

Title: An Unwanted Visitor

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When I was a child, hurricane season meant “funtime” for me. Although I didn’t pay attention to the news to know exactly what a hurricane was, I knew it was some sort of storm that made the whole family stay home from work and for me, school; which I loved. Actually, for a while, I thought a hurricane was a distant relative by the way my Grammy prepared the house for its arrival.

I remember hearing about “Uncle Floyd”, “Aunty Frances”, and “Cousin Jeanne”, and knowing that all the kitchen cupboards had to be swept out, all the bathrooms cleaned and tubs scrubbed, and that Grammy would buy extra, extra groceries, especially tuna and corned beef. I used to say to myself, “*Boy, Uncle an Aunty dem mussy really like corn beef*”. But little did I know exactly what kind of unwanted and uninvited guests these were who sent Grammy into a fit of cleaning.

What I did know, though, was that I got a few extra days off from school to play board games with my family. There was my Grammy, my aunty, my mom and my uncles. I was the baby of the family. But the older I got and the more I paid attention, the more I understood how devastating a hurricane can be, and this year was no exception.

Thinking back, this was the most bizarre hurricane season I had ever experienced. Everyone around me seemed to be going crazy. People were jumping off the bridge above Potter’s Dock, under the incredulous “doomsday” reporting of meteorologists and newscasters who dubbed this particular hurricane “the worst the Atlantic has ever seen”. *They say that every year*, I thought. But I was secretly happy that it wasn’t me this year who caught the crazy bug, since it *was* me who almost caught it last season. For me, cabin fever was worse than any house flooding, any tree the

wind may have bent, and any roof that may have flown off a house. But this year, in this season, something was off; different. It was much hotter than expected, people were falling ill like flies left and right, going hungry, going out of their minds walking the streets, and this season seemed to have brought along with it additional uninvited guests; ants.

Aunty couldn't leave a sweet unwrapped on her dresser for three seconds without an army of ants swooping in and declaring it theirs, toting pieces of it away on their tiny backs, up the walls, disappearing into holes we couldn't see. And Mother couldn't rest down a cup of room-temperature water and walk away for a split second, only to return to a cup full of drowning ants. "*Water? I thought ants were only attracted to sweet things*", I pondered. I was beginning to wonder if the ants were just as hungry and desert-thirsty as we were in this summer heat.

We had been complaining about the heat all summer, Grammy and I. We were the only ones at home, since Mother and Aunty were comfortably stationed in their air-conditioned offices between 9 and 5; the weather app on my cell phone reading, "Actual Temperature: 87 degrees. Feels Like: 101 degrees". What we needed was a miracle this lap, but what seemed to be coming our way instead, was more heat.

Grammy, who I affectionately call "Sweets", was afraid to turn the air conditioning on in any of the bedrooms, in fear of a high electricity bill. So, we trekked through the steam of June and suffered through the flames of July. But August; August was no joke, and Sweets recognized this as a battle she would not win, so, on went the AC in all three bedrooms. Still fearful of the bill, the air could only be on for one hour at any given

time, and all three units could not be on simultaneously. These rules weren't bad, though, since everyone else was in AC during the day, and because when that cool air hit Sweets in the sweaty creases and crevices she didn't even know were on her body, she lost track of time.

Still trying to save money, Sweets decided to leave the AC off during the day and only turn it on, for a while, at night. To me, this made no sense, since it was during the day that we needed it most. The August heat was not sparing us at all. It was so hot out during the day, that the hot air found its way through the air conditioning vents and into the parts of the house that had no units. This type of heat had me thinking we were being punished for things we did in a past life, which we definitely could not remember. "Whatever I do, God, I sorry! I swear I ain' ga do it no more!", was my cry as I dropped to my knees praying for days like this to end. Maybe there was something to the idea of leaving the units off in the daytime.

If there was something, I had yet to figure it out. There was no way I was going to sit through the hottest temperatures to hit this flat rock in all my life living. Having gotten used to the differing temperatures that both the AC and the sun brought, there was one good thing that the family looked forward to every August; Sweets' birthday; and this year was no different. Hot or cold, rain or shine, we were celebrating. She was turning sixty-nine, which was young to be a grandmother since I was twenty-five, but every birthday she celebrated was a reminder to focus on how many she had left.

I was responsible for the cake, as I had been every year since she turned sixty-three, when I got her a cake made in the shape of a Coca-Cola bottle cap. She was

obsessed with Coca-Cola and the cake was so pretty, no one wanted to cut it. This year, after a few half-failed attempts at baking a two-layer chocolate and vanilla cake myself, I decided to go with what I know and make cheesecake cupcakes and one whole cheesecake. The only problem was, I couldn't make them at home because she would see them and their unveiling was reserved for the restaurant. So, I gathered all my supplies the night before, made my way over to a friend's house all the way on the other side of the island, and went to town. Tasting the mixtures, I knew this cheesecake and the cupcakes would put me back in Sweets' good book of birthday cakes.

By the time I got home, it was already Sweets' birthday and I crawled onto my side of the bed I shared with her and gave her a kiss. The AC was on and my sheets were nicely chilled, especially after dealing with the oven. My friend was left to man the oven until all the times were done and the cakes and cupcakes could cool and chill overnight. I went to bed that morning with a smile on my face, thinking only about the awe on everyone's faces when they first lay their eyes on the cakes. It was going to be a wonderful birthday. I would make sure of it.

When I woke up later that morning after the sun came out, the space next to me was empty. The first thing I wanted to do was wish the birthday girl a happy birthday, since I'm sure she didn't feel my kiss just a few hours before. I searched every bedroom and all the bathrooms, but they were all empty. Walking out into the kitchen, I saw a flash of white in the corner of my eye through the window. She was in the backyard hanging out clothes, on her birthday. I ran outside to her, taking the clothes hamper out of her hand and giving her a bear hug with what was probably a million kisses all over her forehead, nose and cheeks.

