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NO ORDINARY WOMAN

JESSICA'S STORY

Jessica shares her birthday with the most famous uprising that took place in Guiana, the 1763 Berbice Slave Rebellion. She was born Jessica Elleisse Carroll on 23 February 1927 in Bagotstown, on the east bank of the Demerara River. In the year following her birth a new constitution was introduced and although it was nearly 100 years after the abolition of slavery, the British government did not see fit to allow the Guianese majority to take part in the selection of those who represented their interests in the governance of the colony. Interestingly, this was also the year in the UK when the vote was extended to all women over the age of 21. Instead, the new Guianese constitution established an Executive Council to rule the colony with more appointed than elected members to advise the Governor. Compared to other parts of the Caribbean, such as Jamaica, those who were qualified to vote, through the ownership of property and a certain level of education and income, had the power to select their representatives. However, this assembly only had an advisory role.

Jessica, the last of her parents' children, grew up as the only girl among male siblings: Robert, Monroe, and Hadden – a fourth brother, Newburne, died young. This situation offered Jessica a good level of protection most of the time. Her mother, Hectorine Carroll (née Esbrand) was sole carer of the children. Jessica has no memory of her father, James Carroll, a diamond speculator, who died when she was about three years old. She faintly recalls a house with chandeliers and brass pots, but after her father's death the family's fortunes gradually declined. They moved to Bagotstown and later to La Penitence, where Hectorine bought a house. But with no regular income, she faced great financial difficulty taking care of her children on her own. Jessica remembers her mother pawning jewellery on occasion to support them.

Her sterling efforts notwithstanding, Hectorine's financial state did not improve. The family was forced to move into rented accommodation at 35 Howes Street, a tenement yard in Charlestown, a ward in the city of Georgetown. Jessica recalls it was "rough, extremely rough, there were lots of fights.... Parents used to beat up their children." But Hectorine kept her children apart from the rough tenement-culture, often insisting: "You may live in a tenement yard but you're not part of a tenement yard." Still, for large numbers of the colony's African population who had moved from the sugar estates and rural villages, this was normal urban life.

Jessica was thrilled to have a job; she could show her brothers that she was independent and did not need them to take care of her. She was also pleased to be able to help her mother financially. She hated sewing, however, so was fortunate to be given instead the job of making the boxes for the shirts. The workers employed in the factory were all young girls like her. There were conveyor belts along which girls were positioned making different parts of the shirts, while in another part of the factory girls made boxes for the shirts. As soon as Jessica began working she noticed the exploitative behaviour of the factory managers. The girls were regularly offered a bonus for increasing production, but time after time as they got close to hitting the target to claim their bonus, the conveyor belts would mysteriously malfunction, meaning that they were never rewarded for their extra hard work and productivity. One day Jessica became so infuriated by this that she told the girls:

“Why don’t you all strike?”

“Strike?” they asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Let’s see the bosses them and tell them we want more money and tell them how the managers have been treating us.”

Though she worked on the other side of the production line, Jessica included herself with these girls, and felt herself to be similarly exploited by the shop-floor managers. Putting her public-speaking skills to use, she swiftly convinced the workers that they should leave the factory and march to Water Street as a group to confront Briana’s senior managers.

When they arrived at the Briana offices, Jessica and her colleagues marched boldly to see the manager, Mr DeFreitas, a Portuguese man, who wanted to know why some of his workers were outside his office.

“We’re on strike,” Jessica said.

At this Mr DeFreitas laughed, wanting to know why there was such a small group of workers if this was meant to be a strike. Jessica looked around. Only a few of her colleagues remained, five at best. It seemed the rest of the girls had lost their nerve. Mr DeFreitas insisted that he could not anyway speak to them all at once; one of them must take the lead and do the talking. Each girl tried to urge the next to take the lead and become spokesperson. Suddenly one of them said:

“But, Carroll, you like to talk, so you talk for us.”

Jessica even now recalls her terror at having to talk to “this White man”. It was the first time she had spoken so directly to a White man. But, with her knees shaking and her heart racing, she managed to articulate their grievances confidently, concluding that they intended to leave their jobs if the managers continued to exploit them with the false promise of a bonus. Mr DeFreitas told them to return to work, promising that he would come and see the managers.

Jessica’s colleagues were overjoyed at the way she had presented their case, and they left the Briana offices filled with positive expectations. On their way back, a group of men they had seen earlier at the sawmill stopped to talk. Hearing what had taken place, the men advised them to form a union, which Jessica agreed was a good idea. The women continued towards the factory in good spirits. When they arrived, however, they found they could not get in – the gate had been locked. They had great difficulty convincing the gateman to let them into the factory, only succeeding because of Jessica – who always made it her business to talk to everyone in the factory, regardless of position. Unlike many of the girls in the factory, she spoke to workers at all levels in the factory, even the “lowly” gateman.

Once back inside the factory, the girls received far from a hero’s welcome. Those who had not taken any action tried to scare Jessica and her striking colleagues by suggesting that they would lose their jobs. Some of her accomplices became nervous and afraid, and began to blame her for leading them to strike. Soon after, she was called up to the office of Miss Bynoe, the woman who had originally interviewed her. Miss Bynoe said she had been planning to award her a position in the office, but that she had now broken their agreement. As Jessica saw it, there had never been any agreement between them. She could see that as long as she worked at the Briana factory she would be making boxes. There was no one working in the office that looked like her – they were all White or light-skinned. Those girls who were dark-skinned, like her, worked on the factory floor. Jessica was not deceived. Her prospects of working in the office were no different from those of the other girls’ on the shop floor.

Impressed by Jessica’s influence with the Briana factory workers and her courage in meeting with Mr DeFreitas, one of the men from the sawmill, Mr Glen, who was also the secretary of the Wood Workers’ Union, approached her, inviting her to speak at a large union meeting due to take place in the coming weeks. She went to the meeting with her brother Monroe. She was the only woman at the union meeting and was introduced to the audience as “Jessica Carroll, representing workers at Briana Shirt Factory”. Jessica said of the meeting:

I wasn’t representing anybody, but I went up and told them exactly how I saw

these girls being exploited... people were aghast and the men were so pleased, Mr Glen ... was convinced that he was going to get those women in the union, after that.

Back at the factory, Jessica was being ostracised by the office staff and the managers on the floor level. Some of the girls in the factory were not happy with her, especially those who had gone with her to see Mr DeFreitas, as they felt that she nearly lost them their jobs. Jessica's colleagues did not join the union and Mr DeFreitas did not speak to the managers, or if he did, they still exploited the girls on the factory floor with unfulfilled promises of bonuses.

This was a painful but important lesson for Jessica. She realised that fighting for others, even for a just cause, is not always appreciated. But she did not let it deter her in the future from challenging those who abused their power, nor from speaking out at the exploitation of others. She would experience this kind of hostility on many more occasions as she continued to take on the role of advocate or champion, confronting situations of injustice and discrimination throughout her life. Her confidence in herself as an African woman, her ability to stand up for what she believed was right and courageously to face the consequences of her actions, were qualities that her mother Hectorine had nurtured while she was growing up.