

No Angels Died at Green Bay

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That night, Jimmy had just come out of Carib Theatre, where he had gone to watch a Western named Gun Sling or Gunshot or something like that. He would say later that it was that Western, the men dodging and rolling from bullets, that saved his life. The truth is, for the rest of his long unhappy life Jimmy would wonder why he was alive and five of his other friends were dead. Survivor's guilt, some man in a white jacket at the University Hospital, where his girlfriend Paulette had taken him to try and quiet the voices that he kept hearing year after year --- the loud yet dull thud of bullets entering skulls --- survivor's guilt was what the man in the white jacket told him that he was suffering with.

These days even the sound of a truck back-firing was enough to get him startled.

But that all happened a long time ago. More than forty years now. And people who heard his story, kept saying Jimmy should have gotten over this a long time ago. The festering wound inside of himself that would not heal. The festering wound inside of the psyche of the island. The uptown brown-skinned woman who had been killed in her own home. She was an *asset* to the community. Yes, that was the word that everyone was now using. *Asset*. Someone who had done so much for her country. Who were the heartless thugs --- and even he agreed that they were heartless --- that would rape and then beat a defenseless eighty-nine year old woman to death? What is happening in our country? people were saying on the radio. What was happening to our *nation*? *Nation*. Another of the new words being used on the radio.

As if where he lived, on Laws Street, in what people now took to calling a *garrison* community, people were not being killed all the time. Everyday in fact. And there was no outcry about the killings that took place in the *garrison*.

Jimmy got up from the roadside where he was sitting and spit out the wad of tobacco he had inside of his mouth. He looked around him. There was not a house around where some woman was not forced to band her belly and bawl over a dead son. There was not a house where a man in a black shirt with a black bandana on his head had not gone to a nine-night ceremony for a young friend killed senselessly. In the yard across him alone, over eight boys from one family, all of whom he had known as young men, had died. Violently. Senselessly. And if the *nation* truly wanted to heal its wounds, they would start talking about what had happened to him and nine of his other friends some forty years before in the self-same *garrison* community.

Jimmy continued looking around him. An election was coming soon and the ruling People's Party for Development was fearful that they would lose the elections. This was what he and Bug-Eyes were talking about the other day. That the PPD's days were numbered and the JDP's days were soon in coming. With the JDP there would be more work for people like him, Bug Eyes was saying, but Jimmy was not so sure about this. That was what each party promised, that there would be jobs for people like them, and it was a similar promise that caused Santos and Chubby Dread, and three more of his friends, to lose their lives forty years before. The political party leaders in Jamaica were nothing but liars. Though, if Santos were alive, he would have said that with the exception of Cuba, which he had visited as a star football player, political leaders tended to be liars just about everywhere else he had been to in the world, and he, Santos, had been to many countries around the world representing Jamaica.

Jimmy remembered telling all of this to Paulette that long ago day when he had been rescued and made his way back to the zinc-fenced home he shared with her and their five children. That there was no posse like the government kept saying and was being reported in one newspaper article after another and was being talked about over the radio. They were just a group of men who would get together in a youth club, all those years ago, to talk about how they could make things better for their community.

Paulette, he smiled at her name. She had left him years before, had moved with their children to America, but she still called from time to time, to check up on him, even though she had a new man in her life. When he would ask her, "Paulette, why you left me?" The line would go silent and Jimmy believed he could hear her softly crying.

It was either that or she would get loud on him and say, "So what you wanted me to do? Stay there with you on that God forsaken island, Jimmy? Stay there in that dump on Laws Street? Gunshot flying in every which direction? Nobody not caring if we live or die, our life of no value to those in authority? Look what happen to you Jimmy!" She would be shouting by now. "Is only the grace of God why you still alive! Is only the grace of God alone why you did not end up like Chubby Dread or Santos! From the moment I see what happened to you, I knew I had to get myself out of that blasted country!"

"But with him?" He would be pleading now. "You couldn't find no other else man to leave me for than the Chiney-man you used to work for?"

"Think of your children," Paulette would say to him. "They growing up here in America. Have made good lives for themselves. They now have American passports and they have American children. Its that Chiney-man, as you call my husband, that made it all so."

