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The Disappearing

MARLON JAMES



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THIS JOURNAL BELONGS TO:

Edmond Porteous

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May 3

So this boy just walks in smelling of Lip Smacker, Matterhorn cigarettes, and sex sweat. He doesn't tell me his name and I don't ask for it. Not that I gave him mine, but he didn't ask for that either. Fine. Be one of them people. Don't catch anybody's name until proof that they have a name worth catching, but two can play that game. So, at the beginning his name was Yo. My sister said to me last week, "Eddy, your superpower is that you always read people right, from one sentence, one word, even over the phone." Which is what she said to me last week when she handed me the phone in the middle of a call with Robbie Lindo because between telling her who she is prettier than and why she needs to check out his bedroom because he have him own video player she couldn't tell if he was too cool or just some asshole trying to pull down her panties.

As for this hombre, he is more concerned with flinging himself into the armchair onstage, a prop for the play I suppose, throwing his right leg over the red velvet arm and spreading as wide as possible. Brown Levi's 501 jeans, hard to find even in America. But his smell: Lip Smacker or candle wax maybe, although his lips look like he licks them too much. Matterhorn cigarettes because that is one of three that I know, and only because it was a menthol, meaning that it could

have been any fucking cigarette. And fuck sweat, yes mos def. With this sort of homo gay is what he does, not who he is, and he was gay only an hour ago.

He's first here other than the stage manager, who introduces himself as the stage manager. No Christian names for this bunch, but they sound like they know each other, which is likely in battyboy circles. Stage manager's lips smile but the rest of his face couldn't care less. On the brown jean boy's shoulders is a Stüssy or Gap T-shirt. Somebody's daddy can afford flights to Miami. Loose because this brother is no friend of fat. Vegetarianism, meaning "greens without the Rasta," took off like a kite at the university but I've never seen this one on campus.

I wouldn't call it an afro, but there must be a name for high, loose, curly hair that you neither cut nor style. Skin darker than me, darker than the stage manager, but lighter than chocolate. Toffee? There's another name for that which don't sound like it come from a four-year-old. Caramel? Now I'm starting to sound like a poem from primary school with snow in it. He is pissing me off. Mostly by being sort of cute. I mean, dimples, but screw him because he is giving this fuck-the-absurdity-of-it-all smile, which I see on every boy who graduated five years ago but still roams campus. Every time he looks at me he raises his left eyebrow. Big eyes, the kind that make you think a brother is friendly. No, not friendly, interested. No, not interested, curious. A neat beard wrapped around his chin, and a mustache over the thick lips that he keeps on licking reminds me that I am eighteen and only recently grew shit to shave. Wild hair but tame beard, who knows what that means. I try to stop myself from doing what I always do, which is to match him to somebody on TV. Okay, Michael Warren from *Hill Street Blues*. Shit, there I go again.

Sometimes I wish that what I wrote sounded like Prince lyrics. Instead I sound like a high school English lit student with a teacher

who when he said he remembers the war, meant World War Two. For real. I wanted to tell him that nobody singing 'bout war no more, busha. Bob Marley still dead, and Prince is singing about AIDS. Bruce Springsteen has a song called "War," but it's not him who sang it first, and I'm only writing about it because Bruce is wearing jeans in that video, and Jeeeeeesus man, them trousers acting like they been waiting from the day they were just cotton balls to run up the length of his legs to hit-and-run the biggest boss bulge in rock and roll where those two thighs are only too happy to meet, so happy that if he turns around to show his backside, right above the crack will be a patch of sweat in a perfect V.

The rain just spent the whole afternoon beating Kingston into a gray that stays that way even when it gets dark. There is this thing about Jamdown, which I never notice in foreign, that by evening even the city starts to smell and sound like country. Crickets and dewy grass and car tires rolling over what sounds more like mud than road, and mosquitoes that think they sing like birds, and won't leave you alone. And just this, I don't know, sadness. I love it.

There is no window in this room, so all I know about the evening is coming from sound. As if you need to see sky to know when night is falling. Darkness is a mood in Jamaica. I never told anybody this but from I was eight, I could feel the day change in my body, like when afternoon turns to evening turns to night. The flyer on the supermarket bulletin board said 5:30. It's 5:52 and the only people here are the boy in brown jeans, the stage manager, and me.

