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The Many Faiths Of Sir Wilfred Knight

YOUNG WILFRED KNIGHT WAS ON HIS WAY TO GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE WHEN he heard the singing. The sun was burning as it always did on Good Friday in Barbados, and the glare from it kept his eyes to the ground. But when he came upon the Church of God and heard the singing he looked up. Wilfred was an Anglican. He was baptized in the faith and confirmed, and he expected to be married by the same man who had performed these rites, Reverend Small. But the sun was burning, and he was halfway to St. Christopher's, his church, and the singing sounded more exciting than anything he would hear from Reverend Small, who was only five years older than he, especially for a Good Friday service. So Wilfred Knight, aged 17, of the Parish of Christ Church, stopped dead in his tracks, walked back to the Church of God, sat in the last pew to pleasant smiles and welcoming nods, and never turned back.

It wasn't long after that Wilfred got to know Cherise. Pastor Brown introduced them. Cherise, like he, was a recent convert, and Pastor Brown thought she might guide him through the mysteries of his new faith while making him feel at home. Wilfred took an immediate liking to Cherise, who was a bold girl with simple, unoriginal ideas. Wilfred joined the youth group, of which Cherise was the vice-president, and they went to Bible study together.

One night, on their way home across a lonely pasture, they kissed beneath the cover of a shak shak tree, which shook in the seabreeze. It was the first time Wilfred had ever kissed a girl, and he was entranced. Although it wasn't the first time Cherise had ever kissed a boy, she had never enjoyed it quite so much. She supposed it was because she loved him. Wilfred had to stop her from getting carried away. They went home, happy but frustrated, and lay awake thinking of each other that endless night.

Within a month, they were married. Wilfred was 18. So was Cherise. Soon, Wilfred passed his exams for the civil service, and Cherise got pregnant. She stopped working as a head clerk for Cave Shepherd in Bridgetown and sat home, growing large and content. Wilfred had a good job in government and, in no small measure due to Cherise's encouragement, was gaining the favourable attention of his superiors. On the same day he was promoted to a chief officer in the ministry of foreign affairs, Cherise gave birth to a 5 lb, 3 oz girl with big brown eyes. They baptized her Ona Cherise in the Church of God. Within two years, Cherise gave birth to a son. By this time, they had moved

into an old great house in St. James, on the West Coast, and Cherise knew she would never have to work again in her life. Wilfred was thinking of entering politics. He had a desire to serve others that seemed unquenchable, unstoppable. Whichever party he ran for, he was expected to win. Cherise and Wilfred named their son Errol Walton, for Errol Walton Barrow, the nation's emancipator. Pastor Brown, who seemed to age ten years for every two, was pleased. Wilfred went on to win his seat in the next election. In short order, he was the number two man in the party. Whether he would ever take the reins was questionable; he was decisive yet lacked the personal touch. He was well-respected by the public but not nearly so well-loved. Some thought he aspired to be a man of ideas in an age when action was needed most, others took him for a pretender to the throne yet out of his realm. Either way, Cherise's prediction was correct. She never worked outside the home (and even then the children had a nanny, and she, a maid), and the family prospered. Wilfred worked diligently at whatever he proposed, and life was sweet. The children were growing straight and strong as Tamarind rods, and he and Cherise demanded little of each other.

But then one day, a Sunday, as they were dressing for church, Cherise told Wilfred she would not be going to the Church of God with him. He asked her if she was ill; she said, "No." He asked her if he had done something to offend her; again, she said, "No." It was only as she continued to prepare for church that he grew alarmed.

"Then where are you going?" he demanded. She told him she was done with the Church of God, and she was returning to her original faith. She told him he was free to join her, but, by the look on his face, she knew he would not.

Wilfred said he didn't understand her sudden conversion.

Cherise said there was nothing sudden about it and walked out the door. Wilfred sat at the kitchen table, dumbfounded. He did not go to church that Sunday, nor for many after that, watching Cherise go to hers. He would have spoken to someone about his pain and confusion, except Pastor Brown had passed away ever since, and the new pastor, a much younger man than he, was not the type to inspire confidence. Nor did he trust any of his political confreres.

