

The Mango Tree

The morning sun claimed the cloudless sky. It scorched the dirt road creating a sweltering, uncomfortable heat. Murphy's Lane was almost deserted. Near the bottom of the slanting lane, two brown skinned scrawny boys pelted stones at a mango tree. Its branches hung over a high wall. Their backpacks were strewn carelessly near the wall, books threatening to slip through the safety pinned openings where zips once reigned. They were fully optimistic of a positive outcome, eager to taste the juicy grafted mangoes. Neither the oppressing heat nor the fear of being caught deterred their efforts. But stone after stone yielded no rewards.

"Let's go Yogi. I doh want Miss to beat me again." The smaller one complained. "Ma Lulu pick most of de mangoes."

"Boy hush before she come outside!" Hissed Yogi at his brother, Pete.

Pete could no longer ignore the pangs of hunger attacking his stomach and lost his zeal to continue throwing stones. He pulled out his worn, damp school shirt from his equally worn khaki shorts to wipe his face. Hoping to ease his rumbling stomach and out of habit, he stuck his left thumb into his mouth. With his right hand, Pete found the tip of his shirt below the missing button and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger in a circular fashion.

Yogi scowled at him but continued pelting away. Although the wall was too high to aim comfortably, he was determined to leave satisfied. The dogs were barking incessantly. Yogi stepped further onto the dusty road and aimed at a big, juicy looking mango at the top. After using his hand to indicate to Pete to move, he threw the stone with all his might. Suddenly there was a loud shriek! The barking of the dogs seemed to have heightened. The two boys remained frozen

momentarily then Yogi snatched his backpack, dashed towards Pete, grabbed his little brother's hand and broke out into a run. They heard Ma Lulu's voice. "I will tell Miss Sybil what all you do!"

With hearts that beat like drums, the boys sped down the hill and rounded the corner that led to the shortcut.

"Stop Yogi! Stop!" Pete slowed down his pace as he pulled his hands free. In a cloud of dust they halted, breathing heavily.

Yogi looked at Pete irritably, fear stamped all over his face. "What nuh boy? You want dem people to ketch us?" His eyes darted around.

"I forget my bag."

"Boy you always have to do something stupid?!" Yogi sucked his teeth.

Pete pleaded with this brother.

"I not going back up there. You doh know de man have a gun?"

The younger sibling looked back and tears sprang to his eyes. "I cannot go school without my bag. You see what you cause? If we had pass de mango tree straight all now we would be in school."

Yogi sighed and set his worn backpack on the ground releasing his longest stupes. "Ok ok. I'll go for the stupid bag. Stay there. If you hear me scream just run to school."

Pete nodded and watched his big brother disappear around the corner, his mouth dry with fear.

Yogi stood at the bottom of the slightly sloping lane. He strained his ears listening for voices over the barking dogs and his thunderous heart beats. He courageously ran the short distance and grabbed the backpack. Clutching it to his chest he sped away praying he wouldn't

get shot. Still running, he roughly shoved the bag to his little brother and took his off the ground.

There were no structured steps in the shortcut but rather a winding downhill dirt path, interspersed with a few rocks and shrubs that led to the Roseau River. It was bordered by bushes and trees in some areas and corrugated zinc fences in others. The boys kept looking over their shoulders as they ran and dragged on their gaunt behinds. Pete stumbled several times before they finally reached the dirt road. The boys hurried across the unpaved street to the river bank.

They approached the shallow area of the clear, inviting river and hopped carefully on the strategically placed stones. They hastily said good morning to the three ladies who were in the river rolling clothes on the big stones trying to get them clean. One was rubbing and spraying the foam out of a shirt making those swishy noises the boys liked.

“You two always late!” One woman shouted at them above the sound of the water.

“Lady is your business?” Yogi shouted back as he continued carefully and quickly across the river.

They reached the other bank, expertly climbed the low wall and clambered unto River Street.

Pete placed his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath but Yogi grabbed and admonished him. “You want to reach early so why you stopping?”

Under the relentless sun, they ran the short distance to Roseau Boys’ School on Bath Road and entered the gates just as the bell stopped ringing.