This room was somebody's living room once. Or some great hall where white people and Syrians used to dance. That would make sense, since not far away is the haunted house where the prime minister used to live, and nearby all those mansions belonging to people who now own hotels but used to keep shops downtown before poor customers made them rich. Now it's just an empty space with

shiny wood floors, meaning somebody was still taking care of it. There's a white platform in the middle of the room. The stage maybe, with the brown jeans boy sitting on the set? Right boot on the chair, left boot rubbing against the Persian rug. Maybe this was going to be one of those stark, minimalist plays I read this semester. And here I was hoping it would be a pantomime about sweet ol' Jamaica. That's sarcasm.

To the far wall behind us somebody left up some art, the sorta abstract-expressionist-but-check-out-the-titties kinda art in just about every uptown hallway.

"Them just leave a Christopher González hanging like that," someone new says walking into the room.

"A who?" I ask.

"The painting. The painting you was looking at. It's a González," he says. Tall, tailored, and more interested in the painting than us.

"Worth money?" I ask.

"Depend on what you mean by money."

"Can't buy this house with it but you could buy a houseboy," says brown jeans.

"Brown," the man says in a way that makes you think a sigh is coming.

"Titus."

Names finally. Homos must be the only men who will send a fist all the way up your bottom and a tongue past your tonsils before they tell you what their parents call them. Not even here an hour and I am tired of people already.

Then the man says he is surprised everybody was late, even though (1) we were early, (2) it was raining, and (3) he was late, too.

I am thinking I should leave, but then the stage manager ushers in everybody at once. I wonder if they were watching the house, which usually looks abandoned, waiting to see who went in, wondering if

somebody was watching them as they watch to see who was disturbing this dead address on a busy street.

Brown, the brown jeans boy, didn't get up from his seat, but started humming *ba-da da-da ba-da da-da ba-da da-da DAH dah* for like six or seven times before I recognized "Sleng Teng." Sure, brethren offer up more shit to annoy the fuck out of everybody.

"Well, well, thank you all for coming here," Titus says, adding, "In this rain," like an afterthought. I can't read his face. It wasn't happy, but it wasn't sad either. Sorta like Mama Jo when you tell her that there are four more pills left on the tray.

The stage manager appears at my back, and I try to act like he didn't fucking startle me. Titus goes over to him and swear to God, this man honestly thinks he is whispering, even though we hear every word.

"This is it, this is all?" Titus says.

"Marshall's one, Marshall's two, everybody I know who hosting a party in this month, every man in my church dance ministry and flower circle."

"What about the Closet? The Interim Closet? Andante? What about Fanny Hill?"

"It's 1988, Havelock."

"Don't be fresh."

"Three bars, every private party I know of, Church battymen, and two uptown supermarket bathroom. If there is anywhere else, it don't open yet."

"Oh. I see," Havelock says.

"You the one who didn't want to put flyers up at School of Drama. Or any actual theater."

"Lawks, enough."

"I saw the flyer at JR Wong Supermarket," I say.

"You must can read gay code," says somebody I don't see.

"No need code. 'Drama audition' already weed out normal man," says another voice as thin as the man who says it.

"I thought this was an audition?" says a new guy at the back. Brown. Tall. Half-Chinese-looking. Wide grin. Wow.

"Audition implies that Titus here have a choice. Way it looking, we might be it, Titus," Brown says.

"Brethren, is Jamaica you deh or you forget?" a tall, thick man says as he steps up on the stage. Stout-stout, as Mama Jo would say. Maybe late forties or early fifties, wearing a navy blue suit that said he was coming from a job that paid more money than any of us will make. Still fresh haircut and a trimmer beard than Brown. Head shaped like Hottentot Venus's backside if I'm being honest.

"Everybody in this fucking country run on Jamaica time," he adds. *Including you and everybody but two*, I'm thinking.

"If you all want to keep waiting, suit yourself. But nobody else coming," Brown says. "Yow, watch this. Thanks for coming. You're all hired!"

