

Be

Longing

Belonging

Be
Longing
Belonging

By
Monica Armstrong

Author: Monica Armstrong
ISBN: 9789464485707
Cover design: Monica Armstrong
© Monica Armstrong
First publication
Brave New books

Foreword

My Dear Queen

When I was thinking about a title for my book, the thought

"Britsjamcloggy" came to mind. Maybe a little weird or too complex as a title for a book, but I wanted to capture just that. I am a Jamaican/British citizen living in your country (The Netherlands), and I had to express how deep that was in me (cloggy was a nickname for Dutch made up by my British colleagues).

Being born in Jamaica to Jamaican parents made me Jamaican. Still, when our family of five immigrated to England in the early 1960s, it was the start of 22 years as a British citizen. I have lived in Jamaica for only six years, yet, my Jamaican heritage is deeply cemented in my core, genes, essence, and structure. I think like a Jamaican more than anything else, which is strange considering I have only spent a tenth of my time there unlike in any other country. What could my comparison be? As a 6-year-old whose life had developed in England from then on, one could say that I am a real Brit. I have lived, studied, and married for the first time in England. I had all of my education there, but does that make me British? Is being a citizen the same as belonging to that country?

In the 1980s, I left Great Britain - which was once my parents' land of milk and honey - to live in the Netherlands. I left with so many insecurities at the time. I felt like a refugee, about to move to her third country of residence, not daring to call any place home.

Having lived in the Netherlands for over 33 years and having lived through your entire reign, you would think it should feel more like home. However, after giving up my Jamaican passport, I was hesitant to give up my British one to become a Dutch citizen. I am afraid of losing my identity once again. Will I ever be considered Dutch? Could I belong here?

They say *home is where the heart is*, and my heart is deeply rooted in the Netherlands where I have a solid network of immediate family and friends. However, I hold onto the thought that if I dream in English, I tend to believe that I have remained British at heart.

The need to belong is something very human. But where is the feeling of belonging rooted? What makes us feel we belong to anything be it a place, a family, or an environment?

Having a sense of belonging gives a feeling of trust, comfort, and safety which triggers loyalty, love, and devotion.

The need to fit in, be a part of, or have the same mind-set is just a touch of that need. Belonging takes effort; it teaches open-mindedness, provides room to try new things, practices, an attitude of acceptance, and believe in making a change.

We all need to feel like we belong somewhere in a family, friendship, to a religion, and different areas of relationships be it at work or personal, it all gives our lives value. On the other hand, no one wants to feel like they are owned by someone - like property - which is the flip side of the coin if you belong.

When I look around my house on this sunny day and feel that comforting peace running through my veins that gives me shivers, I enjoy the thought that runs through my mind: this is home! I am happy with the PRESENT. My whole period of recovery and reflection has brought me closer to God and myself. I have not achieved great success, but I am finally happy. I slowly have begun to belong to my mind, my body, and

my soul. I feel accepted, although possibly judged silently in this country, I am not oppressed; I am in a place where I feel welcomed.

The move to the Netherlands was a giant leap of faith for my family and me. Now, I want to look back on that period and maybe share the experience with my grandchildren one day. I have learnt a great deal from my children. Seeing them as mothers, wives and women in their glory they are all so very different from me and each other.

In my earlier years, I was often afraid to express my true thoughts, and it has always frustrated me that my voice was overcome by other people's voices who claimed to be more verbally proficient. As opinionated as I believe I am, I have been far too shy and private to express myself confidently. The gift of being able to talk smoothly ('the gift of the gab,' as some Brits would say), was not my forte. These fragments of sporadic notes or meaningless scribbles in my journal to you helped shape and give me life. I am happy to say that these are my thoughts and my articulations. When viewed by others, they can be debatable, but my opinions are mine, and they feel as accurate as they can be to me.

Not everything is a fact, but not everything is a myth. What started as a quest to find my voice, a formulation of comforting words to myself, or a record of all the gibberish dancing in my head ended in finding an independent black woman; one who found a voice for problems often treated as unspeakable and found strength from within because she believed in herself and trusted in God enough to dare.

I decided that the book could best be called 'Belonging.' It covers the struggles of acceptance practised by a young girl or teenager in a foreign environment, or a subservient wife and an entangled mother in a role she feared; a self-reflective, hostile, black female employer in a man's

world. Above all, from the inside, a woman of substance has been discovered.

Acknowledgements

What can I say? Many people have helped me consciously

or unconsciously with this project.