The children. His children. His now-American children. They came from time to time to see him. Was always sending him things. And once or twice they had tried to get him to come and live with them in America. But he wasn't much interested in going to live in America. That country was for the young at heart, who didn't mind starting their lives over in a whole new country. It was here, right in the house on Laws Street

where he was born, and it was here, right in the house on Laws Street, where he was going to die. All he wanted was for Paulette to come back home to him. But he knew that was not ever going to happen. Not after what had happened some forty years before.

Laws Street. Again Jimmy kept looking around him, before he started laughing aloud at the irony of it all. He could not believe that in all the years he had lived there it had never occurred to him. On this self-same Laws Street, some of the worst laws on the island had been broken. Yes, he said to himself, nodding and still laughing a sad bitter little laugh, if Jamaica wanted to know what had happened to the country, the crime and violence that was raging like an out of control wildfire all over the island, here is where they should look. Here is where they should start asking their questions. Here is where it all began so many years before.

That long ago night, after he had come out of the theater, Jimmy had run into two of his friends, Mahfood-the-Indian and Buck-teeth-Bucky who talked with a lisp so bad you could barely understand what he was saying. It took Jimmy a full five minutes and the intervention of Mahfood to understand what Bucky was saying to him. That jobs were being given out to the men in the community. That anyone who signed up that night would be given a significant amount of money. And, Bucky had said in a low terrible hiss that Mahfood again had to translate to Jimmy, guns were being given out as well, to the men who signed up, so they could defend their community.

Later, as he walked away from the men, Jimmy did not like so much the idea of the guns, but he was not going to tell Mahfood or Bucky that. News had a way of spreading so quickly and he did not want it getting out that he was not prepared to defend his community. The PDP supporters needed to arm themselves against the better-equipped JDP supporters.

Guns meant police and police meant trouble, he had said to the two men, who had laughed and said, "Who you think giving us the guns in the first place Jimmy if not members of the Special Forces? The police cannot manage all the work of protecting this island by themselves. Those guns, they coming straight from America. High powered weapons to wipe out the JDP supporters."

Something about it all made him so uneasy, but Jimmy just shook his head as if he understood and said nothing.

The talk of work. Now that was something he could sign onto. It was the beginning of a new year, and before you knew it, the Easter holidays would be up on him. New church clothes for Paulette and the children. Big spiced Easter buns and cheese. He did not want it said that jobs were being given out and he Jimmy Paul Blackwood had turned his back on work.

By the time he got home, the children were all fast asleep, and Paulette was laying down in their bed. She had left his dinner of boiled banana and tin mackerel covered under a clean soft white cloth on the table. The lemonade was in the icebox, because at that time they could not even afford a refrigerator. After he had eaten his

dinner, Jimmy changed into his night-clothes and went to lay down beside her. It was dark and she said nothing to him.

“You sleeping?” He finally asked her, when he did not hear her gently snoring.

“You know I not sleeping, so why you asking?” She gently shoved him.

“Just checking,” he said to her, smiling. “I didn’t want to wake you up if you was sleeping.”

He could hear her laughing. There were days he still could not believe his luck, that Paulette was his woman. Those who did not believe in love at first sight were kidding themselves, because from the first time he saw Paulette on the school yard playing ground, jet-black skin and eyes that burned as bright as a night star, he knew he would marry her and that they would have the most beautiful children together. It took him nine long years to get her to understand this, that they would be together, that they would always be together, but finally she did and soon after she moved in with him they started having children together.

“Did Chin pay you today?” He wanted to know, because he had no lunch money for the children tomorrow morning.

Paulette tensed up. “Yes,” she answered after a while, “ Mr. Chin paid me a day’s work today.”

“Good,” he grunted more to himself than to her.

He knew that she was hoping, Paulette was, that he would not start in on Mr. Chin again and how her employer was in love with his-Paulette. He was a man and he knew when another man was after his woman. Men had instincts like that. All he was hoping for now, was to get a good job so that Paulette could stop selling in Mr. Chin’s shop on Harbour Street and, instead, stay home and take care of him and their children.

“The men are taking about a government work,” Jimmy offered to the slim dark shadow in the lightless room. “They talking about good money. I thinking of going with the men to try and get some of the money.”

