

# Life Lessons Learned

## growing up in Saint Ann, Jamaica, age 6 to 13.

The story of **Sherry-Ann Collins** as told by:

Kenisha (her)

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Sherry (her / us)

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Jamaican Freedom Fighter

Fighting for the creative freedom of the Jamaican people™.

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# New Year.

Christmas time in Jamaica, when we were kids, started on Christmas Eve. My brothers and I, along with our mum, would leave our home in the early morning and catch the bus to the local town, Kellits, to enjoy a special day out called Grand Market Day.

Our dad would stay behind to bake our deserts, including rum cake, and sweet potato cake, and make our sorrel and ginger drink with some super strong overproof rum.

Yes, we got to try some of that. Delish.

Our day at the market was always a special one as this was when our mum would give me and my brothers our pocket money for the year. We would then use it to buy our own Christmas gifts.

I was about six or seven when I bought my first toy at the market. A pale blue and yellow plastic trumpet. It didn't last long. Not sure what happened to that.

I loved it, Grand Market Day. We would hop around the market with glee, looking over toys we wished we could buy but being happy with our selection because we had bought them ourselves. Spending our own little money like grown-ups.

We had to negotiate the price too with the stall sellers, counting our change, hoping we had enough left over to buy some sweets for our return journey. Feeling happy as the sellers would always give us at least 10 cents back, enough for an Icy Mint.

We learned from a very young age not to be wasteful or ask our parents for things that we could not afford. And to be happy with what we had, up to a point. We are still dreamers.

Our parents gave us special treats of course and so did our relatives when they came back home from foreign to visit us up country.

One year I was given my first dolly by my American cousins. I named her Alexis. I still have her.

I was thinking about these times over the holidays as I celebrated my 41st birthday.

What innocent times.

This year I'm going to try to live by these memories.

# Sundays was for church.

My mum grew up in the church.

Living up country, she decided enough was enough. We went to church, but we were not part of a church and in Jamaica that's quite hard to do as there is practically a church on every corner.

The joy of not being part of a particular church meant that on Sundays we sometimes decided which one of the many churches on our doorstep we would visit on the day – the Methodist, the Pentecostal, or the Catholic church – to socialise with our friends.

Dressed in our Sunday best we would head out carrying the family Bible.

Easter and Christmas time, we would always head to the Catholic church – when our dad would also make one of his rare visits, sitting at the back and making a speedy exit homewards after the service ended.

I loved visiting the Catholic church as the service was pretty short, which left us plenty of time for play after collecting our sweeties from the priest, who would always rub our cheeks with pillowy-soft hands after we said, "Thank You."

One year, my brother and I decided to be different from our parents and got baptised at the new Seventh-day Adventist Church in our district, along with our friends. It meant we went to church on Saturdays, for a while.

When we got to America, we went with our aunt to her church on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays. One day after church I was told I

was feisty as I kept my eyes open during prayers and I questioned things a lot. Quite a lot, come to think of it.

I'm not religious now, but there was something comforting about seeing the community, our friends, on what was supposed to be our resting day.

In Jamaica, Sundays was for church, but after we had our lunch – rice and peas with stewed chicken, side salad of shredded lettuce and carrots, washed down with Kool Aid over ice – we would often head back to the Catholic church to play cricket as they had a make-shift pitch.

I was allowed to play, a girl in the boys' game, as I was good at catching the ball from very far away and throwing it very fast at the wicket, knocking the rival players out. I was also good at running very fast with the cricket bat.

We would stop our game once the ice-cream man came by on his bike selling his treats, to help us cool off. I would choose my favourite ice cream cake and eat it slowly, being careful not to waste a bite.

Afterwards we would walk home idly planning our next Sunday.

What innocent times.

# Our days at the river.

Our days at the river during the yearly water shortage in August, before we set off for our annual family holiday to visit our cousins in May Pen, Jamaica, were some of the bestest times.

My brothers and I would run down the hill from our house to the hot country road and meet up with friends, heading to the local river with the cooling waterfall.

My best friend Andrea's brother used to drive the cart to the river, and we would hitch a ride taking our empty water bottles.

There were a few of us, including Omar, my other best friend Solomie, and her brother Ricky. We would gather excitedly around the cart, made from bits of wood, metal, and old pieces of tyre.

The best spot on the cart was at the front. We would take turns sitting there, sometimes with our arms outstretched like we were flying.

No horn, we would tear around corners without a care in the world.

Up country, there were hardly any vehicles on the road.

After the Doreen bus had passed through in the early mornings before the sun was out, there was the weekly bread van and maybe a few taxis going into town, so we felt safe.

Once we got to the river, we lost all sense of time and played until we couldn't play no more, catching little fishes in our hands, teasing crabs from under rocks, and jumping off mini waterfalls with our friends.

