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Jubilee Sunday

BY MARLINE A. MARTIN

Jubilee woke up in the middle of the church bell ringing. It was the first bell of the morning, the 6:00 a.m. bell. It was not the bell from the church closer to her home but from the one way down across the distance. The ringing surrounded the village and was encircling her bed, humming like golden waves across her half-naked body.

A crow cawed, and another answered.

"It's Sunday!" the bell announced.

"It's Sunday!" the cocks proclaimed.

She inhaled the new day, as the sun fell on the housetop and across the veranda. Today was Sunday! It was the day of the week that she could lie in bed, listening to the cock's crowing. It was the day she could wait for the second church bell to ring before she would hear the jolting voice of her Tanti bidding her time with a tall order of tasks for the day.

No goats and cows to milk today. No fowls to feed or shoo away. No six round trips of water carrying from bay to barrel today. No drinking water carrying from the spring to the anthill to the men in the yam fields. No gathering of wood, cleaning the house, waxing the floor, sweeping the yard, or going to school. Nothing except for Sunday school, which she really didn't mind going to. No riverside bathing or clothes washing today. She would take a luxurious bath in a basin beside the house behind the barrels of water that she had filled.

Today was the day that she could think about things that she wanted to think

about. And today she chose to think about her mother. In her half-awakened state, the image of her mother's gold locket jingling on the blouse's button appeared to her as a dream. When Jubilee's parents migrated to America, she and her brother Errol were brought to live with Tanti, her mother's sister and husband George. Tanti and George were strict, religious, and owned quite a lot of acres of land and a big house, in Highgate. Jubilee had cried a river that day when she was dragged from the car onto the veranda of the Big House to stand attention to Tanti, who gave Jubilee one look that made her entire body shudder in fear.

"Doroti? Is a cry baby yu bring?" Tanti taunted her sister. "Mi nuh have no tolerance fi no cry baby, yu nuh!"

That was a Sunday, and the last image and lasting memory she had of her mother was that golden locket clicking between her bosom and blouse button. After living in Highgate for four years, Jubilee decided to make Sundays the unmistakably best part of the week.

The morning was not fully bright, but it was warm and wonderful when Jubilee finally got out of bed. She tossed a piece of blanket across her shoulder, tying it with a rope and grabbed her towel and soap. Jubilee walked outside, to be streaked by the sunlight. The fluttering of the birds when she approached the fence made her feel carefree. Her bare feet felt good in the dewy grass as she walked over to the fence of blooming hibiscus around the yard. The hens and roosters had left their roosts and

were chasing each other around the yard. The dogs barked at the fowls, and the villagers awoke to the static sounds of devotional music that droned on their transistor radios, as they readied for their Sunday's deeds.

Tanti was already in the kitchen singing the same Sunday hymns that she sang every Sunday. Jubilee loved to hear her voice like this—soft and sweet, and sometimes deep and rustic. Today, Tanti sounded like a nightingale sitting on an olive branch. This was not the weekday whip-cracking voice that caused Jubilee to shudder every time Tanti would bellow for her. So, Jubilee stood by the barrels of water under the kitchen window and embraced Tanti's songs, which made Sundays feel more magical.

By the time the second church bell had rung, Jubilee realized that much time had elapsed, and everyone was picking up the Sunday morning pace. Dressing up was always the main feature, whether for church, to play soccer, ride your bicycle, or just stand and pose on a corner. Jubilee had one best dress; it was a yellow organdy dress with lace down the middle of the bodice and around the front half of the waist. An organdy flower sat at the shawl collar with an attached sash, with buttons down the back and a full pleated slip skirt. Despite the fact that she had pretty much outgrown this dress, Jubilee felt like a sunflower whenever she wore it and dreamed of being a princess in palatial America, where her parents resided and reigned.

Jubilee didn't want to spoil this sacred day with her daydreaming and a subsequent holler from Tanti, so she pushed her head into the kitchen window to let Tanti know that she was not ready for a disagreeable day.

"Good mawning, Tanti."

"Mawnin', Jubilee."

"Tanti, mi can wear de yellow dress to church today?"

"Hmm, you can manage fi keep it clean?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Dat is not de dress to go rompin' round in, so no games today."

"No, ma'am."

