

BIRDIE

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Image credit: 'Robot Alien Chicken 1'. Marinna Shareef.

Nursing home hostage seeks young accomplice. Must be willing to fight and not afraid of cold water. Pays well. Names starting with C need not apply. Walk-in interviews this Sunday from 10am at Harris Memorial Home with Margaret Bird.

In part I really wanted some sensible conversation, in part I wanted these impostors exposed. I mean, imagine, my own nephew that I raise with my two hands, a thing I never did with a child of my own, take me up as soon as my brother Derek pass on, say I am too much work, that a nursing home would provide “more dedicated care to me,” as if I am a child; as if I didn’t raise the blasted bwoy practically by myself when him father was building a career. Imagine how me vex! It burn me for true, especially when I think how him father left enough money to take care of me, promised that with all I do for the family after Grace gone, that I wouldn’t have to worry bout a thing. I just didn’t imagine it would go towards putting me away. If smaddy did tell me the exact thing I wouldn’t believe them. I would tell them, no, no, is lie you telling, no way Craig would do me that, not after all I sacrifice. But see it deh, as God liveth, I hold me mouth and see me yah a batta batta through it.

Still, even after I land here I never quite intend to create any excitement in the place, if you can believe that. I just wanted people to know what was really going on. Don’t ask me how I put out that ad in the first place. I have my ways. About three people answer it. One man after the other showed up in the Sunday heat, right after morning devotion. I was taking me time going back to my room when I heard the commotion on the veranda, so I stop and lean in the crack of my doorway where I could see down the long hallway and hear them explain themselves.

“Yes Miss, I used to be a security guard. I wasn’t too sure but that’s what you’re looking for right?”

Another one said “I used to play karate from I was in Primary school, you know? And I not too soft on the bush work either.”

“Sir, is that the paper? May I see it, please?” Nurse Johnson took the paper and started reading, “nursing home hostage...” I knew it wouldn’t be long before it got to the Matron and before she read the whole thing and see my name. Yes, yes. I know. Beatrice already said it wasn’t a good idea to put my name in it, but I was convinced I would get to talk to them that way.

“Birdie, you only setting yourself up for trouble, me love. I think you should leave that alone.” Bedridden, she had whispered to me as I propped myself against the protective railing of her bed. Of course, I hadn’t agreed.

“Beatrice, how long you been here in this prison place? Maybe you quite alright with how they treat you, but I not having this.”

Now seated at my desk, my back to the door, the next thing I know is that the Matron and Nurse Johnson were knocking and barging in at the same time.

“Can I help you ladies?”

“Miss Bird, we understand that you...” the Matron started.

“I am quite busy as you can imagine. I am here writing to Craig to tell him some new descriptions I made for him.”

Then Nurse Johnson come with, “Miss Bird, this is a serious matter.”

“I am thinking Johncrow for this week. I know it not that fresh, a bit overused even, but I don’t think I ever used it on him before, so it might burn after all. What you think, Nurse? Nurse?”

“Miss Bird, you are not permitted to issue advertisements concerning this facility to disturb my staff or patients including yourself.” The Matron was stern, like she meant to jerk me.

“I am not your patient miss. I don’t even belong in this place.”

“Nurse Johnson, please call Mr. Bird and file a formal report for the board. Clearly this is not being taken seriously.”

In the next week a group from the Alliance for Elderly Persons and the police went through and through the place, lifting pillows and stale sheets at every turn. The Matron was bent on kicking me out after that, and I was ready to go. I pack my bag and everything, but both the Alliance people and Craig made sure that didn’t happen. For the group, it would’ve been a sure sign of discrimination and further ill treatment, but for Craig, the brute, it was: “This is the only support I have with her now. Diandra and I are swamped with Max and running the firm. I really need her to be housed here.” I think he wanted pity, but I suspect he might’ve also threatened the Matron after the AEP people got it in the news.

Families and caregivers are advised that acts of neglect and/or abuse against the elderly are punishable by the full force of the law.

Miss Matron she make all kinds of promises to them.

“We can assure you that all our clients are handled with the utmost professionalism and respect. Miss Bird’s complaints are simply the words of an aging woman resisting change. It’s just a challenge with adjusting,” she said. But they just tighten the rope round me after that.

It’s been about three weeks since that and now they keep me in this back room painted dark blue. The white ceiling is the only place some light bounces from, when the lord has mercy on me these days. Sometimes I get lost dreaming, bout how I want to crack the window enough to catch the sky, to move

the room outside. I want this place overgrown with wisp and bush and I want to be able to reach the bombay limb from here, stretch and catch the soft, pink bougainvillea blossom again. What I really need is to leave this place, to pack all my notes, move out and go run wild in the bush like I was meant to. The sunflower on my desk bloom and gone and I see now what can happen when people try confine you. Or maybe all it means is that time will pass, that things have a way of refusing to stand up one place, despite how much you protest.