"Jordan Brown, just fucking shut it, nuh? Just shut it," Titus snaps back. I was beginning to like him.

He joins the other two onstage and tells us to gather around, which makes everybody move just one step. He did that clearing throat thing that people with British accents do and introduces himself as Havelock Titus. And yes, he is the director, and yes, this is the audition for the play, well, it was supposed to be. Well, is. Well . . . let him just get on with it then.

I thought he was going to do that tedious thing where we all have to give our names and say something clever or corny about ourselves, but he asks only for names. The big guy in the suit is Omar. The chubby-cute stage manager is Clive. The half-Chinese wow calls himself Matt Chin (I know, I didn't believe it either) and sits on the side of the stage. Not in a suit, but his tie is loose, like he was coming

from a hard day at a desk job. "Orrin," says the one I'm already designating the top queen, not because he is matchstick thin, or buckles his belt at the waist, or that his skin is smoother than the lotion he uses, or that he blows out his hair with the hair dryer on blast every day, but mostly because he says, "All the people who talk to me call me Orrin Turner." I think the last guy's name is Rainford, but he is so quiet that it feel like I made the name up. Honestly it could be, because I just couldn't move past how pretty Matt Chin is.

"Short for Matthew?" I whisper to him.

"Just Matt," he says. I spend the rest of the evening watching him listen.

I can't say when everybody gathered around, or when Havelock pointed to Clive, who handed out scripts, or when Havelock said this is not the full script but that he would have more if . . . when we come back same time Thursday, just early, please. I would have said, "That means you, too," but I was trying to find a color for Matt Chin's bottom lip: not brown, not pink, plum maybe, thick too and pillow soft, I bet. Light brown skin, Chinese eyes (whatever that means), black hair exactly as it means, cheekbones as high as Grace Jones's, thin mustache, stubble. Wow.

I have the script in my hand but look over at his.

"Yours saying something different?" he asks and grins, and right there I remember that unlike everybody else, my blush shows.

"So how come a white boy hear about this little shindig?" Omar asks.

White boy. He means me.

"My daddy's black," I say.

"Him know?" Omar asks and walks off.

I knew that I could have said something so smart that it would singe the hair off his balls. I also knew that this comment would come

to me twenty-four hours after I needed it. Fine, my hair is closer to Don Johnson than Philip Michael Thomas. And I like to wear brown because my eyes take on whatever color shirt I'm wearing and "pussy-eye" was not about to follow me to college. And my daddy would call himself brown or mixed or a fucking mestizo before he call himself black. But I heard that in America even one millionth black is still black, so that's what I call him.

Omar goes over to speak to Havelock; here I am hoping he isn't telling him to call me the white one. More people who know each other, it seems. Omar spreads his arms, breaks into a grin, and spins to look right around the room. Havelock nods, looks at his copy of the script, and takes out a pen. Maybe they all know each other in some sort of way. Maybe they are all theater people, which would make me the odd one out. Now I was happy that we didn't begin with us telling each other our reasons for responding to the casting call flyer. Maybe I would have told them that doing a gay play in Jamdown was the kind of thrill that would come closest to what wiping your backside with a US thousand-dollar bill must feel like. Now, if only there would be nudity—artistically done, of course. I mean if we're going to stage a battyboy revolution, then we can't half-ass it.

As for me. I was still looking over at Matt's script when I saw the name of the play:

Fortune and Men's Eyes, a play by John Herbert.

Matt looks at me, I look at Havelock who is ready for me with this *now I goin' have to school the plebians* look. I want to say *Check this out you old bitch*, as I know the title comes from a Shakespeare sonnet, having put up with him in A levels. But I want to hear how he talks down to people.

"Canadian play from 1967. Caused a little fracas when it opened. Anyway it's set in a prison," Havelock says.

"Like *Caged Heat*?" Matt asks.

"What? No."

"*Penitentiary? Penitentiary II? Penitentiary III?*"

"What are you talking about?"

"Him fucking with you," I say.

"You think so? Today's discerning cocksucker prefers *La Cage aux Folles* or *Grease 2*," interrupts Jordan.