Pete, relieved that they had made it in the nick of time, quickly approached the area where children were lining up for prayers. He breathed heavily as his body fought to settle down. His thighs hurt. His feet hurt. His head hurt. He was sweating profusely and wanted to rest. His stomach grumbled thinking about the mangoes they almost had. He would have saved it for his

snack. But today he had to resort to the usual – tap water – until lunch. He wondered what had happened this morning. Probably a stone had struck a dog. Well too bad. The dogs had food and he didn't.

Yogi, on the other hand, couldn't be bothered about prayers. While the other children were going towards the courtyard, he strolled into his empty classroom which was in the second row of the forest-green barracks, away from the assembly area. He went from backpack to backpack and quickly ate some goodies. Yogi wanted to get the snacks to Pete but slipping into assembly meant that he would be seen and questioned. Then he had a brilliant idea. Yogi wrote a note. It read: *“Thats for you. Eat it for your reesses or take a fast bite when Teacher turn his back. Not to let them ketch you. Yogi.”*

The eleven-year-old exited his classroom and entered his brother's third grade class. He went to Pete's desk and hastily put the note and the items into the place normally reserved for stationery.

Back at the assembly, Pete couldn't concentrate on what Mrs. Matthews, the school's principal, was saying. Suddenly the children were moving and he realized that prayers and announcements were over. Then Jerry was nudging him and telling him something.

“What you say?” he asked.

“You didn't hear Mrs. Matthews call your name?” Jerry answered with a question.

“Yogan Hunter and Peter Pollock, please report to my office immediately.” The principal announced again.

Pete's heart started to hammer in his chest. Oh God. He was going to get a beating for lateness. Where was Yogi? He looked around the thinning crowd of pupils but couldn't see his brother.

Yogi froze when he reached his classroom. Teacher Matthews was calling his name. He raced across the sporadic lawn towards the washrooms so he could pretend to be coming from that direction. Then he approached the assembly area. Yogi's palms and armpits were wet. Did someone see him steal the snacks? He approached the platform with trepidation and wiped his brows. Most of the students had already gone to their classrooms. Pete was on the raised platform with the principal, looking terrified.

"Good morning Miss," Yogi smiled as he climbed the stairs in an attempt to be polite and co-operative.

Mrs. Matthews responded pleasantly and asked Yogi where he had been.

Yogi lowered his head. "In the toilet, Miss."

Arms akimbo, Mrs. Matthews nodded. She was tall and dark skinned with broad square-like shoulders. Her no-nonsense persona forced the disciplinarian in her to develop a face which bore little trace of ever having smiled. Even her voice could terrify students. Her short wig was a little askew (but the boys didn't dare tell her so). Today she wore a brown pant suit and the usual dark red lipstick. Her small nose flared as her round eyes peered at them through her glasses, penetrating their being, with unmistakable disapproval.

She spoke sternly. "You need to comb your hair and dress properly for school. Peter, please tuck your shirt neatly into your pants." She looked at Pete expectantly.

Pete hastily put his shirt back into his pants as the principal watched him closely. He felt uncomfortable and wanted to disappear as he became conscious of the hole at the front of his right shoe. He wore no socks and his big toe peeped through the open space. He quickly tried fixing his hair with the palm of his hand while Mrs. Matthews was telling them about the importance of being neat. As soon as Pete was more presentable, Mrs. Matthews asked the boys to follow her

and started walking towards her office.

Pete touched his big brother's arm and raised his eyebrows at him, silently asking what was going on. Yogi shrugged and mouthed that he didn't know. Then he sidled up to Pete and quickly told him about the snacks. Pete's eyes grew wide with fascination but then he stopped walking as realization dawned on him. His brother had stolen again. His face took on an expression of its own but it was quickly restored to normalcy when Yogi gave him 'the fix your face and walk' look.

Mrs. Matthews turned to look at them, her face a picture of dissatisfaction. A few more strides took them to her small office where she asked the boys to sit. Reluctantly, they sat on the two orange plastic chairs with the rusting legs – the only visitors' chairs in the cramped space. Although her desk had seen better days, it was tidy. The papers and books were neatly stacked to one side. Mrs. Matthews loomed over them. She got straight to the point. "I received a disturbing call from Mrs. Lucien this morning. As a matter of fact, the phone call is the reason why I rang the bell late."

The two boys remained silent as she studied their faces. Yogi wanted to know what Ma Lulu had said. It's not like they had gotten any mango.

"Both of you threw stones into her yard although she had repeatedly told you to stop it."