To my children, the constant factor in my life who has made this possible, my husbands from the past and lovingly the present, a dear friend, because she invited me to a writing class where I met my wonderful mentor, Jessie van Vlodrop, with all her enlightening advice and coaching, my wonderful and supportive son,

My *bonus* daughter, whose sense of humour and perspective I love dearly, my son-in-law's insightful Christmas gift of a writing course was a boost of encouragement. My sisters-from-another-mother, far and near, I value all your opinions and help which helped me stay focused. My editor Faith Okoro for making my words shine.

And last but certainly not least, the excellent and unique Fauzia Jonas who was my rock, gently supported and encouraged me and most importantly, did the translation of the book from English to Dutch, I love you. I am eternally grateful to you for your non-judgmental, open-minded, unbiased, cheerful, and calming nature, which made working with you a breeze.

Thank you, thank you all!

Much love and blessings.

CHAPTER One

"Abdication" is practically a dirty word for many monarchies, but not for all: the Dutch, for example, have made it a tradition over the years. In recent history, Queen Wilhelmina abdicated for her daughter Juliana in 1948 and now, Queen Juliana is abdicating in favour of her daughter Beatrix."

2nd of January 1980

“Hi, you have another daughter!” I exclaimed to my

husband who had just arrived back in Holland for his work. It was almost as though our third daughter was waiting for her father to leave before entering the world, two weeks later than her due date. He had stayed home with us in England for as long as he could over the Christmas holidays. However, being a freelance draftsman, he had to return to work on the 2nd of January 1980.

As we spoke, the nurse handed her to me. Taking hold of her, I looked at her. As I examined her, unexpected tears sprung to my eyes. I pressed my nose deep but gently into her little neck and sniffed, hhhmmmm. That particular smell that new-born babies have is so fresh, warm, and reassuring. She was so beautiful, adorable, and clean. The cheesy-looking coating that had covered her only hours ago had been wiped away, and she lay snug as a bug in my arms. At the end of our first

day, she still smelt the same even after breastfeeding, puking, and passing green poo. What a unique smell new-born babies have! Her little slit-looking eyes were tightly closed, and she looked so calm and peaceful. I scrutinized her little face as she lay with me. She was very pale, the fairest of them all. Her almost translucent skin had hardly any wrinkles at all. I smiled. Though not planned; she was very welcomed. We named her Tayari, a creation from my Swahili book, meaning she came when she was ready.

“Queen Juliana of the Netherlands is abdicating!!”

Proclaimed the news reporter on BBC One. Having just given birth only 29 days ago, I couldn't help but wonder what that meant for my family.

England was going through a recession, and we had been thinking about what was best for us. My husband Leroy, and I realized we had to get out from under Margret Thatcher's uncompromising, conservative government rule. I know I should have been proud of her, being England's first female prime minister. But being on the side of the Labor party, I couldn't openly support her. She was a woman with a mission that could be respected, but her tactics were brutal. She sacked the Social Security party - the little help the poor had, almost as though she had a personal vendetta against the poor and the immigrants. I am not particularly political, but I got the jest of the pressure the country was under; South London was filling up with refugees and foreigners, but most were quickly deported as soon as they entered the country.

British Steel, a company I worked for, was on strike and had been since the 2nd of January. Although most of my colleagues were expected to

return to work, I, on the other hand, was happily on maternity leave. However, I couldn't help being worried about our job situation; British steel was striking for more pay and closing their plants was causing job loss, which meant engineering was going down the drain.

The strikers' placard had read; "COLD STEEL FOR IRON LADY". Mrs Thatcher was becoming less and less popular.

At that point, all lucrative businesses were pointing abroad. England looked as if it was about to go pear-shaped. For us, Holland or Belgium was to be our choice. It was horrifying; uprooting one's self and their family. Leaving wasn't an easy decision. We had families and dear friends that we would greatly miss.

Realizing there was a global economic recession everywhere, we eventually decided life in Holland seemed more attractive after weighing all the pros and cons.

However, the news that Queen Juliana was abdicating had gotten everyone's attention! Leaving the throne in favour of her 42-year-old daughter, Beatrix, had everyone wondering what it could mean for the government.