"Iron out your brother's white shirt for church and get him outa bed. Ah leadin' de choir today and ah don't want to be late."

"Yes, ma'am."

Errol was sleeping cozily in his bed, dreaming about daggers and arrows and letting go one into his nemesis' chest.

"Wake up, Errol!"

He could hear his sister's voice but could not quite wake up, because he had the pitch perfect for a direct aim. Jubilee jolted him and kept calling his name. The jolt rolled him over on his stomach, and the release of the arrow in the dream caused him to discharge the tension in his groin and the warm urine flowed into the mattress. Feeling mortified, he awakened but would not look at this sister.

"Cho, mon! Why yu don't leave mi alone? Don't badda me! Ah guan stay in bed till breakfast time."

The smell of his urine soon hit Jubilee's nostrils, and she could no longer smell the fresh beeswax floor polish that she used to clean the room and the whole house yesterday.

"Pee pee bed buoy! Wakey, wakey and go washy washy!"

"Don't badda me! Suck finga gal!"

Her brother's bed-wetting was often the talk of the village children, as Tanti tended to harangue Errol by sending him to the river with the rolled-up bed sheets in his arms, so her clothes basket wouldn't get permeated with the smell of urine. One particular boy, Wesley, was the leader of the harassment and had become Errol's nemesis. And Errol often dreamed of standing up to Wesley by way of a urinal baptism. Jubilee tried to look out for Errol by waking him up during the course of the night and early mornings. She had not done that this morning, because it was Sunday and she was thinking about what she wanted to think about, and not what she had to get him to do or look after. Furthermore, Errol was old enough to wake himself up.

"Sorry fi mawga dawg, mawga dawg tun roun' an' bite you."

(Sometimes it's the ones we've helped who are most ungrateful.)



"Mood," collage on paper, mixed media, 2001. All images of the author's collages are courtesy of the author.



"Mirror," collage on paper, mixed media, 2001.

The third church bell rang, and Jubilee decided to walk away from what would eventually turn into a ruckus and went off to iron her brother's shirt, as per Tanti's instructions. Uncle Georgy scurried into the yard to give himself a good Sunday scrub with some cerasee vines.

The noises of hooves from the main road soon caught her ears, and she darted to the gates to see what terrible ungodly happenings were trying to spoil her sacred Sunday. Bunched up along the narrow, stony dirt road was a wild and reckless race. It looked like every horse, mule, and donkey in Highgate were galloping down the road. All the riders—men and boys—swayed from side to side, getting on and

off the animals. A flock of birds streaked into the sunlight to escape the sudden uproar. The pounding hoofs and the clattering of the men and boys suddenly turned into a mad breakaway from the road down a slope, through the stream, up the rising, and around the bend.

Errol had finally awakened with the noise, and while everyone's attention was on the horses, he stripped his bedsheets and hid them at the bottom of Tanti's clothes basket. By the time he joined his sister at the gate, baptized in deception, the animals had disappeared into the horizon leaving only a trail of dust along the way.

"Wha' happen?" he asked excitedly. "De cow dem get wey or a cowman a ride hog?"

Sensing something roguish from her brother, Jubilee did not know whether to laugh at his trite attempt of a joke or to smack the back of his head for his cheekiness. She looked him over, inhaled slightly, and noticed that he was only wearing underpants and still reeked of pee, so he was definitely up to something.

"Hmm! Trouble nuh set like rain," she answered and left him at the gate.

The smell of Sunday breakfast permeated the air. Jubilee peeped in the window to see what was on the stove. On the coal fire, there was roasted breadfruit, and on the stove, ackee and saltfish in coconut sauce, callaloo, fried plantains and johnny cakes. On ordinary days, they would eat breakfast

out in the kitchen, which was a separate building from the house. But on Sundays, they ate breakfast in the Big House. The red calico cloth was already spread on the table with a couple of loaves of bread atop it, and a large pot of chocolate tea.