Paulette rose up onto one elbow. “Government job?” She sounded skeptical. “But is not our party in power.”

“I know,” he said, “I ask the man-them that tell me about the job the same thing. They say is aid from some foreign country, either England or America, to get the unemployed young men in the community working.”

She laid back down, without saying anything, but he could tell that she was uneasy.

“If I get the job,” he tried reassuring her, “that will mean you can stay home with the children. That will mean you can stop working in the Chiney-man shop.”

Despite herself, Paulette laughed. “I will never know, or understand,” she said, shaking her head in the dark, “what about me working with the Chin brothers bothers you so much.”

He pulled her close then, snuggled into the back of her neck, and kissed her. “The men are meeting at midnight to go over the job requirements and things. Wake me up then darling.”

She did wake him up at 11:20 pm and watched him get dressed, but he did not like the way her eyes followed him around the room. As if she had a sense something bad was going to happen. She could not understand why a group of men would be meeting so late at night to talk about a job. There was something oh-so-fishy about it all. Why couldn't they do it in the morning?

He did not tell her about the guns. He did not tell her about the Special Forces. He did not tell her that the meeting would be held at the Green Bay Firing Range in St. Catherine. And he did not tell her about the huge sign-on bonus. He would just buy her something nice tomorrow.

As Jimmy stood in the living room looking at their five children sprawled out all over the place, Paulette came back out of their room with some sweet-smelling holy water and she tipped the bottle with a hole in the cap over his head and some landed on his face. She then stood up on tip-toe and kissed him. It was then that he saw her tears.

“Don't cry,” he tried soothing her, “nothing not going happen. Nothing not going happen. Even Santos going for the job too, and who would let anything happen to Santos? He is Jamaica's best football player!”

“I don't sleep at night with Santos,” she was holding on to him, “but I sleep at night with you.”

He pulled her closer to him and squeezed her so tight, he could feel her bones rattle.

“I going get a good job is what I going do, and take care of you and the children. Then you can stop working in that blasted Chiney-man shop! Nothing at all not going happen. You going see. We just going to meet with some government people is all. I will be back in a few hours.”

Her eyes were on him for a long time when he walked out the door and was swallowed up by the dark night.

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A group of ten men met that night. Bug-Eyes seemed a little sleepy. Santos as usual was kicking a ball, and Mahfood was lighting a spliff. You could tell that most of the men had been sleeping and had just woken up. In fact, Mahfood joked, more men should have been there, four more men in fact for a total of fourteen people, but the other men were still sleeping.

“Too bad,” Santos kept saying, keeping the ball steadily rolling on the tip of his shoes, “any man that don't come wont get any money. Easter round the corner and man need money.”

He was in the newspapers often, Santos was, and had travelled to represent Jamaica abroad many times, playing football. He really did not need to be there.

“A man can’t have enough money,” Santos was saying now, as if he knew that the rest of the men were wondering what he was doing there. “Money like the air you breath, you cant have enough of it.”

The men weren’t there long when two vehicles pulled up. A green army ambulance and a dark blue van. Half of the men went in the green army ambulance and the other half in the dark blue van. Then they started making there way on the outskirts of the city to St. Catherine. Because it was so late most of the men fell asleep, and it was only him and Santos awake in the blue van.

“How your woman Jimmy?” Santos asked laughing. “How the one Paulette doing?”

Jimmy smiled. “She good. She little worried ‘bout where I going this hours of the night, but when I tell her I going with you, she calm down.”

“That Paulette,” Santos kept smiling, “always worrying-worrying herself over her man, Jimmy.”

“So who else she should worry-worry herself over?” He asked Santos, smiling.

“I want a woman like Paulette.” Santos was saying now. “ I want a woman who want me just because of me. I don’t want a woman who want me because of anything she think I might have.”

Jimmy thought about it for a long time before he answered. “It hard to find in truth, what I have with Paulette. And maybe it is the fault of man more than it is the fault of woman, why more man and woman not seem to get along together.”

By now, they were crossing over the Causeway Bridge and nearing the housing schemes in St. Catherine.

