

Cyril Dabydeen

SEE HOW THEY RUN

“See how fast I can run,” she calls out.

“How fast?” others jeer.

“Yes, how really fast!” they keep mocking.

Voices everywhere, a veritable caterwaul, with the wind blowing and the clouds now coming down like a heavy tarpaulin it seems. A hurricane too in the far sky, I imagine, on the day I’ve become the track coach for Todd House. Our school’s now a special place, I conjure; as more voices rise in the air; and pigs run; ducks, fowls, sheep, goats too.

Am I really a track coach? Ah, now Bessie will show them, young as she is, scrawny-legged and all: she will become the fastest sprinter ever. See, she grins from ear to ear. Yes, watch her! And her father, Mister Joe he’s called, who’s just a meat-seller...as the boys call out to him, “How many pigs did you kill today?”

“Yeah, how many, tell we!”

“Do they really squeal when you cut their throats, murder them?”

Do they? The boys come closer, as Bessie at once scowls and snaps back at them. Maybe she snaps back at me too. “No, the pigs don’t!”

“Don’t what?” another sneers.

All eyes are on Bessie now. Eyes really on her!

Instinctively she pulls her lips in. to one side of her mouth almost to the left ear. And I can tell she’s thinking of her father killing the pigs, one by one...and how they

squeal. *Not run for their lives?* See, I am now the Todd House trainer. And Father Todd, an English priest, he was, yeah!

The boys laugh again, pointing. To me? And Mister Joe keeps going about his business, as the pigs run helter-skelter; and indeed Bessie's father is going after them...to "murder" the pigs. What else?

"Why he's not a Muslim like we?" cries one, cringing.

"Pork is haram," wails another.

Mister Joe turns around and wags a finger at them.

"Haram, haram," the boys sing. And voices wane after a while.

Back in class Bessie is thinking about the boys, I know, still making faces at them, or maybe she will just imitate the pigs like a new habit. "Pig-face," I imagine the boys hurling at her. Then, "Black like a pig, heh-heh!"

Everyone laughs; and I, really a young school teacher--with them--I also laugh. Father Riley will come by to remind us about the name "Todd" being that of another English priest, a kindly man, indeed (as I heard): the same who left us a long time ago after the tropical heat got too much for him; some still say Father Todd became mad pining away for England. This only!

Now Father Riley wants us to become athletes, as a way to save the British Empire. *Really?* At once I figure Bessie will run as fast as she can. And it's like my own dream also. "Really run for Empire?" the boys let out next. *Heh-heh-heh!*

"Yeah, run to save Father Riley too, no?" another scoffs. How they hector or just hurl abuse. And what can I do about it, eh?

I imagine Bessie doing the hundred-yard dash, skinny legs an' all. Her heart thumping, mouth set hard: gosh, she's really running her heart out! Imagine her running faster than Wilma Rudolph. *Who?* Ah, Bessie's in the Olympics. "Run, Bessie, run!" I let out voicelessly. Father Riley is looking at me, then at Bessie...at the same time. The others pick up on it, "Run, Bessie, run!" They are no longer scoffing. Echoes are everywhere. "Run for dear life's sake," another hollers, a Hindu boy named Rajan.

Bessie is indeed doing the hundred-yard dash before a large crowd in a stadium, as the boys cheer her on. Then they berate her father again, the pigs yet close by...running

into the sea and ocean to escape Mister Joe's "murdering" hands. *Christ!* Father Riley, what will he say now?

"Haram, haram," voices rise in the air.

A gust of trade wind comes, the ocean's waves lashing. Palm trees hurl their branches. Mangrove and courida flagellate, leaves falling. Shrill voices are everywhere, faces of glee in the bright sun.

I start running again alongside Bessie, being her coach, panting and heaving; ah, Father Riley wants me to do just that. And Bessie must run to save the Empire. *She must?* I'm out of breath, as Bessie runs ahead of me. Far ahead.

I shout to her, yet encouraging her on. The wind slaps harder, my ears sting. It's a hurricane coming, remember? Sugar cane wave their tassel-like fronds, flaunting arrows in the wind. "Can I run faster?"

Bessie calls out back to me.

"Faster!" I pant. Then, "How much faster?" Father Riley is making faces. And maybe before long he too will yearn to return to England, no?

Mister Joe somewhere is also urging Bessie on, with his mind still on the pigs. Maybe he doesn't want Bessie to run for Empire...as Bessie now has the sun in her eyes and perhaps thinking of the big day that's not far ahead when she will show the world who she really is, runt an' all!

Bessie stops, and I quickly say to her, "You mustn't slow down now."

"I will if I want to," she pouts, making a face.

Then it's her father, something between them.

"You must train harder, Bessie," I say.

