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Before I Dead

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This morning I had a gun because they get me vex. Usually I does have a knife on me; it have something about the way it does feel: solid and safe like when you swimming in the river or the sea and even though the water high or rough, once you stretch out your foot you go feel the seabed underneath you and know you safe. It have real fellas in my school that does tote gun, but I never really feel that is for me. Gun like it have it own mind, like once it in your hand you can't control it. Where I living in Arouca I see real men dead from own-way gun. The gun just reach in men hands and next thing you know it shoot off and is dead a man dead on the ground and the fella with the gun aint even sure how he kill the man and if is really he that kill the man. I have plenty chance to get gun. You just have to stand up on the junction long enough and think about a gun and a man go walk up to you and offer you one. You could even rent one if you can't afford to buy it. Real fellas does rent gun and bring it in school to show off. All recess and lunch time they in a corner in the classroom pulling it out, stroking it, pointing it. Whenever they point it fellas does scatter, they ain't stupid. And is to see them with this gun in they hand. They does have this kinda half smile, that is not really a smile, is really a "what if" expression, like, "What if I pull this trigger boy?" or, "What if I ride shots for that fella in Arima who disrespect me and my girl by the Velodrome the other night. I go show him. I go show him..."

And other fellas does want to hold the gun but they don't really let them unless is a good good partner, because they could never really tell if a fella holding a secret grudge against them and waiting to fire off the gun at them. And most times is only one bullet in the gun because to buy bullets expensive so they does buy one for protection, but really the protection is having the gun in they hand and pretending that the chamber might be full,

although fellas know is bluff they bluffing but, since they ain't know which chamber have the bullet they will go along with the bluff and respect the gun.

With a knife now, is you they does respect because knife is skill. You could stab a man and make as little damage as a scratch or you could kill him. It depend on if you know how to use it. With a knife you could feel yourself slicing through flesh; you can't feel that with a bullet. Guns good to kill fellas you aint really know or care about; but a knife is for more personal things. If a fella take your girl, you have to get him with a knife. Wait for a fete or something and get your partners and them and ride for him and in the thick of the bacchanal stick him with the knife, twist it in he guts, feel he flesh moving aside to make way for the metal and watch him in he eye so he know who doing it and why you doing it. If he have a gun though it really ain't matter how much skill you have.

Is really one of the security guard on the compound that get me vex. Ah mean, I don't trouble nobody and I was going about my business cool, cool. It have plenty thing people could say about me, eh. They could say I does smoke weed and they could say I does cuss stink when I vex. But they can't say I does trouble people. Since I is a little fella I prefer to keep myself to myself and leave people alone. Everybody know that.

So when just so one of them security walk up to me and say, "I hear you was interfering with a girl," I get vex. One thing I don't like is for people to say I do thing I never do. I, Saleem Mustapha, is one man who go never put Allah out of he thoughts and harass a girl just so. And is the kind of girl too! Shelly Ann? It ain't have nothing special about Shelly Ann! She force-ripe like all them other Compre girls. Same powder on she neck, same fancy hairdo although she aint going nowhere, same loud voice and cussing people if they watch she too hard. The fellas does call she Clothes Clip Shelly Ann. Squeeze she head and she foot open. So how this guard could think that Shelly Ann could be special enough for me to trouble she?

And was the guard attitude too! They does move like everybody is prisoner in this place. They does walk up to you and get on as if them own you, as if them and the law is the same thing. So they grab you by your shirt and drag you in a corner, embarrassing you in front of all your friend and them, asking you all kind of question fast fast so you can't answer and then although they pull you in a corner they talking hard hard for everybody to hear.

"You name Saleem, right?"

Mostly people does call me by my nickname, Taj, so when I hear Saleem I know is office business. One minute I strolling down the courtyard good, good, next minute I jam up in a corner next to the janitor room. Everybody on the corridor watching and I seeing people slowing down to take in the scenes just in case it have any action.

"Is you name Saleem, right?" they ask me again. I nod. And I sizing them up, because me ain't really fraid none of them. Them ain't no law, them ain't no police. Them is just security and I will tell them they ain't have no jurisdiction over me. If they want to

question me they have to carry me by Mr Pollard office. But they could try all the scare tactics they want they ain't getting me to talk about nothing. I done tell them who I is. Now is up to them to do something.