We then filled our water bottle from way up top, where the river ran from the sweetest spot, making sure to sip some of the cold, refreshing mineral liquid first.

No water in the world tastes like it.

Usually, we would make two trips to the river in the summer.

On the way back one time, it was my turn to sit at the front of the cart.

Going down the hill from Mum's friend Miss Tat's house, I sat excitedly enjoying the ride of my life when a thought popped into my head, "Jump from the cart now!".

Rolling MacGyver style onto the side of the road, scratching up my knees and the front of my legs, I heard both shocked laughter and screams of "Kenisha!!".

There were also a few "a wha' di bumbo-claaaat" shouted in my direction too.

I was fine and maintained that I thought the bread van was going to come around the corner at us, but I think it was because I had gotten older and started feeling fear.

I never went back on the cart after that, and I stopped climbing trees too.

Yes, I climbed; [the tangerine tree](#) was my favourite.

My friends picked me up from the sidewalk, and I hopped home.

The next day, we were back at the river.

What innocent times. 😊

# After the hurricane came.

In September of 1988, us kids were excited and nervous about Hurricane Gilbert coming and listening intently to the news on the radio, which gave us the low-down on what time the wind and rain would be hitting our island, Jamaica.

Our dad, who had lived through hurricanes before, went around the place boarding up our windows and doors and moving our chickens under the house, locking them in. He had already stripped his field of all the produce, saving his favourite yams to replant later.

At home, my mum and I picked all the vegetables from the kitchen garden to save them from being washed away, as according to her it was going to rain hard, and the wind was going to blow more than we had ever experienced before.

And then it came.

More rain than we could have imagined beat down on our little house on the hill. The wind blew and rattled our windows. We hid under our beds in case the ceiling fell in on us.

On first pass through, the might of the hurricane missed us, but we were told not to rest easy as the destruction would come when it turned to head back out to sea. They weren't wrong. In the middle of the night, of our non-sleep, the front door threatened to come off its hinges. My dad, brother, and my mum had to push and hold back the wind from blasting its way in, knowing that if it came through there would be nothing of our house left – they fought hard.

The wind didn't come in, but the outside shower was blown over. Our trees were also still standing but we had forgotten to take the TV antenna out of the pimento tree, and it was now twisted up, which meant no TV. Not that we actually cared much for the TV as we never watched it except for a few cartoons and shows, when it came on across the island at 4pm. But the thought of having to waste money to replace the antenna made us annoyed we had forgotten to take it down.

We checked in on our neighbours and those at the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the road, had fared the worst. It also became clear where all the rainwater had gone, as the flood water was rising further upwards covering some of the houses.

The next district along our river was flooded out as well.

After the hurricane, basic food staples like rice, flour, cornmeal, sugar, and salt fish became scarce, as shop owners only sold them to their favourite customers. But we were lucky, because my best friend Solomie's grandparents, and mum's friends, Mr Ferdie and Miss Sarah, had a shop next door. Family from abroad also sent us money and care packages with tinned food and clothes, which my mum shared with the community.

We heard the news that our school roof had taken a battering and it was going to take some time to get it repaired. So, while things got sorted, all the kids and adults gathered most days and evenings at the new attraction in our district, the swollen flood water near the sugar cane fields, planning what was to happen next and getting used to our new normal.

While the adults reasoned and played dominoes, us kids started a new game, collecting up all the empty beer and soda bottles left about and taking them back to the shops to collect our 10 cents per bottle's worth of sweeties, as they paid us to help them recycle.

We were having so much fun and learning new things.

But I cannot tell the story of the hurricane without telling you what happened after. After we all got used to the flood water which seemed to be taking ages to go down.

My mum or dad heard the news first and on seeing the adults weeping we started to cry too, not knowing why. Then the story was told. Four of our school friends, from the next district, who we played with at the river, had made a bamboo raft and taken it out onto the flood water. One made it back.

They brought divers in to find the three bodies and then a sadness descended on our community we had never experienced before. At funeral after funeral weeks later, we wept for them all and at school we couldn't concentrate through the tears.

After the hurricane came, it was the saddest of times. But we had to crack on with our lives and live.

In memory of our friends lost.

\*Hurricane Gilbert, September 1988. I was 9 years old.

# Summers in May

## Pen.

My brothers, my mum and I always looked forward to our annual summer holiday to visit our cousins in May Pen, Jamaica. Dad would stay behind as he had things to do.

We would leave out really early in the morning to catch the Doreen bus heading to the market town nearby. Then we'd change to a minibus heading to another town before taking a taxi for the final bit of our journey to Aunty's, the family matriarch.

My mum would stay for the first week and then leave us to it.