"But we didn't even get mango -" Little Pete started.

Mrs. Matthews held up her hands. "You should know better than to interrupt me. Now a stone that one of you threw burst Mrs. Lucien's head."

Yogi swallowed hard but didn't speak. He focused on the trophy that proudly sat on the cabinet.

Pete bowed his head searching the worn, brown linoleum floor for some kind of escape.

Oh God. What if they called their granny? Or the police?

Mrs. Matthews stared at the boys intently. “What do you have to say for yourselves?”

“Not to call our granny Miss. We was hungry.” Pete pleaded with eyes full of tears.

“It wasn’t Pete, it was me.” Yogi owned up, his voice a mere whisper. He shifted his eyes to the floor. “I sorry I burst Ma Lulu head – Mrs. Lucien head I mean.”

“I called your mother this morning so I’m expecting her any minute now.”

“Our mother?” Both boys asked simultaneously, eyes wide in surprise and panic.

“But is our Granny we living with,” Yogi said.

“Young man. Your granny has little access to telephone and besides your mother lives closer. We’ve been receiving too many complaints about you. I am suspending the both of you for three days. During this time, I suggest you think about your behaviour and the kind of life you want to lead. Now, sit here while I arrange to get your things from your classrooms.”

Before Mrs. Matthews could leave the office, Yogi stood. “Miss, I can go for them.”

“You stay put. I have to speak to your teachers.”

Defeated, Yogi lowered himself into his chair, a feeling of foreboding taking over his soul.

“Yogi, Mrs. Matthews going to whip you for them snacks.” Pete said after she was out of earshot.

“I know Pete. I know.” He sucked his teeth, agitated. “Is best I even go now. I not waiting for that lady to come back.” The bigger brother stood and went to the doorway. “Way boy look Mammy coming.” He hurried back to his seat, his mouth a long pout. Slouching, he folded his arms and swallowed hard.

Pete sucked his thumb vigorously, as he looked through the large, open window directly across the room. He tried to focus on a cow grazing on the grassy hill just beyond the school.

Their mother barged into the small office, an unkempt baby on her left hip, a cigarette was tucked behind her ear. Her red t-shirt hung loosely on her body and her small blue shorts did nothing to hide anything.

“What all you do this time?” Rage seeped from her pores. Her wispy locks were pulled back making her large eyes appear to pop out of her bony face.

Both boys shifted uncomfortably but didn't speak. The boys' mother spoke louder. “What all you do I say? I had to leave my big basin of clothes for what?”

The baby, clad in a stained white vest and a cloth diaper, looked at the mother wide eyed as her voice rose. She ignored the baby and glared at the boys. None of them spoke.

Just then the principal walked in with their belongings. “Good morning Miss Pollock. Thank you for coming.”

“Yes Miss. What them boys do now?”

“Well, this morning I called you about one matter. Now we have another matter to deal with.” Mrs. Matthews went on to explain her phone call from Mrs. Lucien.

“Those chirren not hearing not to throw stones in de lady yard. Since I small that lady greedy so. Leave de lady mango alone!” She pointed her small finger at her sons.

“She can choose to share her mangoes with whomever she wants. But the point here is one of their stones injured her, Miss Pollock.”

“So what she want?”

“She wants the boys to stop throwing stones into her yard. If they want mangoes, they can simply ask her. They need to behave in a more disciplined manner. Look at me Yogan and Peter.”

Both boys looked at their principal without much head movement.

“Mrs. Lucien isn't taking this further and you should be thankful. You both need to think

about your actions and apologize to the Luciens.”

Yogan and Peter nodded.

“Answer better than that.” Their mother admonished.

“Yes Miss.” They said in unison, almost inaudibly.

“Now I need to address another issue.” Mrs. Matthews continued as she retrieved something from her pocket.

Yogi’s felt his heart sink to his stomach when he saw the paper. He could feel his heart ready to leap out of his chest.

“You want to tell your mother what you did this morning?” Mrs. Matthews raised her eyebrows at Yogi.

Yogi looked down at the brown linoleum. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his mother shift her baby to the other hip. He could hear his heart beating in his ears.

“Yogan?” The principal prompted.

Yogan took a deep breath. He said, “our granny didn’t have breakfast to give us this morning.”

As if on cue, Pete’s stomach rumbled.