“What you want to know my name for?” I ask him straight to he face. And the jackass security guard hold my shirt collar tighter, like he feel that go frighten me. Man, I watch him right in he eye and steups. I have time; we could stand up in the corridor whole day for all I care.

By this time big crowd and thing looking on. And I only getting more vex because one thing I don't like is embarrassment. Fellas want to know what happening and the girls and them only giggling and pointing at me. I feeling the comfort of the knife strap on to my leg and I feel better even though I know I can't use it. I see my partner Tush in front of the crowd.

“Don't dig nothing, Taj, boy,” he shout out and I know he do that just to vex them, “I have your back my boy. Dem MTS can't do nothing outta the way, boy.” I give him a nod. Tush like to harass men but he and me real tight. I know he have my back and he go check on me to see what going down. Them MTS security does be liming round the Block in twos all the time waiting to catch one of we with weed or cigarette or girl. The two that hold me, De Freitas and Singh, like to harass the students. If you come in the schoolyard with your little half-pack of Benson and Hedges to sell they taking it away and whole week they searching you to see what they find and if they in a bad mood they sending you to the office and telling the principal they smell weed on you.

De Freitas is a red fella from Grande who feel because he big and strapping he is a big sawatee but me ain't fraid he. Is the Indian one, Singh, who is the trouble man. Singh does wear black gloves on he hand and he ain't have no problem with a little violence. “Is for a worthy cause,” I hear him say once. He does move up easy, easy on men as if he just going to ask them a question and then he does squeeze they balls hard hard so they can't answer because the pain too much. It have fellas say he does tote a piece, because he is a precepted officer. I never see the gun but other fellas say they see him with it under he clothes. I ain't putting it past him.

Anyway, since Singh and them can't use gun on the school compound, they does make the plastic baton in their waist substitute. Is to see them drawing this baton when they catch one of we. Singh have a way he does wring up your shirt so you almost standing up on your toes and then he does put the baton between your legs sometimes and ram it up hard and crush your balls. I see real men cry when he do that. The first time he catch me for some stupidity he ask me my name and I, playing smart, tell him, “Assalaam alaikum.” Since then he does always mock me although he find out my real name. “Sallymally koom is your name, boy?” he go ask me. Or he go tell he partner “Eh eh, look Sallymally Koom passing.”

He does mainly target the niggers on the compound. Sometimes, dry, dry so in the corridor he go call a boy and he go start to search him. It had one time Tush and me was

walking down the corridor in Block C and he call out, “Aye, nigger boy, drift and come over here.” Boy, Tush ain’t miss a beat. One time he answer back, “Yes, Daddy, I comin now.” Tush get he balls squeeze that day but he ain’t cry. We laugh we belly full because Singh done dark he dark and when Tush give him that answer he face turn black like coals.

So anyway, yesterday one minute they questioning me in the corridor, next minute is walk they walking me to the office, Singh hand still tight on my arm. I see Shelly Ann sitting down on a chair waiting and I watch she hard. I want to ask Shelly Ann what going on but I cool myself. Singh and he partner waiting, I waiting too. After a while, Mr Pollard come out of the principal office and call we. Shelly Ann get up and Singh let me go and I follow she and both of we sit down in the office. But the Principal ain’t sit down; he sorting papers and adjusting he glasses. That is one thing does get me vex about Mr Pollard, he and this damn glasses. He done short and softy softy-looking and then on top of that he insist on wearing these glasses with thick thick lens and he always playing with them.

“So, Saleem, I hear you’re in trouble again?” That is the first thing he hit me with.

“Sir, I don’t know nothing about no trouble, sir.” And I leave it there. Let he come out and tell me what they have me here for. All this time Shelly Ann sit down cool cool, she ain’t say a word. I watching she out of the corner of my eye, trying to figure she out. But she watching straight ahead so I feel I have to wait for Mr Pollard to clear things up.

“Miss Williams says you interfered with her. Is that so?” I know I was looking confuse. I coulda almost see how I was looking, sit down there mouth open and close, open and close like a fish in a net.

“Interfere with Shelly Ann?” I ask it more for me than for he, because I hoping somehow it start to make sense when it come out of my mouth with my voice powering it. Pollard have to be joking! Shelly Ann? Clothes Clip Shelly Ann? The same Shelly Ann who get parry when she was in Junior Sec? The same Shelly Ann who does be taking man down by the Agri-Science building every week? The same Shelly Ann who sitting down there and can’t watch me in my eye? Me interfere with she? Everybody interfere with she. But never me! I aint have time for rat!