We loved visiting our cousins as there were lots of us together. Most days, after our chores and in the evenings, we would take it easy in the front garden, the adults and us kids, and play dominoes and Ludi, talking and laughing loudly at each other, while sipping on our favourite D&G sodas and sharing home-grown ginap, cherries, mangoes, and roasted cashew nuts.

At our many get togethers I learnt a new skill – having multiple interchanging conversations with different people without skipping a beat.

I would be chatting to one cousin on my right about one thing, the other to my left on another, plus playing a game while listening in on a conversation in front of me and joining in when I felt like it – but fast.

Telling each other our problems, our troubles, we would talk them through, giving our thoughts and advice on what should be done.

We would also take the piss out of each other, but if we showed that we were upset about it, we would be ribbed further. So, from a young

age I learned to not let insults bother me and in fact I became quite good at quick returns.

Sometimes just a head turn with a look would be enough.

And when a friendly sting was particularly accurate, leaving an opponent stumped, we would all congratulate the person who delivered it, including the one who received it.

We talked over each other, around each other and finished each other's sentences, sometimes in unison, while keeping up with our games all at the same time. And when strangers passed by, we would naturally switch our conversations to our family coded-speak so they couldn't understand us.

Sometimes our chatter would turn into arguments as our older cousins would have a few disagreements, but at the end of the day we would always make peace.

I loved playing with my cousins and being in May Pen, as we also had bag juice, CheezTrix, jerk chicken and Juici Patties on tap. Aunts, uncles, and family friends, living near, would stop by throughout the day to bring us treats, join in our play or to chat with Aunty on her way to or coming back from church, in one of her pale pink, soft blue, creamy peach, bright white, pea green, ice-lolly yellow, matching-from-head-to-toe, outfits.

One of the highlights during our holidays was The Denbigh Agricultural and Industrial Show, held nearby. My cousins would dress in the latest fashion, and we would head out to spend our money on rides, games, toys, and sugary snacks, like strawberry syrup over shaved ice, sold by young men on their colourful remodelled bicycles, playing the latest tunes, with parasols shading us from the hot sun.

One year, when money was tight, my dad gave me and my brother one hundred dollars for our pocket money, the equivalent of our month's grocery shopping, but we decided that we would not waste our money and saved it to return later. Instead, we got dressed up and

helped one of our cousins on her kids' clothes stall at the show, selling her wares and making her some money.

A few days before our primary school restarted, we headed back up country and upon our return changed out of our travelling clothes and put our yard clothes on. Freeing our feet from shoes, we then ran like crazy to our friends' houses to see if anyone was up for a woodland adventure or a trip to the river.

It was good to be home.

# My first protest.

I was eleven years old and in grade 6 in Jamaica, when I made my first protest.

As there was no staff room at our school, the teachers sat in our class and ate their lunch at our desks. But every lunch time when we came back from playtime, we would be faced with their dirty dishes and empty soda bottles, which we had to clean away.

We were annoyed as they always told us to clean up after ourselves.

This went on for a while and we thought there was only one way to deal with the problem.

One of our classmates with the best handwriting wrote a simple note with the wording we all agreed on, but we knew that unless someone owned the note then we could all get punished.

I decided to sign the note: Sherry-Ann Collins.

We left the note stuck to the blackboard and went out to play, it was lunchtime.

While having one of the sweetest games of stucky – the one, where there are two teams and a player from one team would run after the other to try and catch them to stick them to the spot, until their teammate came by to release them – I got a tap on my shoulder from my classmate who told me the teachers were calling me inside.

I said, "Sure", totally forgetting all about the note.

I got to the classroom and saw the note in the teacher's hand and then remembered. "Oh, the note."

The teachers asked me why I had left the note and I told them. They said I was rude leaving them a note and I would have to go and see the

principal about it and receive three strokes of the strap across the palm of my hand on the stage, in front of the whole school, after lunch was finished.

Standing on the stage, waiting for lunch to be over, I was annoyed to be missing playtime. News spread about what was about to happen to me. I'd never had the strap before, so didn't know how I would react. All I knew was pupils would sometimes cry when they got the strap as it was damn painful, especially since it was made of discarded car tyre.

But I decided that day, no matter how painful, I would not shed a tear. And powered by the injustice of what was to take place, I set my face ready.

First stroke, and then second stroke.

After the third stroke, I rubbed my hand as it was stinging, but still no tears, and then the principal leaned into me and says quickly: "You are right."

Shocked, I looked at her and a thought popped into my head: "A wha' di bumbo-raaaas-claaaat you just beat me on the stage in front of the whole school for, if you agreed with me?"

Seeing through her I came to a new realisation, even though they all knew the right thing to do, they chose to follow the crowd, including the leaders at the top.

Silently, I left the stage and went back to class.