"Maybe you're not that discerning a cocksucker," says Matt, who looks away too soon to see how hard that punch landed. But I see it.

Not goin' lie, but there were some deer trapped in headlights in this room, and one was me. Matt holds out his hands for Havelock's copy, then scans the jet-black cover, the title in white and red and the author's name in leaf green, while two sad white men behind bars stare at the reader from a high contrast photo.

"Cover is like Genet's *The Blacks*," I say. I want Matt to look but get Jordan.

"Anyway, this is an adaptation," Havelock says.

"Into what, pantomime?" Jordan asks.

"No."

"Sad. As much fun as always, Titus."

I grab the book. The back says "a bitter play about degradation and brutality in a Canadian reformatory." The cast of characters includes a queen named Queenie, a ragamuffin punk named Rocky, and another prisoner named Mona. "So this is a gay play?" I ask.

"No . . . it's not . . . Why the two of you don't shut up and let me talk."

Easily flustered, this queen. He then tells everybody else that the play has all these layers about the individual and society, the nature of violence, the inevitability of corruption and the fall of man. "It's like *Lord of the Flies* with big people."

"But with man-on-man fucking," Jordan says.

"Anyway, this is the kind of play that blows open the whole fragile myth of Jamaican male sexuality and homophobia," Havelock says. "Because prison is the ultimate male institution and yet masculine sexualities that could never happen outside in the normal world flourish in there all the time. Does prison make the gay, does gay make the prison, or do homosexuals just have a criminal nature because our very existence is a crime? But the love that dares not speak its name speaks loudly behind bars."

"Look at you, Titus, dropping Oscar Wilde like ah no nothing. Scared o' yuh," Jordan says.

"Bosie," I say.

"What?"

"Bosie. The one who called it the love that dare not speak its name. It's there in his poem 'Two Loves.'"

"I know where it is," Jordan snaps, but I don't look in his direction for what would definitely be a frown, but to Havelock for what I knew would be a smile. Not even one evening done and all the bitchiness was beating itself out like dust from a rug. A reason for me to stay after all.

"You ever go prison, Havelock?" Matt asks.

"He's definitely been some places dark," Jordan says.

"Will you shut your fucking shit. Just this one time" comes from Havelock.

"So this is some Kid Ralph kinda thing?" Orrin asks.

"Who is that, please?" Havelock sighs out. He's already so tired of us.

"Come now, Havelock Titus, even me know 'bout the one Kid Ralph," Matt says. "In prison in the 1950s for assault. As soon as they let him out, he commit some crime guaranteed to get him locked back in. Usually rape. Word is there is a man in penitentiary who he keeps going back to. They even staged a wedding in the cell."

"And people say Jamaica don't have no love story," Jordan says.

"Anyway," Havelock cuts back in. "The love that dares not speak its name shouts all sort o' ways in prison. Even a Jamaican prison. Yes, there will be violence. Yes, there will be tenderness. Yes, there will be rape. Sal Mineo, the actor in *Rebel Without a—*"

"Rape? Man and man really goin' fuck in this?" Orrin asks.

"Those are two different things, sir," says Jordan.

"You know what the man asking," says Matt.

"Gay men doing a gay play. Which part of this is shocking to you? Pantomime auditions are in October if that's the excitement level you looking for. But I was figuring that if you came through that door you're expecting to do something that has never been done before, or am I wrong, gentlemen?"

May 4

Me mother must did hit her head. Just now—no lie, just now she comes into my room to tell me she is exactly like Clair Huxtable. Not even a good morning.

"Really, Mummy, which part?" I ask. "The part that speak Flemish or the part that look like you're the mother of the Osmonds, not the Jacksons?" Mummy knows neither, which is why it was funny.

"I am a working woman who holds her family together, you don't know how it's hard," she says and honestly anybody can take one look at Daddy and know how hard it is. But right there I shudder a little because more and more it's starting to look like she's picked me as the one to tell serious shit to. I mean to raas man I'm not the oldest. Also not a daughter that she could talk girl stuff to. Or woman stuff. Or whatever stuff that I would never in a million years be able to talk about.