Well, I get blue vex. Is this shit they pull me down in the office for? Because Shelly Ann say I interfere with she? Since when anybody does believe anything she say? They have to come better than that! I know Mr Pollard expecting me to protest and say, “No, sir, not me, sir.” But I smarter than he. More in that mortar than this Shelly Ann pestle.

“All yuh have a witness, Sir?” I ask Mr Pollard.

“Yes,” he say and the word come out like a sigh because same time he say it he breathe out.

“Who is the witness?”

Mr Pollard watch me like if he sorry for me. He take a long tired breath. “Jason Callender said he saw you pulling at Miss Williams’ clothes in Room 40.”

Oh-ho, so that is it. From the time I hear Jason Callender I done cipher out what going on. No maths in that. I know real fellas who is imps, but Callender have to be the biggest imps I know. You know the joke about how when you born the doctor slap your head and not your bottom? Well, with Jason that really happen. He is one of them that can’t really afford to buy cigarette and Tush shit him up one day and say he does only smoke zut like he father. From that time the fella only out to jumbie me and Tush. But things take a turn for the worse two weeks now. Me and Jason had a blowout and I cut he ass sound sound.

Since that, I change my movements. I doing everything different for the last two weeks. I coming to school late and leaving early—lunch time, sixth period, third period. He couldn’t chart me at all. If he want to ketch me it have to be in school. And he know he can’t handle me in a handfight. So this kind of soft man thing to get me in trouble with the principal is he revenge? It make sense.

“Sir, whoever was in the room with Shelly Ann, wasn’t me, sir.” I know he ain’t believe me, I not expecting him to believe me. But I know he ain’t believe Shelly Ann neither because everybody in the school know that she does lie through she teeth. And too besides even if me and she was in the room, she does take man for money, Pollard know that, everybody know that. So he have to decide if to believe Callender. And Pollard smarter than that. He aint going and punish nobody on Callender evidence, I sure about that.

Pollard ask Shelly Ann to excuse we and if you see she, she zesting up sheself, pushing out she chest and watching me hard like if cut-eye could do me something. To tell you the truth, I feeling sorry for she. I don’t know what Tush and them fellas see in she. She is only sixteen but she does look like if she done live a lifetime already. Shelly Ann does boast and tell everybody how she does run things home because since she was in Junior Sec she have boyfriend and now she mother can’t tell she what to do. Tush went Junior Sec with she and he say that she get break out from real young. He tell me how she does charge fellas ten dollars at a time to arrange brush for them with a cousin she have who is twelve years old and in Standard Five.

Anyway, Shelly Ann leave and me and Pollard alone in the office.

“Look, Saleem...,” he begin but I stop him.

“Not meaning to cut you, sir, but we wasting time here. I really ain’t do nothing.”

“I’m not suspending you. It’s her word against yours. What I want you to do for me is keep a low profile for the next few days please.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, that’s it. The talk on the compound is that you and Callender had some sort of altercation and he is looking to get back at you. So be on your guard”

When I reach out the office, Singh and De Freitas stand up watching me and grinning. Singh elbow de Freitas and say loud enough for me to hear, “That is the kind of slackness them on. Is only black people children you catching in them foolishness so.” And De Freitas still smiling with him like he ain’t realize somehow, somewhere he and all black and getting shit up from Singh.

I brush past him and head down the corridor to find Tush and give him the scores and in my mind I done planning how the two of we have to deal with Callender. Tush is a man go hit Callender with level talk and Callender does can’t take that and then he go look to fight and that is precisely where I go come in, because once he rush in on Tush is a given I go have to swing for my partner. I done seeing in my head how Callender getting he next beat down when I realize them two imps actually following me down the corridor and throwing talk for me. Singh singing the same tune as usual: nigger people this, nigger people that. And De Freitas like he ain’t know better so he only there echoing Singh. Then Singh make the mistake and get personal. He start up on my mother. Saying how she have to be real worthless and how fruit don’t fall far from tree that is how I come out worthless so too. One thing I don’t walk away from is mother talk. Once you start up on my mother your cut ass book. I turn around and I watch Singh. I not like Tush, I ain’t good at giving talk. The most I could do is cuss and is not cuss alone I want to cuss Singh. I want to cut him down, make him feel small. Make him know what it is to have people around watching you while you wishing the ground could open up and take you. I want him to know how it does be when you feeling small. My mother worthless? My mother worthless? I watch the fucker hard and proper and decide before I dead I go do for the bitch.