The teachers had a new reputation for me, "Sherry-Ann Collins is feisty." / too bold.

But as I no longer cared what the adults thought of me, I wore my reputation with pride, quietly. It inspired me to always ask questions of those in charge, the leaders, because if they couldn't do the right thing, I might as well lead myself, living by my life lessons. Treating people as I would like to be treated making my own mistakes and owning them.

The next day, there were no more dirty dishes and soda bottles left on our desks, or forever more while I attended primary school in Saint Ann, Jamaica.

My first protest had achieved results.

I was happy with that.

# Brownny and Pluto.

From a young age, up country, about 11 or 12, I had to learn how to navigate grown-ass men giving me and my best friends, Solomie, and Andrea, the salacious eye when we would head out to play after having our Sunday lunch.

My brothers and their friends would sometimes be ahead of us playing and joking and we would be chatting and walking idly behind.

But yeah, grown-ass men would sometimes come out and sit on their doorsteps, lean against shops, or watch us go by and catcall us.

We had to learn very fast how to respond without offending, whilst not letting it bother us too much as we all knew they couldn't touch us, otherwise the community would give out its own justice. We were therefore free to go on our way and walk about where we wanted – we were kids after all.

When we heard the news about my school friend Sarah (not her real name) being pregnant at 12, we were shocked as we didn't know how that could have happened. Sarah and I met at Basic School (pre-school) when we were both five, six years old. She didn't live near me, but we played together.

Her family were new people in our district and part of a religion where the church leader was "married" to most of the women. The group also lived together and wore white robes with different coloured sashes around their waist, to symbolise their positions in the church. Sarah's mum was one of the church Sisters.

I think words were said because Sarah was swiftly taken by the group from the district. And the community showed the church leader how they felt about what happened to her, by never speaking to them or shopping at their grocery shop in their yard, ever again, putting them out of business.

Growing up neither our school nor our parents gave us much sex education.

We knew mums had babies, but other than that, nothing. Zip. Nada. Zilch. Although we were quite young, so maybe when we were older they would have told us.

But I found out two were needed to make babies when we got Pluto, the smiliest dog. He would always hop and skip down the hill to greet us after school.

We loved playing with Pluto.

One year my brother brought back a female dog from one of our holidays in May Pen and we named her Brownny.

While going on one of my woodland adventures, I came upon Brownny and Pluto and I ran home crying to my mum and dad, "The dogs are stuck together. Come help quick to separate them." Then they told me, but in metaphors. A few months later, Brownny died, along with her puppies. I was so sad and to this day wished I could have done something to save her as I had found her trying to give birth at the side of the kitchen.

But we were lucky, as we still had Pluto who came with us to the woods and all over.

My mum kept telling us that Pluto was supposed to be our guard dog, so we really should keep him at home. But Pluto wouldn't hurt a fly and always bounced and wagged his tail in happiness when a visitor came by.

We loved Brownny and Pluto.

# Same person.

# Different accents.

Growing up in Jamaica hearing stories about America and England, where most of our family had emigrated to in search of what they hoped would be a better life, from the way they described these places when they visited us, I really did believe at one point that the roads abroad were paved with actual gold.

But when I got to “foreign”, at age 13, I realised that the streets were not paved with gold at all and the sidewalks were full of dog poo.

Most of the adults were not happy looking and even though they had so much, they moaned and complained about everything. In America they hardly walked anywhere, and parents were blamed for adults’ failings. In England, most people seemed to be taking cocaine and binge drinking, and it was the government’s fault, the school’s fault, the doctor’s fault, work’s fault.

I kept thinking what happened to taking responsibility for one’s own actions as we had to do up country, because there was no one coming.

I longed for home. The sun. The heat. The simple life.

But as loads had been spent in the hope of me doing well in life with my new opportunity, there was no way I could return home just yet.

In America, speaking patois attracted a crowd and I was constantly asked to “Say something Jamaican!” or got asked about weed, and after being questioned about it for the hundredth time I got annoyed one day and told my tormentors what I really thought: “Ganja is

nature's medicine you, eejit and because you don't know how to use it properly, that's why it's turning you into fools!"

They never asked again after that and I decided that even if I couldn't blend in with my clothes, as I was not into the latest designer gear (dress the same as everyone else because it's in fashion? Really?), I would adapt my accent, so that foreigners didn't constantly ask me annoying questions every time they heard me speak patois.

After watching Beverly Hills, 90210 and The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, to perfect my American accent, I started saying "like" a lot and once I got to England and watched EastEnders, I started saying "hun" a lot now too.

At home with the family, I would speak patois. But when I finally did return to Jamaica at age eighteen my cousins set me straight at a dominoes game about how much of a foreigner I had become. When I started speaking patois with them, they laughed, "No one speak like that anymore \*Kenisha." Because as it turned out my patois was out of date, and I would have to learn my original language all over again.