I couldn't see our Queen Elizabeth abdicating for poor Charles. He may have to wait a long time before becoming king. However, everyone was hoping that since he had made his relationship with Diana Frances Spencer official, they would get married and then maybe, the Queen might abdicate. I can well understand she wouldn't feel compelled to, though; her memory was tarnished by her father becoming king against his will when her uncle abdicated. The act of renouncing one's right to the throne and all responsibility is considered unforgivable. And that he did it for the love of a woman! It was simply frowned upon. That whole epilogue was a big disgrace to the monarchy and very painful for the young princess Elizabeth at the time. It was said that the stress of it all had even cost her father his

life. No, I couldn't see her abdicating. She wouldn't do that; she was far too pompous, loyal, and patriotic for that. Plus, she has many years left to reign at the age of 54. She would not simply step down for a while yet. Abdication would just not do it for our Queen of England.

However, in Holland, for the 71-year-old Queen Juliana, to abdicate meant no shame or disgrace. She resigned simply because her daughter was mentally ready to reign. Two different mind-sets; that of the Windsors and the Oranges.

Despite all of that, we planned on leaving England; Leroy and I, our three daughters, their nanny Eva, and only our suitcases and bags filled with insecurities and new challenges. I even had a job to go right into!

Life was looking hopeful.

CHAPTER TWO

"Geen woning, geen kroning" - "No home, no Coronation"

30th April, 1980

We have moved! It wasn't easy. Your Majesty, we have

arrived in your country!"

England was cold, wet, and grey, but it seems far colder, windier, and just as grey here in Holland! I am under the notion that whatever weather England has, we receive it a day later.

Let me stop before I get ahead of myself; who wants to talk about the weather?

I found an agency while I was in England, and they found me a job starting directly! It's all so exciting.

Our apartment is on Abrikozenstraat, in the fruit area, in Den Haag; a small 'portiekwoning' I am told it's called. I am not sure what such a house is called in England. From the street, you go up a flight of stairs before reaching the front door, the entrance to the apartment. Another flight of stairs greets you on entering the front door leading up into the apartment. Yes, it's small and not big enough for a family of five plus a nanny, but a friend of my husband owned this apartment and rented it to us. Although we have to get used to the inconvenience, we are very grateful. I can't complain; this is home now.

My dear queen, yes, we have a nanny! That sounds a little posh for the working class but not strange to you. You have a whole staff to your service, and your children have governesses, nannies, and babysitters. My husband and I both have to work, and with only one income, we will not be able to save enough money to return to England in 6 months, which is our goal. So with the two of us working 7 till 7, we are hoping we could save, at least that is the plan. So a nanny isn't a luxury for us but a necessity. I was astonished that your system does not cater to the working mom by providing day-care places, such as crèches for their children. Since my arrival, I have realised that most women didn't work, especially if they were mothers. So when Eva, a dear friend of ours, said she wanted to take a sabbatical from the university to help us out, we were overjoyed. Bless her heart! She makes a fantastic nanny; she is quiet, shy and unchanging, and the kids just love her. I watch her play with the kids; she does it so intimately and with so much love as if they were her own. She makes us all feel safe.

Let me show you around our new apartment; I can't help but wonder how we would accommodate three adults and three babies in a three-room apartment!

The open-planned space seemed large as you entered; this was the living/dining room. After coming up the stairs, I presumed to the left was the lounge area, as there were two orange 3-seater sofas in chrome art deco style, creating a hook. A low, equally styled glass coffee table was in front of them.

To the right is the dining area, where a large glass dining table is situated in the middle of that space with 6 matching chrome art deco chairs seated around it. It is all very beautifully decorated - I love art deco, and having studied interior decorating, I could appreciate the style of the room. Leading off more to the right was a small kitchenette, so small I could hardly

turn without my butt touching the opposite cupboard! Maybe it wasn't that bad, but it was a far cry from what we had left in England.

“Oh my goodness,” I thought to myself, “we left a large three-storey terraced house for this?!” I instantly reprimanded myself; “we had no money to buy carpets back then, so hush! We were living in a house with only rigid boards on the floor. Remember why you left.” I told my heart. It would be hard to adjust, but I had to suck it up and think of the bigger picture, which was to return to England in 6 months. I am trying hard to hang onto that as an incentive. It helps most of the time.

Midway through the apartment, there is a door leading to 3 bedrooms, 2 rooms, and a closet without a window. The last room - our bedroom - was through another door, and it was an en-suite. I loved it! I was only disappointed when I realised everyone had to go through our bedroom to use the shower! At least there is a second toilet; we don't all have to share that. The largest of the other rooms is for the three girls to share, and poor Eva will have to use the space as small as a closet!