“So I thought if I just take a little bit from everybody snack they wouldn’t know.”

“You *know* stealing is not tolerated here.” Mrs. Matthews spoke firmly.

“But Yogan, what trouble you putting yourself in?” His mother was loud. “What trouble is that?” She shifted the baby back to her left hip.

Without warning she smacked Yogan behind his head with her free hand. He fell to the floor and the tears came. “Mammy I was hungry!”

“Learn to do with what you have. I tired tell you that!” She smacked him again as he was

getting up. Yogi used his arms to protect his head from the attack.

The baby started to wail. Little Pete, untouched, began sobbing.

The angry mother was reaching for her son again when the principal firmly told her to stop. Mrs. Matthews helped Yogi up and went to sit at her desk. Beads of perspiration formed on her upper lip and she turned on the fan next to her swivelling chair.

Sweating, their mother retrieved her cigarette from the floor and tucked it back behind her ear. Then she tried soothing the crying baby into silence by rocking him and rubbing his back.

“Try feeding him,” suggested Mrs. Matthews. “I need these boys to focus on what I am about to say. Peter, please allow your mother to sit.”

Pete wiped his eyes and nose on his sleeve then joined Yogi on the other chair. Miss Pollock sat and welcomed the cool breeze from the oscillating fan. With the steady breeze caressing his skin, her baby instantly latched on to her breast.

“Now I want the both of you to listen to me,” Mrs. Matthews said. “You both brought this on yourselves and while you are home, I want you to seriously think about what you want out of life. There are consequences to your actions and stealing comes with very serious repercussions including jail time. I wouldn’t want to see any of you go to jail.”

After giving Yogan and Peter much to think about, she asked them to wait outside while she spoke to their mother.

Yogi and Pete exited the small office. The older boy went to sit under the kennip tree towards the side of the school while his younger brother, unable to ignore his stomach anymore, ran to the tap. After wetting his face and drinking to satisfaction he joined his brother on the wooden bench which was nailed to the bark of the tree. They listened to the monotonous voices of the teachers and the buzzing sound of conversations flowing from the classrooms. Before long,

their mother joined them, her expression grim, with the baby fast asleep on her shoulder.

As they walked to the gate, Pete, ever eager to get back in good books, chatted nonstop to the air, for their mother wasn't responding to anything he was saying.

Outside the school gate, she stood indecisively, and transferred the baby from one shoulder to the next.

"Anyway, all you escape today." Her nose flared in fury and her chest rose and fell. "Mrs. Matthews tell me to just talk to all you, an' not to beat all you. 'Cause the kind of rage I have in me -" she paused and inhaled deeply.

Their mother took the cigarette from behind her ear and placed it between her thin, dry lips. She retrieved a lighter from her pocket and with one hand, deftly lit her cigarette. With eyes closed, she pulled on it deeply, held the smoke in for a few moments, bent back her head, and exhaled the smoke through her mouth and nose. She repeated the motion a few times then tossed the cigarette into the gutter.

With sudden calm, Miss Pollock addressed her sons who were looking at her, transfixed. "Yogan, for de last time, behave! Stealing things will get you in jail. You want to go prison like your father?"

"No Mammy." Yogan looked to the road for comfort.

"An' Pete you have to learn to do what is right. Already you self doh have father."

Pete nodded, his eyes brimming with tears.

"Mrs. Matthew gimme twenty dollars for all you. Give it to Granny an' tell her what happen. An' go by Ma Lulu to say sorry."

"Yes Mammy."

"Now I going to finish wash my clothes. Go straight home."

“Mammy I can come with you?” Pete asked just as she was turning away.

“Pete, how you expect me to bring you at de man home?”

Pete felt the tears drop from his lids eyes as he nodded.

“I will come Murphy’s Lane later.” His mother’s voice softened.

“But you always saying you will come and you never coming,” Pete snivelled.

“I will come, Pete. Now go with Yogi.”

With tears rolling down his cheeks and a lump in his throat, Pete followed his brother. He turned to wave good-bye but his mother was already walking away. In silence, the two boys made their way home. The ladies were still in the river roaring with laughter and paused to question them as they crossed.

“Our principal send -” Pete started.

“Is not your business!” Yogi shouted without stopping.

The boys sulkily trudged up the short-cut back to their home.