"What if I don't want to?" she scowls. Christ, where's Father Riley now? But it's the boys she's also thinking about., all her own age. And doesn't Mister Joe not want her to run anymore? Father Riley waves, head lifted up, so haughty-looking. England is all, see!

"Why must I run so fast?" Bessie snaps, and the heat's getting to her. Getting to me too. It's getting to Father Riley most of all, red blotches forming on his face. Will he really return to England where it's damp or just cold-cold?

“It’s serious training you must do,” I say to Bessie. Then, “You can stop for a short while, but you must start running again.” I’m her trainer, no? “Sure, stop if you want,” I cajole her.

“The pigs never stop,” she says to me.

“Cause they’re just that...pigs.”

The look in her eyes, crinkling her nostrils, as if to tell me she will do just as the pigs do. Run for their lives!

Mister Joe comes, he says to me, “That Bessie, all she thinks about is running.”

I nod.

“She must give it up though.”

“What for?”

“Bessie...small she is....”

“She can still make it.”

“Can she...really?”

“She has a chance at the big meet coming up.” I’m thinking of what’s ahead. The big race. And Father Riley’s aiming for it, I know. Bessie’s father shakes his head, and he goes off again, as I hear the pigs squeal louder. Bessie hears them too? The sea and ocean, everything being voices; and it’s the hurricane still coming, and I am now nervous.

Really nervous. We all are!

...

Bessie talks to the pigs all around her now; they are her friends, she says. And Father Riley watches Bessie and smiles. He’s responsible for our school, for Todd House most of all, here in our part of the world.

Yeah, something else is in the air. Maybe Father Riley really wants to go back to England. *What for?*

Christ, he wants to be with all sorts of English people—his kind—and sip tea and eat cakes, all day long, and speak fancy English words, all with long sentences, really the *Englishfy* way.

Bessie runs past the old wooden church next to the school, I imagine; and on Ash Wednesday the entire school will come to church, such a big occasion. Father Riley

will throw his head back and drink communion wine, swallowing it down, in one great gulp as he stands before the altar. God comes near then, I figure. Christ coming down from the Cross too, no? Bessie and the others--the boys mostly--will look long at Father Riley and maybe wonder about faroff places, as I do.

Will Father Riley say a few words from the pulpit about the big day coming...and about saving the Empire?

The boys now fancy themselves running, also--they can't fool me, because the big day is at hand. Maybe they hope to go to England one day and really see Trafalgar Square, as they've talked about. Yeah, see the pigeons most of all, and who can really kick a pigeon in Trafalgar Square? Can anyone..anywhere? Yeah, Father Riley's still talking to them, taking them there; and what if they want to run so that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth will look at them? Not look Bessie, if she's thinking about the pigs only?

"Bessie can run anywhere she wants," I'm about to say.

Yeah, imagine her running in Asia, Africa...South and North America, but mostly in Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, closer to where we live. *Really?* Eyes widen; and censors with smoke swirling in the air it is, as Father Riley waves to me. Ash Wednesday, remember? The smell of candles, then mahogany smells waft in the air. I inhale hard. Holiness is upon us, and we pray altogether, to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost in this the highest church building in the world. It really is!

Father Riley is yet fully at it. *Rule Britannia! Land of Hope and Glory!* Clamorous voices are everywhere. Indeed, Bessie imagines herself in a huge stadium, a place bigger than Trafalgar Square, as thousands cheer, foreigners--white people all--all who take part in the Queen's coronation. Then we'd sung "God Save the Queen." Everything sacramental yet, the blood of Christ flowing. See, Father Riley has England deep in his veins, he can't fool me.

More aroma: dark wine, I inhale sitting in a pew in front.

I cross myself, thinking Bessie will run really well. Then Todd House will become famous the world over, I will be famous too, for I've become a genuine track coach, says Father Riley. I cross myself. Bessie also crosses herself. "See how fast I can run," she hums, her face a tremor.

I am nervous too. *Oh God, help her run really fast!*

“How fast?” Bessie says, eyes opened wide.

Giggles, the boys’ own. Malcolm, Hanuman (we call him Hangman), also with eyes closed. What’s really *haram* now? Father Riley sniffs a little, benediction coming from his lips. Wafer on his tongue, Empire being all. *Let all the World Keep Silence before Him.*

I whisper.

Voices echo.

...

Bessie’s thin legs and all; and what if those legs snap like dried guava sticks in the big race of her life?

It’s what Mister Joe is thinking, and the pigs are yet hollering.

What if he’s looking for one special animal to kill?

Everyone again call out, “Hey, pork-seller, which one?”

And the entire village will soon become eaters of pork, I figure.

Oh, swine...running into the sea and ocean, with the Devil in them! *Haram-haram*, I hear. The Hindu boy Rajan scowls. Hangman waves to the others. And how many pigs will Bessie’s father kill today? Does he have a secret method?