So when I reach this morning, one time is look I looking for Tush to show him the gun and tell him my plan. But I can’t find him at all. Nobody ain’t see him in Block C. I went down in the Agri building and spot Marlon.

“Aye boy, you see Tush.”

“Last time I see him was by the science labs.”

That ain’t sound right but I ain’t have no reason to disbelieve so I make a tack back. No Tush. I went by the café and lime.

“Yeah m’boy, I see Tush this morning. By the taxi stand. I ain’t know if he come to school yet.”

“Who’s that? Tush? Yeah man, Tush come. I mean he reach.” And a whole set of fellas start to laugh at that. Anything to do with sex, them find it funny.

“Where you see him?”

“Block C.”

And then the fella stop taking me on because a girl that he like walk up.

It didn’t make no sense to go Block C again, so I figure I go just wait for first period when we have Maths. Bell ring and I hear them fellas saying we have general assembly this morning. One time I decide I passing on that.

“Where we going?”

“Tech Voc Block boy, it have plenty place to hide.”

So about six of we head down there, passing behind Block E so the deans and them wouldn’t see we. When we reach down we settle on a concrete bench in the back of the building and put a fella name Taylor to lookout for anybody. One time a next fella name Jeremy start to roll a joint. Fellas start to grin. Even me, because was almost a whole day since the last time I roll one.

“Boy this is the real shit you know. I thief it from my brother. Grade A. I take a drag. One drag last night and ketch it. I ain’t lying.” He lick the paper, twist the ends and light up. The smell was sweet. He pass it and rock back. The fella he pass it to take a drag and start to cough.

“Boy this thing real fucking strong.” He take a next pull and pass the joint. By the time all of we take two pull we was flying. Jeremy was right, it was Grade A for truth, it wasn’t no press weed. Taylor get so high he stop looking out and start to make up stories about the last time he get high and the rest of them fellas join in everybody making up stories about all kind of madness. How they climb lamppost and tree and start to bark like dog and shit. All of them like they in a competition to see who does catch the worse head when they smoke. Me I just sit down mellow, feeling the weed pass through me, feeling light and easy, so light I forget about how heavy the gun is. My mind run on Tush. Tush should of been here. I like to get high round Tush, he does talk real shit. If he was here I woulda show him the gun and tell him what I planning to do and we woulda laugh like hell because he woulda see the humour in it. He woulda see how important it was to me. And while I sit down flying, the shout went up.

“Deans! Fellas, Hillman and them coming.”

Hillman is a dread Dean. He and the security and them is real partners and if the security and them like prisons’ officers, Hillman is the warden. Give Hillman a chance and he tell you is he and not Pollard running the school. Men start to scatter. We went round the

corner looking for classroom to hide in. The best place to hide is in the technical vocational rooms. All them classroom full of equipment for welding and plumbing and carpentry and thing. Jeremy and two fellas run into the joinery room. I head straight for the welding room because I know it have compressor to hide behind. I duck down behind one and wait. I hearing Hillman and them coming their footsteps stop and start, stop and start and I know is search they searching the rooms and them. I hear two fellas cry out and I know they get catch. I ain't worried, them fellas will take blows rather than sell out men because they know if they sell any of we out is real horrors. So I waiting, crouch up behind the compressor.

I hear them coming in and trying hard to breathe quiet and come back to earth because the weed still in my system. I hearing their foot coming closer and closer. They checking the welding booths. Anytime now they will reach the compressors. I crouch down more and then I hear a voice, De Freitas, say, "Look I seeing a school shirt across in the carpentry room. Let we check that out." I wait until they footsteps die down and I step out from behind the compressors grinning to myself because I real lucky. Same time I hear a noise and look to duck down again but it wasn't a guard it was Jason Callender. He coming out from behind a compressor and Shelly Ann right with him. I pull myself square one time. Thing like coincidence I don't really believe in. Jason watching me aggressive but at the same time I know he know the guards and them still close by.

"This welding room smelling real stink boy." I know is me Shelly Ann throwing that talk for, but I stay quiet.

"Somebody must be have their mother dirty hijab in they bag."