“No, no, no!” Santos was laughing and saying, “It is the fault of woman more than it is of man, why woman and man cannot get along together! Is Eve start all the problem between man and woman! Eve listening to that serpent! It seem woman always have some snake she listening to and making man’s life miserable! You think if my name was not Santos and I was not Jamaica’s number one football player any woman would want me? Woman worst than man, I tell you!”

“Don’t forget that the snake was a man,” Jimmy said, chuckling, “is man make woman wicked!”

Now Santos was really laughing hard. “What you saying Jimmy man! You siding with woman over man! I cant believe you! Nobody in the world wicked like woman, and if there wasn’t a snake in that garden, trust me, woman would still be up to some other kind of trouble!”

The two men doubled over in the van laughing.

“I tell you one thing,” Jimmy said, after their laughter had died down a little bit, “I love Paulette long long time. I love Paulette from we children growing up. And she never been wicked to me, not even one time.”

“Well then you lucky Jimmy! I jealous of you! And when you find a woman like that, you have to hold on tight and keep her. If I ever-ever find a woman like Paulette I going do everything in my power not to lose her!”

The van turned off the main road into a lane that had high walls surrounded by thick heavy barbed wire fence. A sign outside a high metal fence said, “Green Bay Firing Range.” A thicket of macca bushes ran along a path that led to a ragged drop down into the ocean. You could hear the sounds of the waves crashing up to the shores.

After the ten men had gotten out of the two vehicles a man in army fatigues came out to greet them. He told them that someone would come out soon to talk to them about the work that they would be getting, especially the sign-on bonuses. And there would be talk of that “other thing” which the grinning men knew was a reference to guns and ammunition.

Left alone on the firing range the men started talking about what they would be doing with their money. Mahfood wanted to give some to his mother so she could finally get her eyes tested and get the eye-glasses that she badly needed, so she could stop bumping into things around the house. Silver Shadow wanted to get a new pair of sneakers.

Suddenly powerful floodlights came on blinding the ten men, and Jimmy would always have the hardest time telling people exactly what happened after that. How snipers materialized out of the dark bushes. The rapid gunfire that started. He and his friends running in every which direction, but always, it seemed to him, running into gunfire. Five men would be killed on the Green Bay Firing Range that night, including the star football player Santos.

Jimmy would run towards a thicket of macca bushes the gigantic thorns digging deep into and ripping off his flesh. Yet he kept using his bare and bloodied hands to dig through the gigantic thorns. He was going so fast, Jimmy was, that he could hear the sound of his own heart beating. Paulette, Lord Jesus, he had to save himself so he would see Paulette again. And his children, his five precious children, they needed their father. The man around where he lived would often tease him, calling him man-parlor behind his back, because when Paulette was running late, Jimmy would be the one who would get the children ready and walk them to school. Everyone would know when that had happened because of the big, uneven plaits he had made in his daughters hair.

For a moment Jimmy thought he had gotten away before he ran right into a soldier, who immediately took aim and started firing at him. He had to run right back into the thorns that he had just gotten out of. He was bleeding from every part of his body, blood even coming down into his eyes. Why were the army officers trying to kill him and all the others? In the confusion of trying to escape and the heavy loud pounding of his own heart, the movie he had watched that night at Carib Theatre started playing over and over again in his head. Soon he heard the characters in the movies telling him, run zig zag Jimmy, stop and roll over Jimmy, whatever you do Jimmy don't run in a straight line.

He came to the edge of a steep and rocky embankment leading down to the ocean and crawled down between two large black stones and hid in the shadows. Gunshots. He never heard so many gunshots in his life. And all the time he kept wondering what had happened? What had they done? Why were the police and soldiers shooting at them?

Towards morning he heard two men that he took to be soldiers talking. “The government wanted them gone. Nothing but trouble makers and gang members, they are. Talking ‘bout they coming to get guns to protect their community! Nothing but a bunch of scoundrels!”

The men continued talking and Jimmy came to understand that they had gotten their orders from the highest levels.

Soon, a third more official voice joined the conversation, and he could not believe what he was hearing. “We have to get the story straight. We have to say they came armed and fired at the soldiers. One or two got away ... but, at least Santos, the ringleader, is dead. Talking ‘bout he some youth kind of group leader. He nothing but a communist sympathizer! The official word is: No angels died at the Green Bay Firing Range.”