Father Riley is ready to anoint each pig before it’s killed.

One final squeal...and that’s it!

Bessie watches the pigs’ beady eyes, almost mesmerized.

Her father crinkles his nostrils. Bessie crinkles hers too...with the pigs indeed running for their lives.

I figure Bessie is scared. “Are you really, Bessie?”

“What?”

“Scared...for the pigs?”

A chorus in the large stadium, and Bessie is running again, but scared. But she’s thinking she could become like the one named Wilma Rudolf and winning the most important race of her life. Let Adolph Hitler watch her too. *Who’s Hitler anyway?*

Ah, back in school it’s again rote-learning, and chanting the times-tables, then it’s a spelling-bee exercise. The saaman and sandkoker trees have orchids bursting out from

their roots the more I look at them. A shimmering haze is all because of the sun. Another hot day it is today, see.. Not the hurricane winds anymore?

Father Riley has a rare smile on his face, bringing us closer to Buckingham Place, he says. Where we will sip tea with the Queen if Bessie wins the big race of her life!

Imagine the pigs squealing just as Bessie puts the fancy porcelain cup to her lips. Her Majesty says to her, "Run for Empire, you must, Bessie!" *Run around Buckingham Palace only?*

"Must I?" Bessie says and curtseys.

"It will make me happy."

"Really happy, Your Majesty?"

"It's what Father Riley tells you, doesn't he?"

Bessie nods.

"He will do as I instruct him," Her Majesty adds.

Bessie curtseys again, as I've advised her to do.

Now Her Majesty wants Bessie to run for the British Empire against the Germans. *Nazis, you hear me!* Run faster than any blonde and blue-eyed boy or girl can...even if you have to run faster than the one named Wilma Rudolph. Not Jessie Owens, all who's genuinely black. *Well, American black!*

Mister Joe, is in the background now, knife in hand.

"Hey, pork-seller, how many pigs will you really kill today?" the boys ring out.

Then, "Do they bawl when you draw the sharp knife against their throats?" *Do they?*

Suddenly Bessie doesn't want to run anymore.

Father Riley looks at her, puzzled. The boys and the girls in the class make faces, everyone. Then, "You must run, Bessie," I say.

"I don't want to run anymore," she snaps back.

"Please..."

But Bessie is adamant.

I try my best to cajole her, saying she must run for Todd House, if

nothing else. Father Riley is telling me to say this too. But what if Bessie figures it's the pigs that matter most of all...and who we are in this faraway place, far from England... and Germany?

Stronger breezes come from across the ocean into the cane fields, everywhere. Coming across the wide Caribbean, the entire archipelago, blowing far and wide, from Florida and North Carolina too, places I've come to know about. I imagine cooler winds also blowing!

...

Bessie is more nervous, I sense. Her father is nervous too.

I look closely at Bessie, her expression, and maybe it's because she doesn't want the pigs to die when they start running for their lives.

Now I'm disappointed in her, because I think if she doesn't run it'll be like the end of Empire, suddenly. And do I really want it to end?

Father Riley wags a finger at me...at Bessie. At us all!

Mister Joe smiles from a distance, and drifts farther away.

Bessie starts talking to herself; and maybe she still imagines talking to them each one coming around her again. And the boys will tease her once more, especially when she makes a face.

"Hey, Pig-Face, won't you run again, thin as you are?"

"Yeah, really thin!"

Bessie looks at them, and I know at once: she hears the applause from a great big distance, coming as if from across the ocean, same as I once told her to listen for. *Go on, imagine it*, Bessie, I urge.

It's now like all the world's coming closer to us.

But it's only the pigs coming around her, squealing, as much as I hear too. Yeah, Mister Joe makes a strange face; and then I see Father Riley in a distant place—really far away—still swallowing communion wine, the last drop left. Yeah, I want to tell him: Bessie will indeed run the fastest race ever, thin as she is an' all. And the pigs will be on with her, running along with her, even if Her Majesty is watching.

Yeah, even as the boys are in England, the Muslim and Hindu ones also, and those “converted” also. It’s what I will imagine while training the other kids in Todd House-- to want to run as fast they can. Fast as Bessie, see.

Bessie’s father will come by once in a while to watch me, and maybe imagine Bessie running...in England... where the trade winds no longer hurl...where the sea and ocean grows wider the more you look at it. Where’s the hurricane now? And Her Majesty is pointing from somewhere, speaking in her clipped English accent...though I’m not sure about what really. But Father Riley knows, being back in England among his own kind sipping tea and talking about us... for the rest of his days, I figure. Even as I once in a while savour the wine he drank at Communion from the altar in the tallest wooden church in our part of the world; and it will always be about Empire, as he rubs his skin with red blotches on it. This only, I will think about, see.

Calabash

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