I don't want to be funny, Your Majesty, but it's like everything here just isn't it. Either it's just too small or a bit colder, you know what I mean? Even your TV channels, Nederland 1 and 2 start at 6 pm and end at 11 pm! No TV at all during the day! I thought England was lagging behind America, but this surpasses everything.

Congratulations! Today was your big day! For you and your

Dutch sovereign; Queen Beatrix's coronation. You looked lovely and radiant, all dressed up in your royal attire. That long cream dress, with bell-bottom sleeves and an under layer puffed up, seemed very different and stylish. I think that cloak thrown over your shoulders is the traditional Queen's mantle. A long Bordeaux-coloured, velvety-looking cape with a matching oversized cream fur collar looked like something made in the Tudor times for Henry the VII of England. It looked very heavy! As a finishing touch, around your neck hung three rows of pearls and a pearl tiara but no crown. No Crown? You are the Queen! I imagined you would wear a big heavy crown as that of royalties in England. Still, you looked splendid! I only wish I could have understood your speech.

Sadly, the evening news was packed about squatters rioting right outside the Amsterdam New church where you took your oath. A pledge to your nation, your people, and your country's constitution. As I am new in this country, things have a way of going above my head. I sometimes haven't got a clue what is going on, but I later gathered that your folk were in unrest, and your family was oblivious to it all or tried to be.

Before arriving in your country, I read that when you were young, your family fled first to England and later to Canada after the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. After the war ended in 1945, you returned home and resumed life as best you could in a post-war country. It is said that your mother ruled in a very down-to-earth way. I guessed because she was spoiled by the relaxed way she was treated in Canada and not having that stiff upper lip of royalty as most do, she governed her country in the same manner and was greatly loved by her subjects, giving her the title of a

"people's person" kind of queen. A bit of an idealist, nothing like my Queen of England; less aloft, or even as the Prime Minister of England, dubbed 'the Iron lady.' I am so curious about what type of ruler you would become.

On this memorable day of your coronation, Amsterdam was being raided! With rackets louder than the bombs or fireworks. It's so sad that the rioters' high-pitched screams of "*No housing, no coronation!*" marred your day in such a terrible manner. It must have been complex, handling all your hurdles. First, the Dutch people did not accept your husband readily because of his history of being schooled in Nazi Germany and was a member of the Hitler Youth and the German army. It was unpleasant to read about how the anti-German riots also marred your wedding day. I guess it couldn't have been easy for you both. You were courageous enough to stand up for what you believe in and the love of your life, to go against the grain. I admire that.

I also found it a lovely gesture to maintain the celebration of your mother's birthday as a national holiday when this day is also your coronation. You could easily have changed it to your birthday, but this tells me a lot about who I think you are; a self-assured, strong, and empathic person.

Did you know? I never realised just how special a day this was to every Dutch person. The Queen's-day is a day that everyone is allowed to sell whatever they wish on the streets, just like a big flea market everywhere!

However, regarding our decision to live here, it feels sad that there is also an economic crisis here! I can't help thinking, "what have we done? Have we made the right move by leaving England? We have just moved to a similar or maybe worse condition!" I consoled myself; my partner and I both had a job and a home! Now, the thing is, can I balance everything between home and work? Can I be what is expected of me as a mom, wife,

and electrical designer? Are my questions about my future similar to yours? Are you equipped to rule your country? Are you going to be a mask-wearing queen or a happy-go-lucky queen? I think I will console myself with the reasoning that Holland has a new young queen, so the future is bright. I am filled with curiosity now that you belong on the throne.

Be strong dear Queen! Be comforted. There are other strong influential women out there ruling their countries. The '80s look promising; Indira Gandhi in India, Golda Meir in Israel, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in Iceland, and our Iron-lady Margaret Thatcher in Britain. Oh, and not forgetting, of course, Queen Elizabeth of England. You will fit right in and make a difference. Patronising, undermining men will not phase you!

Somehow, I do believe in you!

By the way, I was thinking: I need to take you down memory lane to give you a bird's eye view of who I was as a girl and a teenager. Embarking on what may have driven, influenced, failed, or aided me. Then maybe, you will understand the woman who is now one of your subjects and is crazy enough to write to you in her diary.

CHAPTER Three

“Even young people are known by their actions, whether their conduct is pure and upright. Ears to hear and eyes to see — the Lord made them both.”

Proverbs 20:11-12

Jamaica,

The Country

Here we are in the country dear Queen.

