

CECILE NOBREGA

A Guyanese Childhood in the 1920s

An Excerpt from an Autobiography

I guess they were all quite relieved when Daddy said there'd be no fuss or reception as the Bishop could only marry them on the 9 February at the 6am Mass because, from the cathedral, they would be on the 9am train to Belladrum. I know Grandma Husbands was relieved. Being the bride's mother, as is customary, she would have had to do the whole wedding reception—she never impressed me as someone who liked entertaining or having a number of friends in. Even if she did have one of her close friends around, it was always Aunt Helen who saw to things like that. She was the absolute opposite in temperament to Grandfather—who loved to entertain and have company around.

It was a strange sort of partnership as Grandfather Husbands was always away in the bush at least nine months a year, and when he came down, as was the custom then, he would hire the Park Hotel and fill it with friends and spend a great deal of money, which Grandma hated. Grandma was the thrifty one, and Grandfather just abided by the bushman's slogan, *Where dis come from, mo nuh deh?* So judging from what I gathered later, the hard-earned gold or money which bushmen earned in nine

months was frittered away on sprees, and entertaining their friends, when they came down to Georgetown from the bush. Nor was his the only sort of waste of money. There was the case where one famous bushman—I can't this minute recall his name—would hire a horse and carriage to drive him round the town, and each time on dismounting from the carriage he'd feed the horse with \$5, \$10, and \$20 notes. It was pathetic. Of course, we were hardly in a position to pass judgment on these bushmen, some of whom were “pork-knockers”—a name given to those who worked and sieved through the sand and gravel in the stream to find the gold—as their lives must have been awfully dull. Eat, sleep, wake and dredge gold, eat, sleep, wake and dredge gold, eat, sleep, get a whore when there was money, eat, sleep, drink rum when you could buy it. What a life! This was the standard bush life at every level. Pork-knockers and shopkeepers all lived the same life.

That included Grandfather Husbands, who had originally gone to the bush with Uncle Zac, a young uncle of Grandma's, to open a drugstore—Grandfather was a trained pharmacist, Uncle Zac a teacher. Business was not only slow—it never took off. People in the bush knew all the remedies as provided by nature. Living as they did close to nature they knew at firsthand all the herbs which could cure snake-bites and other illnesses which occurred in these parts. Medicine as provided by these two “medics” were a joke to the inhabitants of the interior. Doing a bit of research with regard to the needs of the pork-knockers, the business partners realised that FOOD was what they should provide in their shop, and immediately set about opening a shop that not only sold food, but *everything possible that a bushman would need*. Clothes, cutlasses, shovels, forks, spades, buckets, penknives, razor-blades, shaving sticks, rope, to name a few of the hardware and other items, candles, cigarettes, Lighthouse matches, Capstan tobacco, kerosene oil, wicks for oil lanterns, pots, pans, frying pans,

graters, and other cooking utensils, and of course the food, which consisted of Demerara sugar, rice, split peas, black-eye peas, potatoes, curry-powder, salt, black pepper, cooking oil, flour, lard, keg butter, soap, Lifebuoy and carbolic for bathing, and Fernandes blue and white soda soap for washing clothes and scrubbing floors, Rickett's blue. To all this was added rolled chocolate sticks and "fresh" eggs. I remember Aunt Clara telling Mummy one day why the carton of eggs she sent to the bush were always labelled "Fresh Eggs." "You see," she explained, "the boat going up the Potaro, and stopping at Sands where the shop was, took three weeks, and people would think they were stale." She continued, "Eggs take three weeks to hatch out, and who knows if during a hot season the box of eggs would arrive as chicks?" She had the most whimsical smile. They were all blessed with the gift of humour. Without blinking an eye, the Husbands clan could generate a roomful of laughing folk.

Aunt Clara was their "man of business." She did all the wholesale purchasing, packing and shipping of the goods. She was indeed the business-woman of the family. Rum was one of the items sold for which there had to be a special licence. White rum, which contained a high percentage of alcohol, was almost lethal, taken in large quantities. The other rums were like those we have today, of a golden colour, and varied in quality and price because of its age. There was the fifteen year-old EXTRA SPECIAL, the ten year-old MAESTRO XL BRAND, and the mellow Demerara rum produced by D. H. D'Aguiar Bros.

