

MY FATHERS BEFORE ME - 001

Dick, the yard man, took the big Rhode Island cock from the run and, tucking it under his arm, went back to the kitchen steps where he had been sitting.

He held the cock fast between his legs and, squeezing its mouth open with his left hand, took a pinch of ashes from the small heap besides him, between right thumb and forefinger. This he rubbed on to the bird's tongue, and began to peel the hard, horny growth from the tongue's end.

His grandmother, who had spent most of her usefulness with the family, came shambling from the house behind him, eating cassava farina soaked in water and sugar from a glass with a spoon. She stood looking down at him for some time, her eyes, the colour of dry bracken, tender, before she took a spoonful of farina from the glass and, bending with the stiffness of years, put it from behind into his mouth. Through the matter in his mouth Dick said, like a man continuing his thought in speech:

“And your age, Granny? You've spent a lifetime here. How many summers you's seen?”

“More than you'll ever see if you go to that England,” she said, letting herself down on the step above him. “Eighty-four years come October God spare life. Whole fourteen above and beyond what the good Lord says.”

Dick said: "Hm," and taking the cock to the run, returned with a hen the whiteness of a swan.

The old woman said: "Just think of it, Dick, just think of it: Come this time tomorrow you'll be miles away, with oceans of water separating you from everybody who loves you, and going to a land where you ent got a bird in the cotton tree, where nobody'll care a straw whether you sink or swim, and where black ent altogether liked." She scraped the last fragments of farina from the glass, and once more put the spoon to his mouth.

"You ent mind leaving us Dick?" she said. "You ent mind leaving your poor old Granny and Ma? And Vere? What about Vere? You ent got no feelings in that belly of yo'n Dick?"

Dick said, sucking matter from his teeth with his tongue: "I'll send for Vere as soon I can. Maybe Ma too."

The old woman continued as though she had not heard: "No more Dick about the house to put your hands 'pon. Maybe some lazy wring-neck governor in your place whose only interest'll be his week's pay."

Dick said, applying ashes to the bird's tongue: "Time enough too, and welcome."

From an upstairs window, whose curtains she had been pulling against the evening sun, Bessie saw her mother sitting on the concrete step above Dick. Going down to the servant's room she took a cushion from the sofa and going out to where they were sitting said:

“Up Ma. Think you’s young sitting on this cold step.”

The old woman raised her buttocks a few inches, and Bessie pushed the cushion under.

“I’s just been telling Dick, Bessie, how no good ent ever come to our family leaving our land and going into nobody else country.”

“True enough,” said Bessie. “Look at my Dick and Panama.”

The old woman said: “Ever teach you who the Boers was at school Dick?”

“I ent ever learned for sure who the Boers were,” said Dick, “save that they couldn’t stand up to bayonets.”

Bessie said: “That’s right. ‘At the bayonet charge the Boers surrender.’”

“British bayonets,” said Dick.

“Don’t you let nobody fool you with that, Dick,” said the old woman. “There wasn’t all no British bayonets. Your grand-dad’s bayonet was there too.”

Dick said: “Oh, well, we’re all British. Least that’s the way I looks at it.”

“But British or no British,” said the old woman, “your grand-dad came back to me and his four children with a foot less, and as I often told him after, it served him in a way right. For what in the name of heavens had the Boers ever done him, whoever in God’s name they was, that he should leave off peaceful shoeing horses, and go in their own country to fight them for it? What right he had, Dick? Answer that question, nuh?”

Dick, having peeled the pip off the hen's tongue, handed the bird up to Bessie who, squatting beside her mother, laid it in her lap and began to stroke its smooth feathers.

"Didn't it serve him in a way right don't you think Dick?" pressed the old woman. "Going to kill those Boers who'd never done him a single thing? Speaking from your conscience, Dick."

Dick said, turning the bit of callouse from the hen's tongue round his fingertips: "Well, he went to fight for his king. To defend the Empire."

"The Empire?" said the old woman, as though unable to piece together the jig-saw of her mind.

"The Empire," said Dick.

"What Empire?" asked the old woman.

"The British Empire." said Dick.

"Listen Dick," said the old woman. "I can't ever get this straight though I must have tried dozens and dozens of times to get the old man to put it right in my brain before he died: Ent Britain England?"

"Sure. Britain is England," said Dick.

"And ent British come from Britain?"

Dick said, perhaps not too sure of himself: "Well. . .yes, British from Britain."

"And how come that your grand-dad lost his leg at a place called River in Africa, as he was so fond of relating, and you says that he went to fight for the king of England? What right had the king of England in Africa?"

“Well, I don’t think that the king of England was there in person,” said Dick, “but he had, well... interests there.”

“Interests?” said the old woman, uncomprehending.

“Well, it’s, like this.” said Dick: “Years ago, just as we from the West Indies are going to England now, English men and women, British if you like, went and made their homes in other lands, Canada—”

“That’ where Vere’s sister gone to a hotel to do waitressing,” interrupted Bessie.

“. . Australia, Africa, and so on,” continued Dick. “And these places where the British made their homes became British and made up the British Empire. So the king of England had a right to interfere if any other nation tried to pinch the places where these English had made their homes, as the Boers wanted to do.”