The mud squeezed through my tiny toes as I walked up the hill. It felt so awful. I couldn't hold back the tears anymore. They rolled down my four-year-old little cheeks as I carefully tried to avoid the path's most wet and most muddy areas. I paused and turned to see if the bus was still there where my mother had gotten on. She had only brought me here and got on the next bus back to go wherever she was going. The bus wasn't there. She had gone. Of course, I knew that because I had waved goodbye to her with my uncle, who collected me.

Somehow I hoped she would still be there.

My uncle had removed my pretty red patent shoes and my white ankle socks with lace around their edges. He explained he didn't want them to get dirty. I stepped forward, but to my horror, I couldn't take another step. After stepping onto what appeared to be hard ground, I was shocked to find that

my feet sank through, and the red mud crept up through my toes. All I could do was stare at my feet through my tears.

"Shall I lift you?" came my uncle's voice from above me.

"Yesss," I wailed in relief. He bent down and scooped me up onto his back after placing my bag over one shoulder. Leaving his free hand to support me. Then he patted my bottom as I settled myself.

I had no idea why I had to be here, in this awful place. The only explanation was that my mother had said she had to work far away and needed someone to look after me. So here I was on my way up some hill to meet my grandmother.

"It will be fun," my mother assured me earlier. There were granddad, great uncle, aunties, and uncles. As I thought of them, I began to feel better. Or was it because my uncle was jerking me up and down on his back, pretending to be a horse with me being the jockey. I began to laugh as he started running while shouting,

"Giddy up horsy, giddy up horsy!" I was screaming with laughter as I began saying it along with him.

"Giddy up, horsy!" Maybe it will be fun after all, I thought.

"Do you like it?" my uncle asked as he pretended to gallop faster.

"yees," he ran faster and faster, and I was laughing so loud I almost screamed out loud with pleasure. Then, suddenly I felt a strange pain in between my legs. It hurt as I jerked up and down on my uncle's back. It was near my uncle's hand that held me up as we went up the hill. I stopped laughing. I stopped jerking up and down and tightened my butt.

"Awe" I screamed,

"Something is hurting me," I shouted to my uncle. On reaching the top of the hill, he eased me to the ground. A dry and not muddy ground. I looked up at him with a frown. I wanted to ask him what that was, but many people ran toward me, and the moment was gone. I was swept off my feet,

and I stiffened at the touch of someone who picked me up and introduced themselves to me. I went from hand to hand as they all “aaahed” and “aawed” over me. I was squeezed, kissed, hugged, lifted, and placed down by just about everyone in the household. They all had something to say about me in our Jamaican dialect.

"Wat a way she luk like haar madda, spitting image!"

“No, she favor haar fada, man”

"Yu hungry?" a big-built lady asked me.

It all frightened and overwhelmed me, and I began to cry. I wanted my mother. I didn't want to be with these people. I must have fallen asleep because I woke up in a place I didn't recognize. It was a dark room and had a strange smell to it. I could see two small windows, and it was dark outside, not just dark, but pitch black. In the middle of the room was a big brown table. A kerosene lamp was on it, which lit up the room. Several doors led from this room. I was lying on a sofa, and as my eyes scouted the room, I noticed I wasn't alone. The big-built lady was next to me. I turned towards her, and I felt the sting of the tear about to start. She greeted me with a big smile.

"Ah, yu wake," she said in patwah, our Jamaican lingo, pulling back the blanket covering me, she picked me up.

"Nuh cry, yu really luk like yu madda, yu hungry now?" I managed a slight nod and sniffed the tear away. She turned to another person in the room that I hadn't noticed and told them to get me some food. This lady was my grandmother, and she calmed me.

After I had eaten, I met the rest of the family this time; they didn't all come at me at once. I was too young to remember them all. I noticed two of them were about my age. As they assembled, I realised everyone was not just in the room to greet me, but they gathered for 'evening worship.' A moment set aside each day to give thanks to God. At home with my mother,

we also had worship, where she read bible stories to me. In this worship, they sang lots of songs and read and read; all that reading made me very tired.

The daily activities of my stay in the country were not that

exciting. I didn't like being there. There were insects everywhere; in and outside the house, even though it was swept constantly. As a pass time at night, my young cousins and I would try to count the flying lights that were called "peeny wallie." This firefly or beetle emits a blinking light as it flies around. From the porch where we sat, it looked like lights were being turned on and off in the darkness. We would spend hours sitting there while trying to count them. This was always a pretty sight. However, I grew to dread the inside of the house at night. It was so eerie and scary, with dark shapes that gave me nightmares and I would awaken screaming in the middle of the night.