A bushman's whole life could be summed up in the three categories: Wine, Women and Song. When we were old enough to chat openly about things of this nature, from things Grandma told us, we would have known that Grandfather Husbands was a lady's man. A man like grandfather, handsome with his grey eyes,

and financially qualified as proprietor of a general goods shop, wifeless for nine months a year, he would have to be Angel Gabriel to be strictly faithful to his marriage vows—and I would not vouch that Gabriel, having his wings to transport him around, would not have had a little fling here and there—so cut off from the normal way of life in the city or countryside the bush folk were. The result was, yes, Grandfather was a lady’s man, and that meant giving favours to many of his “girl-friends.” This was easy. He was a very kind sort of man and never really cared much about money. All he cared about was LIFE, and living the life, for him, meant lots of friends, food, drink, jokes, fun and games.

He was a lovely man. I remember him well, with a tiny neat moustache. This has stayed in my memory because one Sunday, when we were at Grandma’s and he was down, after lunch he lay on the floor by the door, and called Doll and me to pick out his grey hair. He was also vain, I think, as he did not allow any grey hair to nestle on his head. He said he’d give us a sixpence for a hundred, and Doll and I loved the idea of getting a “shine money.” This was the term we used for sixpences and “bits.” A bit was another little shine money, which was worth four pence, or eight cents. Grandma used to save them in a bit tin. We settled down to pick and pick and pick all the white hair we saw in Grandfather’s head, until we were tired, and he was tired lying on the hard floor. There was a long three-foot wide carpet running along the gallery, but he was not on this. He was sort of upside-down, perpendicular to the carpet, so we could both get at the grey hair on his head on the floor. It was when he lay there, I scrutinized my grandfather’s features well. He was nice. He had a lovely complexion, Chinese type of hair and look, and I think when he smiled I could see he was wearing dentures.

The time had come to count the number of grey hairs we each had pulled out. Doll seemed to have quite a lot. I counted first, as it looked less, and I wanted to get up and go. I was tired. Grandfather pulled out a bit of black cloth, the size of a handkerchief, and took mine off, counting them one by one to thirty-one. Well, I thought Doll's looked as though we could make the hundred. She got hers together for counting. Grandfather commenced. Suddenly he stopped. "But wait a minute," he said. "Doll Grandfather's hair stiff like this?" Dolly's face became strangely tense. She had a tiny face, but with this tenseness it was hard to describe. She sat up and said nothing. The silence was deafening. I couldn't tell what grandfather was getting at—and I didn't know why Dolly never said yea or nay. By the front door, close to where Grandfather was lying was the doormat. This was where Carlo, Grandma's pet dog, would lie, day or night, and had left quite a bit of his hair there. Suddenly Grandfather took up a grey hair from Dolly's palm and said, "Aw, Mama Doll, Grandfather's hair stiff and white like Carlo's?" It took only a second longer for Doll to burst into tears. That agonising, tense look she was wearing was guilt. It was terrible for me to witness this outpouring of tears. Both Grandfather and I stretched across to clasp and hug her. Grandfather was there before me and I just hung onto him and her until the weeping stopped. We got our shine money—a SIXPENCE.

This was when Grandma lived in East Street. It was a lovely house. I remember when Mummy was imploring her to buy it as it was to be sold. I think the owner died and left it for his daughter, and she wanted the money to go abroad to live in the States. Her Aunt wanted her to live there with her. Grandma, as we say today, didn't want to know. Although she was thrifty, she was not interested in investment as, say, Aunt Clara was. She just liked to see what she saved grow on its own. She had her

priorities. She had to have money to pay Pradasco Bros. This was the firm from which she imported her classical gramophone records. She had to have money for her imported rose bushes. Nothing else was important. This was why she was thrifty. These were the things she needed money for. With regard to running of the home, her clothing, her jewellery, her curtains, sheets, pillow-cases, bedspreads, you name it, these were all provided by Grandfather, who had a running account at Fogarty's Big Store and Home Furnishers in Water Street. It was arranged that any new items of worth being imported were to be sent up to Mrs. Husbands, one of Fogarty's prized customers. Shoes, handbags, umbrellas, hats, anything a lady would need was to be sent up to Mrs. Husbands. This was why one would say she was fully provided for. What a great husband to have. Well, he had the means; the shop was doing fine. Pork-knockers who had no money would pay in gold, with small and large nuggets. Others would promise to pay later and request him to *Mark am ah book*, which earned him the name of "MARKABOOK."