“Happy birthday, Sweets!”, I shrieked.

“Thank you, baby. Thank you”, she replied.

“Why you outside in this heat hanging out clothes on your birthday?”, I asked. “Today is your rest day. It too hot to be out here today and even still, it’s your birthday! I ga hang out the rest. You go inside and rest your troubles away in the AC.”

As she walked back inside the house, I saw her brush a few mosquitoes away from her legs and ankles. She always complained about mosquitoes buzzing around her legs, and we always joked with her that they must only be attracted to a scent of something in *her* blood, because we could be sitting right next to her and not be bothered by one buzz. As I finished off the rest of the clothes, the only thing on my mind was getting over to my friend’s house to pack up the cakes and hide them until the big reveal.

If there was ever a day for everything to go awry, this birthday was not the day. I got over to my friend’s house only to find a raw, uncooked cheesecake and burnt cheesecake cupcakes. The cake reeked of oil spray and cream cheese, with puddles of oil leaking down the sides at the touch of my finger. I was distraught, as it was already settling into the evening and quickly nearing time to go to dinner.

Somehow I was able to whip up another mixture to yield a second round of cupcakes, but my nerves were on me to make these so perfect, I completely forgot to add in the eggs. In a panic, I took the cupcakes out of the oven, whipped up two eggs, and tried to equally spread the egg mixture into each cupcake. There’s no question that this made things worse, so I threw them away, packed up all my utensils and headed

home. This was the first birthday in six years where I would have showed up to the dinner with nothing. Even if I had brought a lopsided cake, with the icing melting down the sides, Sweets would have still eaten it as if her favorite pastry chef in the world made it error-free. That's one thing I loved about her.

Even without my cake and cupcakes, dinner was great and Sweets enjoyed herself, which was the most important thing. When we got home later that night, I promised her that I would make her a new batch of cake and cupcakes for her to truly enjoy. She told me not to worry, that it's no rush, but I was determined.

I wish I had stayed true to my promise, because as time passed, the days and nights remained hot, if not hotter, even though we were approaching Fall. The ants were multiplying and were extending their territories. I grew up seeing ants attack sweet treats and beverages or scraps of food, but this season, it seemed like God sent all the ants in Nassau to our house to crawl all over the remote controls, bedheads, towels, sheets and lotion bottles. It seemed like everything we touched, the ants wanted to touch too.

Three weeks after her birthday, Sweets was still complaining about the heat and started sleeping more. She grew extremely tired, no longer doing the things that made up her daily chores. We tried to keep the AC and fans on for most of the day and night, keep ice crushed in the freezer, cold water at hand, fruits, towels and cotton dresses that would breathe on her. She kept getting lower and lower and we ended up taking her to the hospital. It turned out to be an infection which would explain her fever. The

doctor put her on two types of antibiotics, lots of water, iron pills and lots of rest. However, we were bracing ourselves for a storm, but it was no relative this year.

This was probably the first hurricane season we didn't bother to clean, buy any supplies or extra food; we were focused on putting up shutters and hoping that Sweets would weather the storm. Although she was weak and frail, she was coherent, cognizant, able to speak and answer questions and she was alive.

The day had come for this year's hurricane to make her grand entrance, but she was taking pretty long. I noticed that the electricity never shut out, *praise Jesus*, the water hadn't been cut off, *hallelujah*, and the Caribbean Hurricane Channel brought the Gospel: this hurricane had steered off her expected pathway away from Nassau. There could not have been any better news.

We were happy because this meant Sweets could still have her cooked meals, her tea, bathe in warm water, have AC at night and cool fans in the daytime and that her shutters didn't have to stay up for long.

However, that night, that joyous night, the electricity did indeed cut out, and I saw what I am still not sure was a dream or reality: tiny ants, hundreds of them, toting my grandmother's body out of the bed, onto the floor and out of the room into the darkness of the corridor. Frightened, I retreated closer to the bedhead, pinning my legs under my hips, rubbing my eyes to make sure what I was seeing was real. I started to scream but I don't know if anyone heard me. The house was silent, there were no fans, radios, cell phones or TV's on, so they must have heard me. Stunned, I remained glued to the sheets and pillows, afraid of what may have been lurking beyond my bedroom door.

Somehow, I got the courage to get out of bed and slowly tiptoe out into the hallway. I was no longer afraid; curiosity now consumed me. I walked towards the end of the corridor, only to meet the ants hard at work placing my grandmother's body into a hole. I couldn't tell if she was alive or not; I didn't notice any breathing, but I also didn't notice any. Just as I ran towards her calling out, "Sweets!", she was gone in the blink of an eye, with the army of ants covering the top of the hole. It seemed as if the more the ants crawled into the hole, the more more ants covered it.

My scream must have been heard this time, as I felt someone shaking me just as I caught my balance running towards the hole. It was my Aunty, in a panic, telling me my grandmother had just had a heart attack. I was lying right next to her at didn't feel or hear a thing. Paramedics had been in the room, taken her away and Mother had left to go with her.

"Why didn't you wake me then", I asked Aunty.

"Because the last thing Mom yelled out was, 'Spare my baby!'", she replied.

"Well, how is she now? Did she make it?", I asked.

Aunty stared at me, resting her hands on both my shoulders.

"Your scream said it all."

A single tear fell from her left eye, as she tried to hold me in an embrace. I broke free, running out into the corridor and outside into the front yard.

"Sweets!", was my cry, as I fell to my knees and looked at the sky. Only then did I understand that there are worse things in the world than a hurricane.