I did, however, love the mornings. I would be awakened most mornings before any movements in the house. I would wander onto the porch, sit on the floor and dangle my legs between two bannisters. I would watch the morning mist rise from the ground and around the house, slowly creeping its way up the mountainside towards me. It was several shades and shapes of grey, so peaceful and still. I wasn't afraid of the mornings. As I became more familiar with my surroundings in the country, I sometimes noticed grandma would be awake before me. I would know this because I would see the smoke from the kitchen chimney sneakily mingling amongst the morning mist as if it also wanted to play.

The kitchen was a hut built down the slope away from the house. After trusting the route, I would sometimes carefully make my way down to the cabin to watch my grandmother making breakfast. The lovely aroma of boiling chocolate would be the first scent to hit my nostrils as I slipped through the cracked door. I loved that thick chocolate tea.

Without even turning around to face me, grandma would say, "Maarnin." As though she had eyes in the back of her head.

"Morning, mams," I would reply to the back of her head. Mams was what I was told to call her. She would turn to face me and hand me a cup of that delicious chocolate tea that only Jamaicans can make. My dear Queen, let me try to explain to you in more detail. Firstly, the cocoa beans are roasted, then crushed, spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg, rolled into balls and left to dry. Next, the ball would be grated, boiled, and sweetened with condensed milk to make the delicious tea taste fantastic.

The cup warmed my hands from the morning chill while I sipped the tea in the kitchen corner. Slowly the room filled with other helpers preparing breakfast. They made a spread of 'ackee and saltfish,' callaloo - a sort of spinach - fried breadfruit, cassava bread, and fried dumplings. Another name is Johnnycake, as some may call it.

After morning worship, we would all enjoy the delicious breakfast, which was an actual start to the day. Despite the morning's bliss, I spent the rest of the day dodging various family members. For a four-year-old, summer in the country was lifelong, with the blurred moment when you would have a great-granduncle in a wheelchair, grabbing for you to come and sit on his lap. If he caught you, you knew the unspeakable things would happen to you. Or the plight of an aunt that would fondle you in bed when you are awakened by a nightmare, which is her sick way of comforting you when you had hoped to feel safe and secure in her cuddles.

I never accepted my uncle's invitation to play 'giddy-up horsy'

anymore. Some days, he would be close enough to catch me as I ran away from him. I would struggle under his hold, but he was far too quick and too strong for me to pull free. Laughing, he would run while carrying me out into the garden. He would then put me on his back, and off we would go towards the woods where he would sing "giddy-up horsy" all by himself. I never sang it with him. Instead, I would cry aloud as he galloped in the woods, singing his heart out at my pain. That was the first experience of the feeling of hate that I could remember. I hated him. The pain was not even as painful that day because I made myself not feel. All I knew was I wanted to go home to my mom, our house, and our garden, where there was no red mud and awful relatives. I hated being in the country!

The sounds, colours, smells and everything appeared different in the country. Even now, just the thought of the country makes my stomach turn. I never went back. My country experience clouded all patriotism in me. It created distrust, and from then on, I did not like having any close encounters. I became fearful of the dark. Certain smells repulsed me. That sordid vacation left me emotionless and detached from within. In my child's mind, the country became an unsafe place, never to be revisited.

You, dear Queen, may never understand these experiences, but this is what a child was up against when surrounded by people with no morals. Looking back now, for a strict Christian family with so many do's and don'ts, many things weren't allowed from a Christian point of view. The family had many lines and boundaries drawn up for this and that. Yet a helpless child of four was not safe. Being in the country was where it seemed like everyone

took liberty with the vulnerable and dared to act as if it was their right because what they did was done in silence!

Years later, when I became a mother, I realised how paranoid and protective I had become towards my children's well-being. No sleepovers by anyone, and no one slept over at ours. My children hated me for my strictness but little did they know about my hidden fears. I needed them to be safe.

When I had plucked up enough courage and found the nerve to tell my mother of this memory I had carried all those years and how it had traumatised me, to my horror, she had a similar experience living in that household. Could you believe that?! On hearing that, I was flabbergasted. I didn't speak to my mother for a while. That's how angry I was. It was, to me, unforgivable that she placed me in that unsafe environment when she knew what danger I could have been placed in. Her explanation was typical of most abused persons: she believed it was her fault that those things had happened to her and thought it happened to her alone. She had never dreamt of it ever happening to me, especially since I was only a baby. It broke my heart. I have forgiven my mother since but had difficulty understanding her negligence.