I been going pale from no sun and my desk seems on the verge of turning to dust from all the things I been scratching into it. Truth is, I've been talking. I've been talking a whole heap and the desk is feeling it hard. I'm pretty sure it was a teacher's desk before I get it. I believe this because it says 7b along the top right edge, and I feel that is a class number. Yes, that is a fairly loose chord to string anything on, but I like the idea of it. When I sit here, lap my skirt and take up my pencil, I feel like an English teacher doing important work, or like a student except in a forever school, without break time or lunch time, or anyone to play with. Sometimes, when the day seems to merge sun and moon seamlessly, I wonder if I am crazy like they say. I wonder why I don't see real people anymore, why I only know them by the past. But I know is that these people want me to believe that me mad.

The desk was a gift from Craig since, as him say, I claim to be a writer. I mean, that was a long time ago; all these years really put a sluggish feeling in my body. Still, it was always one of my favourite things and I still write a little here and there, which is how I can tell you any of this. I will be honest and say here that that was a kind thing for him to do for me. I always liked a nice space to write— my own space— even though you would swear say this room and everything in it belong to all them door-pushing nurse who love bright with me. If this was really my room I would have a key and no one could tell me when morning was and I could walk free. As I was saying, the desk is nice and old like me and I have notepads that I write on with long orange pencils, so I can rub out things if I ever change my mind. Sometimes I just stare at the paper though and I see me life rippling through the blue lines and wonder how I got here, to this page.

They wake me up at 5. Yes, in the morning. The nurse will be here any minute now, but is not today they start treat me this way. When I just reach here, I remember feeling pleased someone finally agreed with me that teatime could be any hour and decided to indulge my love for peppermint, but I was wrong. They wake me with an ice bath, to balance me out, they said. See her here now. Lord god.

"Miss Birdie, wake up, is time to bathe," she says, gripping my wrists.

I can hardly protest today. I just roll and turn and wonder what me do so, why people must disrupt me soul when it was nicely set at ease. I try a little backchat, because I didn't quite believe what was going on.

Trying to free my wrists, I tell her "My name is Margaret Bird. What you mean bath time? You see how

outside black, how not even fowl leave them roost yet? That is as clear a sign as any that is not time to rise or to pry an old woman like me from any kind of warm salvation.

“Miss Birdie, you need to start the day early.”

“What you say? But after, I not going to market or catching no country bus. I not even likely to encounter anybody with sense today.”

I swear I catch her with that, swear she taking heed, that the old woman talk have her, and she see her granny in me, but no such luck me child. She loud up the whole place with my name as if I am giving her all kinds of hell. So see me yah, fighting with nurse over when to bathe me, over when morning really start. I don't hear a fowl yet, but this one swear the time is now.

“Come man Miss Birdie, set good. Make me take off the nighty.” She rip me clothes off, strip me down to nothing then rub me close to raw in the cold water. All the same, I make it through and she dress me, but don't make them tell you I alright.

Everybody on this road supposed to know my name by this, for every morning early it echo, and throughout the day it ring like bell. Same so every day my name just hitch up in every nurse mouth, for apparently is so me one bad. Birdie this, Birdie that, Birdie why, Birdie don't. Is like my name set pon spring with these people.

This little piece of hell is on a residential road not far from Constant Spring. The yard is big and green, but I hardly get to see it after I get in trouble the other day. Now I spend most days by the window trying to catch a bit of sky. Is 'ccasion make them bring we go outside mi dear, or if the one Craig him feel like visit and I beg him take me for a walk, so I can tell him me mind. One time I tell him a thing and him say,

“Auntie what you mean you can see into my soul?” And I just laugh.

Him have it say me mad, even call foreign tell him other family them. Who don't disown me call only to see what brand of craziness I going on with on the given day. I will be the first to admit that me bad yes, but you shouldn't believe any of what they say straight away. Me will tell you the God truth if anything really go so. Me will tell you, me no 'fraid. Is them drive me to wherever I go these days and all the days that I ever issue a word that wasn't divine. Since the newspaper incident I try to keep myself quiet still but is not all the time I can do a thing like that. So every now and again when they come attend to me, I see what I can get done. And like how is breakfast time now, maybe I catch them at ease.

“Nurse Johnson, how you do? You know I been behaving myself good-good from the other day. You

think I can have whole papaya today?"

"Miss Birdie, I'm not sure you can manage that today."

"What you say? Of course I can manage. I can even scoop it out myself. I know how to do things you know."