The irony wasn't lost on me. I was an outsider at home and abroad. But instead of crying about it, I decided to become whoever I wanted to be and was soon adapting lots more accents and dialects. Just like our ancestors had done when they travelled like nomads across the world.

Same person. Different accents.

It's only when you live on an island and have never really experienced a new culture for a time, that you end up with one accent.

Speaking to other immigrants and the well-travelled, it turns out we are all changing our accents and dialects with ease.

It is our superpower.

\*Kenisha was the name I was called by my parents and friends living in the same district and also by relatives. Sherry-Ann Collins was the name used for official purposes. School friends called me Sherry-Ann, but I dropped the Ann when I got to America.

Having two names meant when I was out and about, I could tell who to trust by the name they called me.

# We were lucky.

Up country as kids in Jamaica, whenever we were ill with a fever, there was no Calpol.

Instead, my dad, the family herbalist, would swing into action and go about the yard picking various herbs - fever grass, cerasee and such - to make bush tea. Then he would add one final ingredient from his field. Lots and lots of ganja, which he grew but never smoked.

Sometimes we would come home from school to find a whole load of ganja drying on the kitchen's zinc roof, which the Rastafarians living in the community would often stop by to exchange for yams or other produce.

With one of us ill in bed, sweating like crazy, dad would boil the herbs and make a bath for us to soak in. We were also given the concoction as a tea to drink.

Next day we were up and about bright as can be, hungry for soup, ready to go play.

We were lucky, and I have always thought one day I will ask my dad for his secret recipe, because our life medicine was handed down from generation to generation and it worked.

Once a year, from an early age, my dad would also take me to the local mother woman, with the dreadlocked hair and flowery garden, for her to observe me.

She would give me ganja tea to drink while I sat in a warm herbal bath, in the sun, under the red bougainvillea, staring into space. She would sit nearby and tell my dad my futures.

I'm not going to tell you what she said, but she was right.

# Selling Tangerines.



My Jamaican passport photo taken when I was 10 years old in 1989.

I was six years old, and in my last year at Basic School in Jamaica, when I had my first enterprising idea.

It was simple really. I asked my classmates if they would like to come in with me and put 10 cents each towards a large packet of Excelsior Water Crackers, which we would buy after school and share between us.

Most agreed and we bought the packet, shared it, and promised to do the same again the next day. But when I got to school, everyone else wanted to be leader of the cracker buying and had grouped off into

little cliques. This meant that we couldn't buy crackers as we were all short, which left many disappointed and some went crying to the teacher, who promptly banned it.

If we couldn't work together, then no one would be getting any crackers.

Annoyed, I vowed never to share my ideas with large groups of people ever again. Unless of course it becomes part of one's creative.

My next venture was with my best friend Solomie, selling limes, picked from the tree in her yard. We had seen a cartoon one day where one of the characters was selling lemonade at the front of their house. But since we didn't have any lemons, we decided to brave the prickly lime tree and sell them instead.

We set off and picked, and picked, and picked, and picked, and picked, getting scratched to pieces, in the hot sun. But we didn't care as we were about to make some money to buy sweets, D&G sodas, CheeseTrix, and bun and cheese.

Not long after setting up our stall, the bread van came by and the driver asked us how much for our limes and we told him. Turns out limes was scarce, as not everyone had a tree, so he said he would buy all of our stock. He gave us 10 dollars, which was a lot of money at the time. It meant we could buy snacks for a whole week.

After the van drove off, we ran excitedly back up the yard with our money ready to spend it, but Mr Ferdie, Solomie's grandad, called us over to the veranda. He was sitting down on the Rattan chair where he spent most of his time, as he couldn't use his legs.

But even without being able to use the lower part of his body, Mr Ferdie was very resourceful. He had built the family home with the help of a cousin, Mr Sendry, who lived in a small room, on their land, and he was also one of mum's best friends in the district.

Mr Ferdie asked us about our sale, and we told him about our 10 dollars. He then asked us for the money and said it was his money as we didn't ask him permission to sell his fruit. But we could have some sweeties from his shop for our troubles.

Sucking our Busta sweeties hard against our teeth, Solomie and I sat glumly in the yard, nursing our scratches, vexed.

When I got home, I told my mum expecting her to go down to Mr Ferdie's yard to demand my share of the 10 dollars, but she agreed with Solomie's grandad. She said next time you want to sell fruit, sell them from your own yard.

At primary school one year during assembly, we were told about a school trip to the Christmas pantomime in town for the senior students. If they wanted to attend, then they would have to bring in their money weekly to pay their share of the ticket and fare.