"Why you aint hush yuh cunt." It slip out. I was thinking it but I didn't plan to say it. I know they was just trying to get me vex. One time, because she man around Shelly Ann try to rush me. But if the two of them feel I was going and stand up and let the two of them beat me they lie. I have a gun and a knife. I breaks Shelly Ann cuff and let go a slap on she. She boy, Callender, rush me and both of we fall down on the floor. I trying to get him off me and reach for the knife that strap around my leg but Shelly Ann trying to get me in a headlock too, so is both of them I contending with. In all this confusion chair and table falling over and banging up and next thing you know De Freitas and Singh on top the three of we and pulling we off each other. De Freitas holding me and Shelly Ann and Callender grappling with Singh. He break away from Singh and rush back at me and I reach for my knife one time. He jump back. Singh bawl, "But ay ay! Look how them nigger quick to kill each other nah! Is girl the two of you fighting over? But Shelly Ann you have real thing girl!" Even I could of see how Singh could think is Shelly Ann have we fighting. De Freitas let go Shelly Ann and tighten he grip on me. Singh tell him, "Leave that one with me and take these two by the principal. Is straight suspension for them and I feel this one might get expel." De Freitas shove me over to Singh and he grab the knife from my hand, spin me around so my back to him and he twist my arm behind my back. One time I feel the baton between my legs and tears start to full up my eye.

“All you niggers is real hell you know.” He breath was hot, hot by my ears. “You smelling of weed boy. So you smoking and you have weapon on you? Boy today you out of school boy. Is only all yuh niggers you catching in this kind of slackness yes.” And he carrying on with he nigger talk and squeezing my balls and I trying to get away. Because I know is a suspension I heading for and I know when Mammy hear this she go cry, because I is the last boy. The only one who look like he might finish school and I know once I get suspended she ain’t sending me back. So I figure I go run, jump the fence and lie low for a few days and then come back in school. By that time them guards done forget about me.

But this Singh fella like he out for me because he still have the baton between my legs and my hands behind my back and talking.

“We go have to call in police for this one boy. Weapon involve. Possession with intent. It must be all you nigger children eh? How much like you your mother make eh? About six, seven? One after the other? Every year like a bitch in heat? All you have the same father? You even know who your father is?”

But he make a mistake. All the time he talking he bending me forward and I reach down with my free hand and pull the gun. When I turn round on him I know I catch him because the nigger talk stop and he eye open big. He stretch out a hand and the talk change now because the power change. I in charge. Gun is a thing like that, it does change situations real easy. It could put you in charge, make you giddy with power. All of a sudden Singh ain’t bad no more, I is the big sawatee and he blinking and looking stupid. He wondering what really going on and I stand up quiet quiet, looking at him. Weighing my options, deciding what to do. How long to make him sweat for before I make to dive off the compound. Because I know after this gun thing I can’t come back to school. The principal go be on my case and Singh go kill me before he allow that. But I enjoying myself watching the coolie bitch sweat. Looking nervous, nervous and trying to talk me out of doing anything foolish.

“But ay ay,” I tell him, “is only foolishness a stupid nigger like me capable of.” I know he regretting all the nigger talk now.

But the gun fool me. I focus on it so much I lose track of everything. I didn’t even notice when Singh attitude start to change and he stop talking fast, fast. And the look in he eye went from frighten, to mean. He start to look like the normal Singh again. Like he ain’t fraid me or the gun. Something tell me look behind me and I realise de Freitas stand up there ready to swing a baton on my head and I duck and looking to run, but he grab me and I swing my hand and point the gun at him. Just like how I did point it at Singh, to frighten him and get the upper hand, because it ain’t have no bullet in it. I can’t afford one. De Freitas look to breaks and that is when I feel it, a sharp pain in my back!

A bullet not exactly like a knife eh, but it does cut still. Your flesh does have to move and make way for it and it have a kind of cold heat about it. It chilling you and burning you at

the same time. My head hit the floor hard. My whole body really. But things happening so fast and I feeling so hot and cold I not sure what going on. I touch my stomach, because that is where I feeling hot and cold the most. But is when I feel the stickiness it hit me. Where Tush boy? I try to push myself up to see if I see Tush. I have to tell him something.

As I struggling to get up I see Singh watching me and I seeing something in he face because he watching me hard hard. He eyes digging me but he ain't saying nothing. The words was right there in he eyes though. I coulda almost hear he voice saying, *Is I do this to you, nigger boy.*

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