I must share this story which Grandma told us herself. She was out in Water Street. That is the shopping centre in Georgetown. She had just left Pradasco where she had paid a bill for a record she bought for me—*Autumn*, by Cecile Chaminade (I wish I had someone to put my compositions on record: the piece I wrote to Doll, when she left and settled in New York, for instance). Pradasco was in Hincks Street, not far from M. U. Hing, the jewellers, and by cutting through the cross street you quickly come to Fogarty's. Grandma paid a visit, knowing her account was good. She could take whatever she wanted and charge it to Mr. Arthur Husbands' account. That was her husband and that was the arrangement. Her eye caught sight of some beautiful umbrellas and a new model of a machine which she liked. She approached the counter and asked for Mr. Vieira, the manager, who looked after getting things for

her. He came. “Hello, Mrs. Husbands,” he said. “How nice to see you this way.” He called to a clerk standing nearby, “Bring all the new things we have in—umbrellas, machine, bed linen—and let Mrs. Husbands select what she’d have.” The clerk looked dumbfounded, went over to Mr. Vieira and whispered something to him. Mr. Vieira looked equally dumbfounded as he spoke. “Mrs. Husbands, we’ll have to sort this out. It appears that someone called the day before and collected your things, saying that she had come for Mrs. Husbands’ things.” It was only then that it was evident that the Fogarty’s account was being used by more than one Mrs. Husbands. Poor old Grandma—she was shattered.

There was no radio then and certainly no television. Entertainment occurred with some who knew how to play a harmonica or a banjo, guitar or saxophone. Yes, there must have been some type of music in the bush, as when we lived at 86 Robb Street, Lacytown, there were in the next lot a series of “rooms,” which were tenanted by large families who slept in shifts. To be accurate, there were fourteen in one particular room. The father would have made fifteen regular members in that room, but he was a bushman, and only came down occasionally. He was a fine saxophonist. Everyone knew when he arrived from the bush. He was always drunk and very loud in calling out, when he arrived from his midnight to early morning revelry, to his poor wife, who was very soft in speech, but wide as a door from hip to hip. Her name was Miriam. At the top of his voice he would shout, “Miriam Hencock, bought and paid for, where are you?” He’d go on for some time chanting this phrase, calling her out of the room. “Is the last time ah calling me wife, me sweet honeysuckle wife. Miriam Hencock, where are you, sweeter than sugar cane? Come and take your darling cocky,

James Hencock” —he’d start spelling—“C-O-C-K-Y cocky! Miriam Hencock—
BOUGHT AND PAID FOR!”

The whole neighbourhood would be aroused by this bushman when he visited. He’d be quiet for a bit, and then take up his saxophone. This was magnificence itself. Hencock was a master of this instrument. He’d start off with a series of arpeggios, tu-tu-tu-tu-tu-tuh, then go down a semitone, and do the same, tu-tu-tu-tu-tu-tuh. When he had done descending the entire chromatic scale, he’d be ready to embark on some heavy heady jazz, out of this world. No one could sleep any longer. No one could honestly report this tremendous morning musical extravaganza as a nuisance. No one dared! This was genius. One of his favourite melodies was *Oh give me something to remember you by—when I am far away from you*. Hencock knew his instrument. After a series of improvisations, he’d use a section and “go to town” on variations which would make Elgar’s Variations seem like child’s play. Who on earth taught Mr. Hencock to play a saxophone like that? No one. This was a gifted man—a musician of no mean order. There are such gifted people in the world, but with no guidance, opportunity, or money, their talents are wasted. Guyana has produced some wonderful people who unfortunately have had wasted lives. So, like our Kaieteur Falls with its 741ft drop of sheer water power which could generate electricity to supply the whole of the Caribbean, it must fall and fall and flow away unused. What a country! What a waste...!