“Oh, I see,” said the old woman, shaking her head up and down. “It’s a little bit clearer than I’s ever understood it now. But how come you’s all flocking to England like a parcel of sheep? Why don’t some of you go to Australia or Canada? Sure Vere says she gets sixty-seven cents on every dollar that her sister sends her. Why don’t some of you try and work for Canadian dollar, to send back home? Ent you just told me we’s all British?”

Dick said; “Well, it’s like this: A man had, say twelve children. As the years passed by the oldest grew up and left the old man and went and made their own homes. Mind you, you couldn’t interfere with the old man and the younger kids they’d left at home for them to know, but at the same time the old man couldn’t tell them who to let come in their house and who not to. Well, it’s like that with Canada and Australia and South Africa. They have grown up and are running their own homes, and they says they don’t want us West Indians to come into them and that’s the end of it.”

“But we can still run about in the backyard of the old home,” said the old woman, “Is that what you mean?”

“Exactly,” said Dick. “If you put it that way.”

“ I see it all now,” said the old woman, “I see. Your grand-dad was never given much to explaining. Still I don’t feel that your grand-dad had any right going to fight those Boers,” she persisted, “just as I don’t feel you’ve got any right leaving bright, sunny Barbados and going to that bleak England, though I’s often thought that with your reading and quickness maybe you could do better than you’re doing.”

“I’ve thought so too for a long time,” said Dick.

The evening sun had struck through the leaves into his eyes and letting himself down upon the lowest step he had sprawled back, making a rest for his head with his interlocked fingers. The women look down on his face, and when he spoke his eyes had a far away look into the sky.

Bessie said: "Your dad thought the same thing, and it didn't do him no good."

Vere, the young cook, appeared round a corner in the yard, carrying a basket of groceries in her hand. She rested her basket on the ground and sat beside Dick with a sigh, leaning her body heavily upon him.

"Your dad thought Barbados was too slow for him too," said Bessie. "He swaggered about singing the foolish songs of the money they'd make digging the Canal with the other fools just like, as Ma says, our dad used to sing about the pound and a crown for every Boer they down. Only he hadn't the luck that your grand-dad had. He didn't ever come back".

The old woman said: "Died like rotten sheep in the Panama mud. No, no good ent ever come to our family leaving our land and forking ourselves in nobody else's. Not one bit of good."

"Three for luck," said Dick.

Bessie got stiffly to her feet and, going to the run, put the white fowl in. Then she came back and stood looking down at Vere.

"You's a foolish girl, Vere," said Bessie, after a time. "Why don't you tell this Dick not to go to no England?"

"Cause it wouldn't be any use," said Vere.

"No use, nuh?" said the old woman. "Hm."

Vere said, sitting up and half-turning so that her words might the

better take in both women: "You two had husbands, husbands mind you, and nothing you could say or do could stop them from going away once their minds was made up. I ent see how I's been more foolish than either of you 'cause I ent been able to stop Dick here from going."

Dick executed a long stretch before he said: "My grandfather was sick of waiting to tack back loose shoe, sick of waiting days, maybe weeks, for a few paltry cents. And so when he thought he saw a chance of bettering himself he grabbed it with both hands, even at the risk of losing his life. My father was sick of cleaning up the mess that the dogs make on mornings, sick of picking pips off these stupid fowls, sick of waiting for the few paltry shillings at the end of the week, just as heartily sick of the whole deuced show as I am myself after him. And so when the chance of going to Panama came along nothing nobody could say could stop him from going, just as nothing nobody can say will stop me from going to England. My grand-dad and dad didn't go because they wanted to be rid of their wives and children. They didn't go because they wanted an easy life. They didn't go for a spree. They went because their souls cried out for better opportunities and better breaks. And just like them, I'm going for the same thing."

Bessie still stood, her hands akimbo, looking down at Dick. When Dick finished speaking her eyes switched their measure to Vere, and with a fleeting lightening of her harsh face which none of the others saw she

decided to play her last card.

“Still, Vere,” said Bessie, “you’re a foolish girl.’

Vere pouted and said: “Say it again. A hundred times. Till you’re tired.’

“What’re you straightening your hair so for?” said Bessie.

““Cause other girls do,” said Vere.

“And rouging your face, and plastering that red thing on to your mouth?”

“Cause other girls do,” said Vere, hugging her knees and rocking herself back and forth on the step.

Bessie said: “You was always a rude brazen little piece. All the same, I hope you’s got something else to make Dick stick by you. He going to England where he’ll see hundreds of girls with straight hair and really red cheeks and mouths natural like roses. Ten to one one of them get him”

Vere sprang to her feet like an angered tigress her eyes dilated with the fierceness of her passion, her long-nailed fingers taloned for the kill.

“And I’d spend the last cent getting to England, and wherever they was I’d find them out and tear the last straight hair from her head. I’d tear the flesh from her red cheeks to the bone. I’d beat her rosy mouth to a bloody pulp; Oh Christ, I’d—.”

She caught at her breath in a long racking sob, and then the pain at losing him and the fear gushed from her eyes. She snatched the basket from the ground, and blindly mounting the steps, dashed sobbing passionately into the house.

The other three were all standing now, and in the understanding of Vere's love, had drawn involuntarily closer to each other.

The old woman said, knocking an early beetle from his shirt with her spoon: "And will you still go to England, Dick?"

Their ears just barely caught the one word from his lips. The women turned and, mounting the steps in the settling dusk, made their way together into the house.

The old woman said: "It's the same with him as it was with them, Bessie. Nothing will ever stop him."

"No. Nothing," said Bessie.