My older brother was a senior and knowing that our parents, although life rich, were cash poor, we didn't want to bother them with the burden of paying for the ticket. So, my brother and I hatched a plan to sell tangerines from our fruit tree to raise the money.

Also, it would be fun and a lovely little challenge we thought.

Our tangerine tree was a social one as once the fruit was ripe, we would invite our friends to join us in it and we would sit on the branches and eat tangerines, sometimes all day. Chatting and laughing with each other, we would also take turns on the swing my dad had strung up on one of its branches below.

Everyone agreed our tangerines were the sweetest.

The plan was to sell our stock in the mornings on the way to school, filling a scandal bag, so-called because it was see-through and so scandalised your groceries. But for our purposes it meant our potential customers could see our fruit in the bags, and ask us about them, so we didn't mind.

First morning we set out and we sold off all our tangerines before we had made it half-way to school. We were excited and thought this is going to be easy and we would raise our money in no time.

The next day though, kids from the other district started selling oranges and tangerines too. This meant that we couldn't sell all our tangerines before we got to school and had to sell our remaining fruit to the stall holders at the gate at a reduced price.

Annoyed, my brother and I reasoned on what to do and then we had an idea. We would ask our friends, who ate our tangerines, to talk around the school about what they thought of our fruit. And so Solomie, Omar, and Andrea, our fellow tangerine eaters, told everyone about how sweet our tangerines were.

After that we had no problem selling our tangerines. And in fact, those who were selling their fruit bought from us to see what the fuss was all about. They agreed our fruit was sweeter.

Not long after, we made all the money for my brother's school trip.

Our parents gave him his pocket money and we sent him off with a promise to try and remember everything about the play.

Upon his return us kids sat excitedly and listened as he told us all the jokes from the show, which had us laughing so much that we almost fell out of the tangerine tree.

Turns out, I have always been a creative entrepreneur.

# Life Lessons Learned.

I've shared my childhood stories, on my life lessons learned, from age six to thirteen, growing up in Saint Ann, Jamaica.

The process was cathartic and after coming out the other end, I can say I feel well rested.

I have cried more tears than I have cried in years, but I also smiled and laughed as well.

I cried for my friends who died after the hurricane came. I cried for my friend Sarah, and I cried for Brownny and her puppies, and Pluto who I missed so much after leaving.

I thought about the privilege of being able to enjoy our days at the river and summers in May Pen with my cousins. Time spent sitting in the tangerine tree with my brothers and having the bestest friends Solomie, Andrea, and Omar. And for mum's and Mr Ferdie's wise words.

I felt happy to have had so many woodland adventures with my trusty slingshot, without being bitten by snakes, falling into sinkholes, or getting lost. Except for that one time when I found myself standing on cold concrete raised off the ground. Then I saw more and more around me, overgrown with plants, but definitely rectangle-shaped. I looked down and sure enough, I was in a graveyard. Like the slow-mo scene from a Matrix movie, I ran like the wind out of there, in my favourite 1960s-inspired sleeveless lime green dress.

Graveyards, no. Mother woman, yes.

We were lucky that our dad knew his bush medicine and I'm thankful for the lots and lots of ganja used to save our lives on many occasions. And you would be right, it is running through my veins, my hair, my bones.

I smiled when I remembered our little blue house on the hill. Long since gone, but one day it will be rebuilt as an eco-house, with a few tree houses in the woodland canopy looking out at the farmers' fields. And a zinc-roofed shop at the front selling tangerines, CheeseTrix, bun and cheese, D&G sodas, and lots and lots of my dad's life medicine. Plus, home-cooked meals made with vegetables from mum's kitchen garden and bread from a van, we will name Grandad's in memory of grandad who moved to England during the Windrush era and was a baker. All taking in our 360-degree view of tropical paradise. I might even check out the caves at the back, now I know that's a thing. Invites all around obv's.

I cried for my brief time in America and the sadness I felt while living there. After spending so much of my life outside, it was a shock to the system when I got to foreign, spending so much time indoors. Visiting a supermarket, I went off food for months until I discovered smoky barbecue sauce, coleslaw, potato salad, Doritos, pancakes, maple syrup, Pop-Tarts, waffles, three-flavored ice-cream tubs, Oreos, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, coconut-iced donuts, and grape soda.

I laughed at all the jokes and games I remembered us kids played in each other's yard, on the hot country road, and at Basic and Primary school. The many Sunday cricket matches with my brothers and friends at the Catholic church. And idle walks home from the cooling waterfall at the local river.

I also remembered our little menagerie of chickens, cats, pigs, lizards, bats, mosquitoes, ants' nests, creepy crawlies, and dad's trusted donkey who used to walk home from the field miles away on his own with the produce for the evening's dinner.

