ram the girl at initiation.

"Eh bwoy, watch weh y'ah --"

A bus conductor, dangling from a speeding 30-seater, boxes his head as he crosses Orange Street to the shell of Captain's Bakery. His fingers move reflexively. They caress the steely hardness of Bad Gyal. Just as quickly, he withdraws, muttering,

"Every puss have him 4 o'clock."

He marks the escapee and makes note: Rock River to Kingston via Annotto Bay.

In his bag, Bad Gyal anchors layers of baby pampers, and a pair of sneakers. This is topped off by a nice piece of yellow yam from '31'.

12:10. He sees Brown Man's cart and thinks he will buy onion, skellion and thyme on the way back to '31' for Mama's soup at 4:00.

12:13. Ward Theatre. He veers from Sutton Street because of Babylon. He turns smoothly onto Church Street, heading towards Fletcher's Land, thinking Dadda always says at board meetings, never come to him via Church Street. But today, Parliament's emergency sitting means Babylon locks Duke Street.

12:15. He sees the circling triumvirate. Lean. Slick. Imposing. They corner him at an old split level, board house where termites eat what thieves leave. There are no doors or windows on the grey structure, where two big families live that Mama often helps. The facade is bare and his eyes connect an empty verandah doorway to the back yard through a sparsely furnished front room.

The air is dry. He is thirsty. Words catch in his throat but he's able to belch a pretentious hail. The place is still. He hears nothing but his leaping heart. The sun feels like a laser beam cutting across his torso. He thinks of the scorned shirt in his mother's hand at noon.

Slick interrupts his thoughts.

"Eh bwoy!"

...

"Look pon mi when big man ah talk to yuh."

Imposing boxes him in his head.

Like a rotating chamber:

Lean -

"Look pon di man!"

Imposing thumps him in the stomach.

Slick -

"Hard ears muss -- "

Imposing kicks him in the grand tumescence that placed him first at initiation.

Slick bends over his foetal frame coiled around the bag.

"Gimmie dis."

"Mi ah go to Da --"

Imposing stomps iron leg across his back.

Slick -

"On Church Street?"

Lean -

"Not even a shirt. Ah weh dis bwoy ah go eeeh?"

"Dadda need di -- "

Imposing kicks him in the head. He hears the rattling of wheels and board on road.

12:20. The blinding sun bounces off Brown Man's metal box for prayer requests, as Imposing flings him into Brown Man's cocoon of spices. He hates garlic. Delirious, he grins at the thought that spices need better suspension.

Wafts of a hymn tickle his ears from Brown Man's Bluetooth speaker.

"Sing above the battle --"

A splitting headache rolls on his head like a pair of drum sticks.

"Jesus saves, Jesus saves."

He wonders if any stew peas from last night's dinner is still in the fridge.

"By his death and endless life,  
Jesus --"

His head bounces on a solid wooden shelf, as Brown Man manoeuvres his cart out of a pothole.

"... heart for mercy craves,  
Sing in triumph o'er the tomb,  
Jesus saves, Jesus saves."

Pain radiates in waves across his body.

"Give --"

Every time he opens his eyes, he sees a different face above him.

"... saves, Jesus saves."

He sees Imposing's big hoofs marking time on asphalt.

"Shout salvation fu --"

Imposing's feet get smaller and smaller.

"...This our song of victory,  
Jesus saves, Jesus saves"

Brown Man picks up speed for a few minutes then stops abruptly. Another hymn starts.

Mama's high - pitched, loud voice.

"Deacon Brown, ah weh yuh did gawn ina di miggie ah di day yah? Yuh tink mi  
'ave time fi stan up ina sun hat ah wait pon yuh fi spen my *good good* money wid  
you?"

He is not dreaming. He sees her rose slippers. And smells '31's' kitchen.

"How comes yuh neva deh ere when mi come 12:15? Mi not even know *why* mi nuh guh adder preeple, go buy di tings dem."

Brown Man quickly puts a cat on his chest. Suddenly, he can't breathe. He can't say 'Mama see mi here'. She is never good at hide and seek.

"Why dem whole heap ah puss always roun you Deacon? Dem look *crawny*."

Mama likes dogs.

"Ah wha time now? 'Sas Chris!  
Ah 12:30!"

12:30. Dadda's appointment misses him. Worse, the thieves have the glock and he does no--...