As soon as they sat down to eat, Cousin Jim came calling for Tanti. He must have smelled the breadfruit roasting from way down the hill. Every Sunday morning, he would come calling for Tanti, saying he had something special for her—a special mango, yam, banana, coconut, peas, or something else. One Sunday, he brought Tanti the most special yellow tomatoes that made her cry and hug him. Cousin Jim usually came before the breakfast got to the main house. Tanti would give him a plate, and he would stand by the kitchen window eating while the rest of us ate in the house. This Sunday, he must have been delayed by the stampede of animals earlier. He wouldn't go in the house, so Tanti gave Jubilee a plate of food to bring to him. He stood at the window outside the sitting room and ate while he shared some talk with Tanti. While they talked, Jubilee quickly polished off her food. These days, the more she ate, the more she became hungry. With Cousin Jim distracting Tanti, she ate a second helping in silence.

When breakfast was over, Cousin Jim bid his goodbyes and walked by the back of the house, down the hill to the pool of a stream where he would take his Sunday bath. By this time, everything gradually quickened into a mad rush in the house. Jubilee and her brother cleared the breakfast dishes away and got ready for church. Outside, the entire village of people and animals had been baptized with the Sunday spirit. Men in light suits, boys in tailored shirts, women in hats and white and patterned dresses, girls in colored frocks, all carrying hymn books, Bibles, handkerchiefs, and fans on their way to churches near and far. Every now and then, a group of passersby would call out, "Good maunin', good maunin'," and asked if Tanti was ready yet.

When the next group of passersby inquired if Tanti was ready, Tanti told Jubilee to take Errol and go along with them. Jubilee grabbed her brother's hand, and they scuttled to the gates and down the dirt road to catch up with their fellow churchgoers. When they caught up with the Hornetts and fell in pace with them, Clive, the oldest boy, rushed besides Jubilee and began walking with her. Clive was much older than Jubilee, and she disliked everything about him. After a few paces with him brushing himself up against her, she deliberately switched sides with her brother to keep him between them. Suddenly, Clive busted out laughing.

"Gal, wey you shoes?"

Jubilee looked down and to her dismay stared at her bare feet. She realized that she had not put on her shoes. She had not put on her shoes because her shoes were still at shoemaker's repair shop, and she had forgotten to collect them yesterday. By now everyone was laughing and ridiculing her, including Mother Hornett and Errol. She dropped Errol's hand and ran towards the house. Halfway there, she remembered that there were no other shoes at home, and the shoemaker's repair shop was in the opposite direction. So, she scrambled and ran back in the direction she had just ran from.



"Like Mother," collage on paper, mixed media, 2001.



"Ancestral Garden," acrylic on burlap, 2001.

Sweating and panting, she passed the Hornetts and Errol, ran past her church, ran past another church, and then ran for fifteen minutes until she reached the shoemaker's shop. The shoemaker's shop was closed, because after all it was Sunday, and while the shoemaker didn't go to church, the shop was still closed on Sunday. Jubilee threw herself on the shop's steps and started to fret.

"Oh me, oh my, what to do, what to do?"

She could see Tanti's scolding eyes if she were to enter the church barefooted, and not helping to lessen the pandemonium was the fact that Tanti was leading the choir and would have full view of her appearance and behavior. She contemplated not going to church at all, but the village was pretty vacant once everyone cleared off to church, and she had no place to go. While the tears welled up in her eyes, she pounded her head against the wooden door. As the tears flowed, she pounded harder and harder.

Suddenly the door creaked open, and Jubilee fell in backwards. The shop was dark, only a stream of light from the open door, and there was no sign of the shoemaker. She looked around the room

but could not see much of anything. She waited for her eyes to become accustomed to the darkness and tried to remember the layout of the shop. If only she could find her shoes, she would slip them on and rush to church before the choir's second hymn. She opened the door a bit more to let more light in and started to look around for her shoes.

There were shoes everywhere—shoes on shelves, shoes in boxes, shoes on the counter, shoes on table—but no sign of her shoes. She ransacked the shoemaker's shop, looking for her shoes. She burrowed through boxes, tried on a few pairs of high heeled shoes that were way too high and way too big, pranced around the shop in them, rummaged the counters, scavenged the shelves, and tousled the tables searching for her shoes. Jubilee had spent a good part of the morning in search of her shoes when she heard a voice outside:

"Mr. Potter, how you do, sah? You workin' on a Sunday?"

The voice frightened Jubilee into a panic for she did not expect anyone to come calling or that a passerby would have noticed the door that she had left slightly open for the light. The voice also sounded slightly familiar, and she certainly would not want

to be recognized by anyone who knew her Tanti and would reveal her disorderly conduct of breaking and entering. She scampered for a place to hide, climbed over the counter, hiding behind a sewing machine.