I smiled too at the memory of my pet chicken Helen and Piggy-wiggy-woo, whose ears I used to spend time rubbing under the avocado tree, and how I learned the hardest lesson of all – never befriend the family's food.

I even had a giggle when I thought about our family savings account the battered old brown suitcase, on top of the wardrobe in my parents' bedroom. Whenever we had to go to the shop to buy staples like flour, rice, or other bits, mum would say "Take some money from the top!" and off we would trot.

And I felt nothing but love again for the community cart, still there I'm sure with new bits of wood and tyre added every year. I took a look up country the other day and I glimpsed it.

I would highly recommend the process to everyone. Thinking about life lessons learned that made you and writing about them.

The words will fall out and will not read well at first, but if you keep going over and over it each day you will get to the point where you are no longer burdened by the past.

The process has been so great for me that I'm not suffering as much anxiety as I used to. I dare not say forever, although it does seem like it is totally gone.

Thank you for coming on the journey.

**The next chapter.**

**My early years in  
adland.**

# Sure, why not.

The first time I watched porn was with my mum and my aunt in Birmingham. I was a teenager. My aunt found her husband's porn on videotape and decided to make an event of it, and brought the popcorn in. We then watched and laughed our heads off as my mum and aunt did funny commentaries throughout the scenes. Since then, I have always seen porn as comedy.

The next time that I can remember watching porn again was for work purposes, in the role of production co-ordinator on a short film when I was 26. I'd been in the industry for a few months or so, having recently left book publishing.

I did some running on set (where I learned how to make proper British tea and coffee), when I bumped into a friend, and he asked if I would like to help out on the short musical film he was directing. The producer was the legendary Rob Small.

One of the scenes was set in a sex dungeon in a nightclub with the full cast wearing black leather and PVC bondage gear. But since I hadn't been to one before I decided to watch some porn set in sex dungeons, to get an idea of what everyone was talking about.

And I laughed my head off.

We arrived for the shoot. It was late at night, at a club in South London. The scene was set with the actors in and then, action! Camera moving in and out of shiny bodies dancing and swaying to music.

I was standing at the back of the scene and looking at the actors, but they looked kind of off to me. So, when they paused, I looked at the 1st AD and said to him, "They are not doing it right."

Then I added, "I've been researching, and they are not doing it right at all. It should be more like this."

He stood open-mouthed as I stepped into the middle of the set and started showing the actors how they should move to get the scene looking right. "Let me show you."

The scene got reset, shot, and all went well I thought.

Several months later I got a call from Rob asking me to come into Factory Films, on Wardour Street, for a meeting with a director to chat about her first music video.

Carrying my notebook, I wrote down practical things. "Ah, you want the singer to be spinning on a table. Cool."

After the meeting ended, I looked at Rob and said, "So, where do you want me to start?"

He looked at me and laughed, "We want you to produce the job, Sherry."

I'm like, "What! Sure, why not."

# I can't do this.

# I can do this.

I said, "Sure, why not."

And afterwards, the first shoot I produced went something like this.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

What do I need?

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Let's make a list. Do the budget. Crew, cast, food, camera, lights, sound, location, transport. Do I need a grip? What does a grip do?

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Camera and lighting company: "Hello, I am Sherry Collins. I'm a new producer. I have the equipment lists. I have a small budget. I can only

afford to pay you for transport and consumables, but I promise to come back to you again and again.”

Deal agreed. I did it!

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Call FAB for walkie talkies. No deal there.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Gaffer, sparks. No deal there either.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Rest of crew: “Small budget. I've budgeted the fees so that everyone will be paid equally, from the top to the bottom, with the promise of working together in future and paying proper rates when I have bigger budgets.”

All crew booked. Hurrah! Shoot's coming together.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Night before shoot, double checked everything. I'm sure I've forgotten something. Can't sleep.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Day of shoot.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Shoot goes well.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Post goes well.

I'm rubbish. I'm crap.

I can't do this. I can do this.

Delivery goes well.

"Well done, Sherry. Ready for another?"

"Sure, why not."

I can't do this. I can do this.

# An outside creative lifestyle.

I am a couple of years or so in, producing more shoots and hanging with my crew. Working seven days a week. Sometimes shooting at night. I can't get enough of it.

The energy, the vibe.

A new addiction. But did I take regular breaks and recharge?

Like hell I did. I ate Deliverance take-aways, smoked 40 fags a day and drank whisky shots in the mornings, while eating cold pizza from the night before.

I took very few days off, had hardly any holidays where I wasn't working too and very rarely saw family and friends.

After finishing up on night shoots you would often find me asleep on a sofa in a post house waiting for the colourist to turn up so we could get the rushes graded.

I would then jump into an Addison Lee cab home (my other addiction), during which I would be on my Blackberry planning the next shoot happening in a week's time, with a cast and crew of one hundred or so, while wrapping the one I did last week.