*Daaaaa-ddaaaaaa dooooooooooes nooooooot* have the glock! He tries shaking his head but can't, as the cat stares at him in disdain. He does not want to think of what Dadda will do to him after discovering that he no longer has the glock with the personalized engraving and 24 carat feature on the barrel. He groans inwardly,

"Mi dead now..."

Mama leaves with onion, skellion and thyme for her soup.

The cat falls asleep on his chest, making him numb. He could touch the persons who come by the stall but he can't move. His thoughts are jumping like the ever hungry mongrel dogs that devour kitchen scraps at '31'. He thinks repeatedly,

"I am present in the moment.

I am brave.

I am smart.

I am handsome.

Today is **great.** "

He settles on memories of fifth form English Lit poetry battles to describe immediate environments.

He tries his hand at it again to escape present rigidity; writing on the walls of his mind:

*Patty bags and juice box rife*

*World at my feet*

*Here and there the people strive*

*Kingston on repeat*

*Lord 'ave mercy. What a life!*

*Rough here in di street*

*Reality cut mi like a knife*

*What a blood \_\_\_\_\_ !*

He gives himself an internal forward. He tries, but fails to buss a blank. He knows his English Lit teacher is proud. His warm thoughts are pierced by a police wee wah that stops beside the spice chamber. As the blue light dances on the ground, hands lay on him suddenly. Brown man removes the sleeping cat. Immediately, a boulder of searing pain hits him. Hands shove him unto the car seat. Hands shut the door. The suspension is not much better.

The sea of humans on the cusp of the market district, gives way to high rise buildings and stop lights. The sky is so so blue. The radios sputter sounds that dart in and out. Hands cover his face with a wet cloth.

2:00. He drifts off to the news highlights.

He wakes up bound to a chair. He cannot move a limb. He hears the tick of a clock. He laments that he failed to deliver the glock to Dadda. Such an urgent request. Now he's freezing in A/C without the shirt. A voice in the dark booms,

"Chicken ina di coop."

Static.

A voice from beyond responds,

"Hawk still ina di House of farts."

Laughter.

Beep.

"You nuh easy e'nuh ."

Static.

"Straight."

Beep.

"Chicken cowl."

Static.

"Him nuh need clothes fah weh im ah guh go."

Guffawing.

Beep.

"Shortest distance. 6 foot...Down."

Static.

"*Straight- est* line."

His neighbour hits what sounds like a desk, roaring.

He wrinkles his brow. His mind races back to Ward Theatre and Babylon. There is East Queen Street. Skip Duke Street. There is East Street. Cut across that other street, to Gordon House for 12:30? Not on foot. Not with an urgent request at 12:00 noon. Not with that heavy bag.

At board meetings, he touts the straight line. At board meetings, Dadda touts strategy, details and punctuality. At board meetings, everyone else, including the triumvirate, is silent.

Static.

The voice from beyond gushes,

"Hawk fly ina queenie place."

A door behind him opens and shuts. A door in front opens. Blinding lights flood the room, causing him to squint. He smells Dadda's cologne, as he feels a box across his face.

"Where is mah glock?"

Dadda's hand is so soft. Dadda clearly doesn't do manual labour and probably could pay for Imposing to get a manicure. He bites his lips to stop a smile from spreading.

He sits in the middle of warehouse documents in a windowless room.

"Where's mah glock?"

He can now see the triumvirate.

"Axx dem.

Dem tief it from me."

"No. You *gave* it to them instead of me. You disobeyed an order."

3:15. He sees the clock on the wall above Dadda's head.

"Speaking of gifts, Christmas come early for me this year."



He looks quizzically.

"Stop pretending seh yuh nuh know *weh* mi ah talk 'bout.

How long yuh tun spy fah -- "

"Spy?"

"Spy!"

"*Mi*?!"

"No. Spragga Lee. Of course, you.

Spying for Reagent. Waiting to take over Dadda Holdings.

Wasted potential. 6 CSEC ones.

I see you in construction."

" You and mi Modda. Mi nuh waah tun Architect again. Mi ah buil' our ting," he says eagerly.

"*Our* ting?" Dadda asks scornfully.

The triumvirate approach.

"Mi cyan tek nuh part two.

Mi nuh kno *weh* yuh ah talk bout Dadda."

Slick gives Dadda the bag.

"The yam will eat good in the Satdeh soup," says Dadda laughingly.