Jimmy waited until the voices stopped talking and the heavy boots walked away before he could even begin to get his jumbled thoughts together. All he ever wanted was a job to take care of his woman and his children. He shook his head disbelievingly at all the lies that the government would immediately start telling. He knew now why they had been singled out for extermination: They had formed a youth group of young men from their area and in their “reasoning sessions” they had started asking questions. Questions about what was happening not only in their community but also in their country. They wanted to know how they could make things better for the people around them. Santos had travelled to other parts of the world and he would come back and tell them things he had seen and how those things had forced him to start questioning everything around him. He especially told them about a group of black men he had secretly met with in America, calling themselves the Black Panthers. Maybe they could start calling themselves The Black Panthers too, Santos had suggested. The tears started falling then for Santos and all the others. They were not gang members, he wanted to shout out aloud. They were not part of any posse. It was the Special Forces that had suggested that they get guns and ammunition. Most of the men were just there to get a job. The tears were now falling into the rips and tears in his face, and they were burning terribly. He could taste the salty tears mixed with blood in his mouth.

In the distance the ocean was now blood red with the rising sun. After a while Jimmy saw what looked like a boat. He waited for a while to make sure that indeed it was a small fisherman’s boat before he slowly started to wave his hands over his head, signaling for help. He prayed to see Paulette again. He prayed to see his children again. He was praying even when the fishermen let him onto their boat and covered him up under a black tarpaulin and headed back out to sea for the Kingston Harbour.

Paulette was at home when he stumbled in bruised and bloodied. Without saying a word to him, she started tending to his ripped and torn body. Something had told her to stay home from work that day and wait for him. Some spirit deep inside of herself. When he comes home, the voice had kept saying, Jimmy is going to need you. Stay home and give up that day's money. Stay home and wait for Jimmy.

The first thing she did was take off the clothes that he was wearing and burn them. No sooner had she done that word spread that there was a curfew in the area and the police were looking for men who had escaped from the Green Bay Firing Range earlier that morning after firing onto defenseless police and soldiers. After she bathed and cleaned him up, Paulette set Jimmy's breakfast before him. By the time the police and soldier burst into their house, it looked like a man and woman were just having their morning breakfast and getting their five children ready for school.

It took two days for the news of Santos' death to hit the airwaves. With his death, it slowly started to unravel what had happened on the Green Bay Firing Range that January morning. How a group of ten young men --- a *posse* is what the government officials, members of the armed forces and people over the radio called them --- had attacked members of the island's Special Forces at the Green Bay Firing Range with high powered weapons. That's how brazen the members of that *posse* that called themselves a youth group had been. Five men had been killed and five had escaped and were wanted by the police. The police were conducting a manhunt all over the island because they had heard that the five escaped men were now hiding out in the rural areas.

That was all people would have known about what happened at the Green Bay Firing Range that early January morning had it not been for a dogged investigative journalist who smelled something fishy about the whole story. Ten men going to attack a firing range filled with the island's top-trained Special Forces? That made absolutely no sense to him. He never stopped digging and digging, that dogged little reporter, until he found out just what had happened that long-ago morning. How the men had been lured to the Green Bay Firing Range with promises of jobs, guns and ammunition. How they had been told that they needed to defend their community. How five of them had been savagely murdered by members of the armed forces at the behest of the government because they had aligned themselves with the opposition socialist party. How the government denied complicity in the killings, all the while insisting, that only thugs and murders firing at the island's Special Forces had been killed that January morning. The Jamaican people were not to waste their tears and their words and their Sunday morning sermons on the likes of Chubby Dread, Mahfood and the hard to understand Buck-tooth-Bucky because none of those men were worthy of it. None of those men were worthy of demonstrations in the street because not one of those men was an *asset* to their community. Though Santos was a good football player the truth of the matter was that he was a common thief and he was arrested for shop-lifting in foreign countries more times than they could count, always embarrassing the Jamaican

government. It got so bad that they could not let him out of their sight, even when he was sleeping, because Santos had such sticky fingers. No angels died at the Green Bay Firing Range that early January morning, was the official word from the government and the island's armed forces. No angels died at the Green Bay Firing Range in St. Catherine, Jamaica.