Work became all-consuming, but I loved it.

As any freelancer knows it can sometimes be difficult to say no, especially when you don't know when the next job will be coming in. But I also said yes, as I loved producing. I loved the shoots. I loved talking ideas and learning about what everyone else did.

Also not knowing how things should be done meant I had to figure things out and create my own systems, which I love doing.

Yes, I am a producer now, but here comes the crash and burn.

It started a few days before, at the Coffee House pub on Beak Street. I couldn't make up my mind on anything. I usually make quick decisions, so this threw me. A few days later, one morning, my body gave up on me and I found myself unable to move from the bed. I had to crawl on the floor to get about.

I decided there and then it was time to create a new lifestyle that worked for me.

And for the first time I started saying no to things, which became very liberating. Making all future decisions based on how it will affect my mental health and whether it will give me a chance to grow.

Going for walks on Hackney Marshes, I saw a new London for the first time and wondered why I hadn't done this before.

Lived an outside creative lifestyle.

Now I have this and would highly recommend it.

# Who wants that?

It's not ok for someone to walk up to your desk at work and spit in the bin next to you, is it?

That's gross, right?

The clearing of the gravelly throat. The wet, soggy, drippy, wet mess spat out, followed by the wiping of stringy spit off the mouth with the back of the hands.

That's nasty, innit?

Thought so.

Especially when there is a toilet across the hall.

Well, that was the moment when I said, "Nope, that's definitely not a thing." Then I called it out to those in charge.

It was a prime example of a little micro-aggression.

Next day two new people who looked like me were hired. It has been quite lovely watching their career progress from afar over the years.

I think it was great that the incident was dealt with swiftly.

What I couldn't understand though was why the individual kept working there too and for years after.

I however walked soon after that.

The thought of working in a hostile environment. No thank you.

Who wants that?

# We are going to the moon.

After about three and half years, I knew the time had come to take a break from adland. Standing in my wedding dress in a bridal shop in Farringdon, I answered a call from an agency creative asking me how it was going locking in Dame Barbara Windsor to do a voice-over for the anti-supermarket commercial they really wanted to do. The directors I was working with were promised the job if we could get the star onboard.

Midway through the call I thought, "I'm not getting paid for this. I really should hang up and make sure I don't end up buying a dress I will regret."

Then the seed was sown: "Am I enjoying this anymore?"

Then I thought, "Why should I do his job for him?"

And, I kept thinking, "I really could do with a holiday, a break from it all."

Straight after, I got married and had my boys.

One day in early 2009, while sitting on the sofa in our flat at red door house. I was playing with my first born, after colour co-ordinating his toys and clothes again, when I got a call from a friend about producing a commercial. I thought on it for a bit, then I asked myself, "What will bring me more joy?"

I then had my break from adland.

Six years of it. Living simply.

Spending most of my days with my two boys in the park, doing a little gardening and hanging at children's centres in Hackney singing, Row, Row, Row, Your Boat, and Zoom, Zoom, Zoom We're Going to The Moon...

I also managed the purchase of our new home around the corner, the house we had our eye on for years even though it had a plant growing out of the top.

Then I became a landlady for our first flat, which we then sold a few years later to do the work on our home. Which I project managed.

And I did an exhibition at the local museum in Hackney about what life was really like being a parent and invited my friends and family down.

A wonderful time.

After my break I came back and launched, yes, you've guessed it, The Pitch Fanzine.

And here we are, creating change together.

... five, four, three, two, one, lift-off!

# We are on our way.

In my vision, I am sitting in the woodland up country in Jamaica watching ants rebuild their nests after the rainfall.

There is a gentle breeze blowing.

I'm then on a cart heading to the river. It is sunny.

After drinking some cool refreshing spring water, I take a leap into the waterfall.

I have crossed a bridge with the river beneath.

There is a mountain up ahead.

Let's take a little rest.

We are on our way.

# Peopledem.

Find your peopledem.

The ones who will get you.

The ones who will welcome you.

The ones who will uplift you.

The ones who will not judge you.

The ones who see your smarts.

The ones you don't have to explain yourself to.

The ones who understand your goals.

The ones who see you.

The ones who respect you.

Find your peopledem.

# Jamaica, we are here.

Time, to create our new futures.

We are in a knowledge-sharing revolution.

Best wishes,

Kenisha (her)

Sherry-Ann Collins

Sherry (her / us)

Sherry Collins

JamAican Freedom Fighter

Fighting for the creative freedom of the Jamaican peopledem.™

Powered by Dad's Life Medicine.

Watch on Pitch TV.

Pitch Knowledge and Learning Creative Summit 2024.

Call her, Kenisha.

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