I understood my mother better over time. If you were the Cinderella of that family - the outsider - of course, you would imagine all things bad happen because of you. She was an only child and was devastated when her mother died at a young age, leaving her to be raised by aunts and family members. She was at the mercy of everyone. Her family pulled her from pillar to post, as they say. I don't know if she was allowed to grieve for loss or if she had experienced anger or abandonment. My mother doesn't like to talk about her past.

She was sent out to work when her real family could not keep her. Being of a workable age, she was taken in by this Christian family to help

out with the household chores and nanny for the babies. She lived with them throughout her teens until she met my father and very soon after, married him. He was an escape from her bondage. Did she love him? It didn't matter; she grew to love him. She did not feel as though she belonged in that family. They may have claimed to have loved her but abused her and treated her like a servant. She was less than the other children. I guess her adopted siblings loved her. Naturally, she was the big sister that cared for them. She wasn't given an education as they were. She was violated and deprived! Then they abused her child as well! What a sick circle. We were not welcomed or loved as their family members; she belonged to them as property at their disposal. They may not see or appreciate this, but it is a fact.

On meeting some of them years later, I noticed I carried the torch of hurt, pain, anger, and resentment of my four-year-old self and wanted nothing to do with them. I wondered if they recalled those ugly dark weeks and if they ever felt any shame. They are not considered my family and will never be. After all, they were not from my blood, and I feel no attachment towards them.

Thank goodness I was not damaged beyond repair or was I? You know, Your Majesty, recapping is giving me a feeling of a healing process, but should my mother ever read this, I apologise for resurrecting her pain.

Keeping an eye - 6 Reben lane

I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, At Andrews university hospital,

on the 10th of December 1953. For my six years on the Island, I lived on a street called Reben lane, a side street off Maxwell Avenue. I remember that address so clearly as if it was yesterday. Maybe because the first impressions of my young years were created during that period. Sad to say, that street doesn't exist anymore.

Being the eldest of five children, I have vivid memories of our home as a girl. It was a beautiful place, spacious and always filled with delicious aromas.

My father built our house because he was a builder and a carpenter. I was so proud of my dad, the eldest of 11 children. He dreamed of a better life for his family and did all he could to make it happen. He was very good with his hands and made it his profession. Our house had a veranda that ran the width of the house at the front. He made the bedrooms and the kitchen leading off from the house entrance inside the house. The space just as you entered was the living/dining area, the heart and soul of the home. The garden at the back of the house was quite a large plot of land, as I remembered it. We even had a chicken coop on it. I loved playing with the chickens, especially the rooster, given to me by an aunt. His feathers were mainly blueish black, and those of his head and the middle of his back were orange-red. I named him Red. I loved how he trotted around the yard as tall as he could stretch his neck. He was a proud and beautiful rooster.

Further to the back end of the yard was our toilet. Everyone had an outdoor toilet. It was a room made around a giant hole dug so deep for all

the waste to fall into. Above the pit, a sort of box was built so you could sit comfortably on it and was kept closed to keep the smell in and the flies out. When it reached a certain height, my dad would fill it with earth and cement and make another hole somewhere else in the back of the garden. At least, that's what I am told because I have only ever seen one toilet.

At the side of our house were trees, a pear tree, a pear being the Jamaican word for avocado, and a lime tree, this was the tallest tree, and it hung over our shower, making it a good cover for when you had to bathe. We had a lovely house on 6 Reben lane. A place where I felt safe and happy.

Sadly, my father often worked away from home, which meant my mother, baby brother, and I were home without him. (You, my dear Queen, might be recognizing a pattern here. Are all Jamaicans restless and always searching for a better life elsewhere?)

My mom was a nurse, so she needed help running the house. We had a lady called Queenie, who came in the morning and left at night. Later, my aunt Jean, came to live with us. She wasn't an aunt because my mother was an only child, and I had never met any of my father's siblings. But it was custom to call anyone close to the family an aunt or uncle out of respect. She was also a nurse and stayed with us because the hospital where she worked was too far from where her family lived. Our house was big enough for her to stay in. She worked shifts. Some days when she wasn't at work, she would be home relaxing or sleeping all day, unlike my mother, who left in the mornings and returned every evening at the same time.