Bad Gyal looks so so good, even in Dadda's hands.

"Yuh clean dis piece twice a day or supm ? " Dadda says admiringly.

He swells with pride.

"Pity. You coulda tek charge ah di armoury."

He wishes the earth would do a Galdy and spit him out at '31'. No red ruby slippers are here.

"What's so funny?!" Dadda roars.

Before he can think of an answer, the door behind him opens. The triumvirate drop like three little flies, red dots between their eyes. A man in a white t - shirt and blue jeans stealthily rests a muzzle on Dadda's head. Is he smelling '31's' kitchen? He sees rose slippers! His voice catches in his throat.

"I knew it!" Dadda shouts.

"Mi nuh tink seh yuh shudda move right now. Sir."

Mama?

"Bwoy, shet yuh mouth. Mine yuh ketch fly."

Mama!

"Bwoy, stop pulp out yuh yeye pon me."

Mama disarms Dadda and puts Bad Gyal in the bag. She says to the yam,

"Das why mi cudn fin' yuh tideh."

"Yuh bitch yuh. Yuh think mi wudn find out."

"Mi tell him not to cootch up cootch up wid crebbeh crebbeh but di bwoy woan listen to im Modda."

"Ah me bring him"

"Ah me birth him"

"I have a good mind....*steups* "

"Big man weh di keys?"

He hears footsteps behind him.

"Reagent, see di jailor ere."

"Gimmie di keys!"

Mama grabs the keys and unlocks the cuffs and padlocked chains. He gets up as the jailor is dotted. It is true. Reagent has the best silencers. MOM. WOW. Mama.

"Sidung big man."

"The police will -- "

"Babylon weh drive di bwoy 'ere? You ah guh meet them. Yeah man."

He leaves with Mama and her entourage. He leaves the storeroom behind with its newest dotted entries. He walks out with Mama, meandering rows of uniformed office staff who fixate on computer screens. In the street, Mama's team disperses without a word.

"Look."

He makes furtive glances around.

"Stop. Look. Listen."

The sky is so so blue.

"Stop grin at di sky like ah eediat. Look bwoy."

He follows Mama's hand to Brown Man's face in the spice tomb with cats sleeping on Brown Man's body. Five men surround the cart, as one pushes it toward the waterfront.

Mama talks as they walk.

"Technical Drawing, Com Sci, Literature, English, Maths, History. All ah dem grade one. Geography, French, POB and Accounts. All ah dem deh grade two. 1500 SAT score."

Mama shakes her head.

Back at '31', he puts on the shirt and sits on a chair in the yard.

4:00. The radio blurts the news highlights:

"News just in -

Rojay Saunders, Honourable Minister of Industry and Construction, affectionately called Dadda, dies suddenly of a brain aneurysm, after complaining of a headache during today's emergency sitting at Gordon House.

The Kingston West Police Division salutes the brave Customs supervisor, Junior Lee, for the deadly confrontation with three of Kingston's most wanted at the Queen's Warehouse today.

Also in the Kingston West Police Division, two special task force detectives die in their police car from Carbon Monoxide poisoning while on a stakeout."

He walks to his room and emerges soon after, with Mama's 15 inch Mac Book Pro college gift to him. He retrieves a taped up envelope, suspended from a nail at the top of the kitchen door and receives a big bowl of pepper pot soup from Mama's hands.

Coconut milk, scotch bonnet pepper and calaloo harmonise perfectly like his old high school choir. Mama joins him at the table under the mango tree. She gives him a piece of sweet potato from her bowl.

"Mama dis a sing. It shot!"

"Heh heya. Wah kin' ah song it a sing tideh?"

"A dancehall anthem from one a di general dem...soon tell yuh."

"Mi can work wid dancehall. Mi neva really gree bout di rock steady stew peas yessideh."

He rummages the envelope's contents and takes out the now familiar Notice of Deferral under the eye-catching letterhead of the Notre Dame Institute of Architecture. He logs into his email and starts

"Dear Secretary of Admissions,

I trust that this email finds you and your family well.

Please be advised that I hereby rescind my deferral for entry to another academic year.

I will commence studies this fall."

He deletes the last line and recommences:

"I will commence studies in the upcoming academic year. I also accept your invitation to participate in the Institute's summer school on Tropical Architecture this July and August."

When done, he presses 'Send'.

Mama has things to build.

July 5, 2020 (C) Marleigh Jones.