Papaya seeds good for something (I just can't remember) so I keep most of them saved up. I even sneak out to the hall where Beatrice is (I hardly see her anymore) and she give me what seeds she collect. Now and again, I throw some out the windows. I don't see anything happen yet, but one-day I feel like all these plants going to rise over this place. Next time I going to ask the nurse to give me some metal utensils, so I can cover up the seeds that fall on fertile ground when I get outside. Right now, they only give me plastic things and clear them up fast, and other times they even try feed me. You can believe that? Me, Margaret Bird. More time I not so strong yes, but you can imagine me letting somebody feed me?

"Nurse!" I call them sometimes because they seem to forget me, except when they want to disrupt me life of course.

"I can get some cooking oil please?"

"Birdie what you need cooking oil for? Your food is prepared and brought to you. You not supposed to prepare anything in here"

"Is just these little ants I want to feed. They don't have anybody to care for them, you know, like how you care for me. You don't want them to suffer do you?"

"No, Shakespeare, not at all," she says and leaves.

She don't give me what I want and I know is fool she taking me for, because I only write stories and a little poetry and Shakespeare was mostly a playwright, but I like the sound of it. I am left just staring out the window, feeling the words scratched into the desk and wheeling the window to see if it can open just a little bit more. It doesn't work. The window is stuck at this strange angle, catching the bombay mango tree outside but purposefully missing the sky. The sky that is so close that it makes me wonder who designs these things. Isn't the point to let the light in, to make us on the inside not feel so boxed up? Maybe these were specially designed for my case and same way I can just hear the one Craig haunting me.

"Auntie you know you not supposed to leave the room."

“Auntie the food they give you is for you to eat and not to feed creatures.” “Auntie please don’t trouble the nurses. They just doing their jobs here.”

What him know? Everything is him. Him is the devil from hell that take outside from me. Outside that I would have my hands in every day. Boy, when I remember the gardens I used to keep, how the day was the sky and the sun and lemonade under the mango trees. Boy, how I used to love my lemonade out there half hidden, half exposed in the heat, the dirt coarse and crumbling from my hands as I rub them together. Sometimes I think, at least there is memory, that I not too far gone after all, that at least him can’t take that from me, no matter how hard or cold him make them wash me.

As evening comes, same way some little black bugs come crawling over my pillow and at first, I want to brush them off, but then I stop.

“What is this lord, what is this you send?” I swear it is my lord and saviour reaching out to me.

“Birdie girl, follower of my word, worshipper and beholder of truth, you meeting it me child, but you hold firm, you stand up strong and you don’t let the devil hold you down.”

Then smaddy knock, and for a moment I think is God come to finish talk to me in person. No such luck misses, just a nurse with a nerve for imposing, one so wicked it stained on her face like anger and bitter misfortune.

“Miss Birdie, lights out in five minutes.”

You would never imagine say is pay people pay to keep them family in this place. But the lord is still with me all the time.

“Birdie just walk.”

And so him talk to me, so I strip down to me black slip. I take up my papaya seeds and I walk out behind the nurse as she move through the halls turning off the lights. I not doing any harm. I hide behind the curtains in the great hall one after the other. The nurse stops, looking around and I freeze, holding my breath and leaning on the wall. By the time I reach the bend for the kitchen, Beatrice is having one of her screaming attacks and I swear the nurse would catch me then. But no, she goes to attend to Beatrice and the lord see and know and carry me through. I decide to detour and go out to the veranda instead. When I reach the door and step down onto the steps, the light floods my eyes. All the place is dark otherwise. And I just hear voices coming from everywhere.

“Miss Birdie what you doing?”

“Matron, what is the meaning of this?”

“Miss Bird, get inside this instant!”

I see people sitting around tables like they are having a meeting. Maybe it is the people from the church that run this place?

“Miss, I just going for a walk. It is very hot in this place where you lock me up. Even some black bug in the bed and I very much can’t stand it anymore. Me want little breeze in me life.”

The Matron, her eyes now glaring, stands and starts moving towards me. Nurse Johnson appears with a towel and freezes beside me. I stand up there before them and I just start laugh. I laugh because the people sit down and looking like they see a ghost. They looking like they never see a person before. I tighten my fingers ‘round my papaya seeds and I laugh. I laugh because I never did see things coming to this and I just walk.

Yashika Graham is a Jamaican writer, visual artist and the 2019 recipient of the Mervyn Morris Prize for poetry from the University of the West Indies, Mona where she is a student of Literatures in English. The recipient of a 2018 Centrum Writers Residency and the 2019 Urban Wilderness Projects Research and Teaching Fellowship, Graham’s work is published in *The Caribbean Writer*, *POUI*, *Spillway* magazine, *Cordite Review*, *Moko* magazine and *Jamaica Journal*. She teaches creative writing and has taught cross-genre workshops for the Port Townsend Writers’ Conference in Washington, USA.