One day, Queenie was out running errands, most likely having to go to the market, and she had put me to bed for my nap while my aunty was supposed to watch me. I couldn't sleep, I just lay there catnapping. Then in the quietness, I heard muffled giggles in the room next to mine. It was a definite, muffled and contained giggle. I could hear that clearly because the space was only partitioned off by a curtain. My aunt occupied the other side

of the curtain. She was obviously in there with someone. Here we have it; children were exposed to so many circumstances that they should not have been due to situations not thought through or culture. So, hearing my aunt next door, curiosity got the better of me. I snuck out of bed and tip-toed to the curtain as softly as possible. Just as if she could see me, my aunt asked if I was awake. Quickly and quietly as before, I tiptoed right back to bed and pretended to be disturbed out of my slumber by her call. I replied, "What, aunty?" She cleared her throat with a soft cough and told me to go back to sleep. I could hear the laughter in her voice. I didn't respond, hoping she would think I had fallen back asleep.

I waited. The unfamiliar sounds of ruffling sheets activated my curiosity again. I glanced around my room. Noticing I could use my bed next to my chest of drawers, and the chest of drawers was next to the curtained partition, I could climb and look over the curtains. So, this time I stood up on the edge of the bed's metal frame, holding onto the bed head so as not to stand on the mattress, which would make a squeak on the springs below. I waited for my next move while listening to see if my aunt heard me. She hadn't; she was giggling again. I slowly placed my skinny leg on the top of the chest of drawers. Now I felt excited, nervous, and scared out of my mind. I held onto the top of the chest as I pulled my other skinny leg up. I waited and squatted on the chest of drawers. If my aunt came into the room now, I would be in a lot of trouble because I had no excuse for being up there.

I slowly stood up and peered ever so carefully over the curtain top. What I saw made me almost lose my balance and come crashing to the floor. I managed to quickly contain myself and return to my bed but not as silently as I had hoped and not without being able to stop the springs from squeaking out loud. I heard hurried footsteps heading to my room. Aunty appeared from behind the now parted curtains. "Are you okay?" she said, glancing

curiously around the room. I turned to face her from under my sheet while rubbing my eyes as if I had just woken up. And replied, "Yes, aunty."

"What was that noise?" she continued

"Noise, aunty?" I played ignorance

"Okay, never mind," she said, "Queenie should be back soon. Just stay in bed until she arrives." She went back to her side of the room.

I lay there, relieved that my aunt hadn't caught me or suspected what I was up to. I was grateful. The shock of seeing my aunt in the so-called privacy of her side of the partition left me thoughtful. I wondered who was meant to be keeping an eye on who. One thing I can say is that she was not alone.

I couldn't look squarely into my aunt's eyes for the coming weeks after that, and if she wanted to hug or kiss me, I would run away as fast as possible. I didn't want those lips near me.

The toilet

Dear Queen, are you ready for another situation that springs to

mind from my childhood? This memory is from when my mother's aunt visited us with her grandson. He was a sneaky, skinny-looking little boy she called Winston. One might say he wasn't mean or anything, just inquisitive, and very nosy. He was maybe the same age as I was or even a little younger.

He lived with his grandmother in the 'country.' Yes, the beloved country that triggered fear in me. However, the 'country' is not called that

because it's a place. It is a term used by the locals of Jamaica for a remote location in the mountains deep, amongst trees, bushes, and gullies.

Winston stayed with his grandmother because his mother worked in a city far away from home, and she could not travel back every night to be with him. You know the story. Your majesty, I often wonder if these mean-well parents know the trauma imposed on the children left in the care of relatives. Indeed, not everything is for a better life, but what happens to children is rarely discussed or considered. Working away from the family was commonplace in our society. I couldn't help but wonder what poor Winston's life was like in the 'country.'

Winston's grandmother lived in a tiny little house, almost not entirely a hut. It would typically be made of wood, not bricks, and had a tinned roof made of zinc. The outside was likely painted bright green and yellow, or some colour that would make the house visible from afar, as it was surrounded by woodlands.

Winston had never seen a house as big as ours before. The moment he entered through the door, he was all jittery, and his face was covered in excitement. Wide-eyed, Winston would look around as if visually taking in everything. As he walked around, he would touch everything, look in every corner, and open every drawer he could before his grandmother reproached him to stop. Winston stopped for a short while but would continue his prying when he thought no one was looking. He was always up to some mischief. I knew from the start that he would get into a lot of trouble.

Every Thursday, my mom and Queenie would clean the house from top to bottom in our house. There weren't any expensive items in our house, like an old grandfather clock or a Chesterfield sofa, but what we had was polished and shiny. I can almost still smell the 'pledge', a furniture polish that she used. My mom would hum some tune, dressed in her simple printed house dress as she briskly moved from dusting to polishing and mopping