Wilfred and Cherise continued to drift apart until they divorced. She agreed to keep the children. By this time, Ona and Errol were almost adults. They were not surprised when their parents separated—they had never been what the children would call close; if anything, Wilfred and Cherise lived like brother and sister. But they were hurt. Errol stopped going to church—any church—and declared himself agnostic. (Wilfred doubted the boy, never a bright student, knew the meaning of the word.) Ona, her thick, black hair as dark and beautiful as her eyes, began to grow dreadlocks. Cherise seemed unconcerned. She said once Errol stopped being angry he would start going to church again. The boy was raised up in it all his life, wasn't he? He was yet young. As for Ona, well, all girls her age flirt. It was part of becoming a woman. Ona was just flirting with Rastafarianism, and as soon as the attraction waned, she'd be looking elsewhere. Cherise told him to relax, trust her,

watch and see.

But Wilfred couldn't. With Cherise's laissez-faire attitude, what if they didn't snap out of it? What if Errol remained indifferent to his maker and Ona went off, completely, into the bush? He had already lost his wife; he didn't want to lose his children. To what, he wasn't sure; he couldn't say he feared for their immortal souls.... Still, he was frightened for them, the way he was that day their mother refused to go to the Church of God with him. On his next visit to see the children, Wilfred sat them down to talk. He told them about the importance of faith and constancy. Pointed out the flaws in their philosophies. Set himself up as an example of the benefits of a life lived in the Spirit, according to tradition. He finished by asking them to reconsider, come with him to church this Sunday, give it another try.

They said nothing at first, simply stared into his face.

He smiled a little; they did, too.

Then they looked at each other, at him again and burst out laughing. They laughed and laughed and laughed, gasping for air, falling off their seats.

Wilfred quietly got up and left the house.

Cherise, both angry and pitying, looked on without a word.

It was the last time Wilfred had any contact with his family. Seeking to erase the misery of his defeat, Wilfred accepted an ambassadorship to the United States. For the next 30 years, he worked hard, alone, known as a man of conviction who could get the job done. He was occasionally pitied; it appeared he had lost his family to his career — had chosen his career over them. But he was considered a success and, in his 70th year, was knighted by the Queen of England herself. It was that year he returned to the new republic. He told his aides he was going to visit, but really he was going to die. He was old, now, tired.

On the night he felt Death approaching, he called for Reverend Small. Time had been gentle with the reverend. He was stooped but fit, lucid enough.

The first thing Sir Wilfred asked Reverend Small, his little black preacher's bag still in hand, was if he remembered him.

"Should I?" said the reverend, taking Sir Wilfred for confused. "I know of you. I've seen you speak...."

Sir Wilfred waved away his words. "No, no, that's not what I mean. Look at me. Do you remember? I was a member of your congregation, of your church."

Reverend Small looked at him doubtfully; he hesitated to say another word. Then, slowly, he started to nod. "Yes. Yes. I think I do. But that was a long time ago. We would've been just boys then. I couldn't have known you long. I was new to the church."

"But I wasn't." Silence.

Reverend Small decided to take a chance. "You live here by yourself?"

"I have no family."

"But you married, have children."

"I don't want to talk about that."

"All right, then."

"Why didn't you come looking for me?" Sir Wilfred asked.

"What?"

"When I left the church."

"That was a long time ago. I had heard you left the church —"

"Didn't it matter to you that you had lost one of your flock?"

"How? You weren't running around with women or drinking. You were a good member of the community and distinguished yourself in service to your country. Whether Protestant or Catholic, you were always in God's hands."

Sir Wilfred burst out laughing, laughing convulsively, laughing so hard he clutched his chest. With his last breath, Sir Wilfred laughed and died with his eyes wide open.

Reverend Small, startled by the outburst, closed them after a moment. Then, after a moment more, in the disturbing silence that followed, he took his stole from his bag, wrapped it around his neck, opened his Bible, and began to pray over the body.