Footsteps climbed the steps, and Jubilee was quivering in the corner where she hid.

"Mista Potter! Yu dere sah? Is me, Nancy!"

Fear washed itself as sweat over Jubilee's body. Nancy was the village blabbermouth, who posed herself as a domestic helper for those who could afford to pay for a day's wage. Tanti would frequently use her help for major domestic tasks. And Nancy carried news from house to house, aggrandizing them in her own way. Jubilee could only imagine how she this news would reach Tanti's ear.

"Mista Potter! De door open sah."

Looking around the room at the disorder, she shook her head.

"Somethin' not right here. If yu need any help to organize and clean up de shop, mi available fi work sah."

She took another look around the room, walked to the door, and closed the door on her way out. Jubilee waited for a few minutes to make sure that Nancy had left before coming out of her hiding place. She

still had not found her shoes and knew that it was well into the Sunday sermon, and she could not stay there looking for her shoes. She crawled out from behind the sewing machine, climbed over the counter, creaked the door open to make sure Nancy had left the premises, and headed out of the shop.

As luck would have it, at the crossroads, by the big clock where there was a market and a rum bar, though not open on Sunday, non-churchgoers were still hanging out there. Jubilee's heart sank as she spotted a couple of girls from her school. She disliked everything about these girls, especially their raggedy dirty clothes. But the girls were playing Dandy Shandy, one of her favorite games, which she seldom got to play, as Tanti forbade it. Between the two empty stalls in the market, away from the obvious, one of the girls spotted Jubilee.

"Jubilee! Ovah here! Wanna play Dandy Shandy?"

Before Jubilee could answer, the girls had rushed her, dragging her into the market. The game of Dandy Shandy began as soon as they reached the market stalls, and Jubilee had no time to resist. Played with a "box ball" made from a discarded juice box stuffed with old newspapers or any other such junk, the two girls stood about

fifty feet apart from each other, with Jubilee in between them. The first pitch of the box ball came swooshing by her ears, and she dodged the ball just in time.

"Sight!" she exclaimed.

The girls alternated throwing the ball at her, and Jubilee missed the ball each time. Soon the game speeded up very quickly, and Jubilee skillfully dodged the ball and even managed the infamous "cok-up" move, jumping in the air allowing the ball to pass to between her legs. This stirred up a quarrel and squabble, as one of the girls decided that the ball had hit Jubilee.

"It tip, it tip. Mi si when it lick yuh."

"It no lick me. It just brush pon mi dress."

The girls rolled their eyes and congregated to conjure up another plan of attack.

"A'right, we gonna change balls. Dis ball pitch better."

The girls laughed with each other and then at Jubilee. One girl hurled the ball hard and fast at Jubilee, and before she could position herself for the "sighting," the ball exploded with juice on her chest, dripping down her yellow dress. The girls' laughter blasted in the empty market, as Jubilee looked at the damage to the dress that Tanti had begged her to keep clean.

"Sight dat one," the other girl mocked.

Jubilee ran to the standpipe in the market

and tried to clean off her dress to no avail. It did not get clean, only wet. Now she knew why those girls' clothes were always raggedy and dirty, they didn't play fair.

Appalled and disgusted with the girls' behavior and her now stained dress, she turned in horror and panic, fled the town's square, saying absolutely nothing to the girls. As she ran up the road, their laughter followed her into the distance. She hurried along in the hot midday sun, sweating in the subdued Sunday sea sounds, aware of the Sunday sky but feeling unsettled in her Sunday mood, anticipating Tanti's reaction at her first sighting, "Gal! Ah guaan Dandy Shandy your behind!"—and of the eventual beating that would come. ▼

Marline A. Martin is an artist, arts administrator, curator, writer, and storyteller. She is the recipient of several awards, including the Arts Mid-Hudson Individual Award, the Zeta Phi Beta/Five Pearls Foundation Community Partner Award, the Harlem Women of Excellence Award for the Arts, and Mind-Builders' Creative Art Center Visionary Award. She is currently working on a collection of short stories and describes this story as "based on my childhood living in Jamaica." Photo of the author by Matt Williams.



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