

My Father Who Fathered Me

by Barbara Blake-Hannah



The late Evon Blake

When I was 11, Pop got out an old typewriter, placed it on a table and put a keyboard diagram beside it. That was my first typing lesson. By the time I was 17 and his beloved SPOTLIGHT had been cruelly wrenched from him, his lack of money forced him to decide which one of us two girls would have to leave school. "Babs," he said: "You are a survivor. Let me give you a profession."

I cried buckets of tears to be deprived of school after doing only my O Levels, but the money he invested in my one-year tuition at the Jamaica School of Commerce on East Street, did indeed give me the tools for the profession I have followed since -- though he fully intended that I should become "the best secretary in Jamaica."

A larger than life man

How I learned to write, I can't say. Those were the days when the only journalism school was at Columbia USA, many miles and much money away for such a privilege. So it was certainly a kind of osmosis caused by reading and seeing the work of a journalist every day of my life, and being surrounded by the books and magazines read by his active mind. Expressing a loving use of the words and phrases I had taken in from these sources, my high school essays became my favourite subject.

To be fathered by this larger-than-life man was not easy. His marriage to my mother had ended before I was four, and with the help of nannies, cooks, gardeners, as well as stepmothers and girlfriends, he took charge of the upbringing of his two girls. And, how he loved us.

BN-BLAKE,
EVON

Once the neighbourhood dog bit me, so he took his licensed gun down the street and shot it. End of story. Another time, he came to my high school to ask the Headmistress and the drama teacher why it was that, while the school's white girls always got starring roles in school drama productions, his daughter was only ever given the

servant's part. And there was one strict rule for teachers -- don't beat my children -- I'll beat you."

I never knew how privileged I was to have his fatherhood, while I was young. We led such a sheltered life, that I was unaware that there were children who did not have three meals a day, who did not go to school; I took for granted the pretty dresses, shoes, socks and matching hair ribbons that we bought on wonderful excursions to the shops on King Street, around the corner from his office at 95 Harbour Street.

But I knew for sure that there were no other children who were expected to spend holidays folding and pastewrapping copies of his magazine to mail to subscribers -- a chore we often hated, but which was always rewarded by either a juicy hot dog or a book from the stores beneath his office. The smell of printers ink, the clatter of typewriters and the energy of a publication being produced, were all a part of my life from as early as I could remember -- for SPOTLIGHT was born one year before I was.

Over and over he would tell me the story of how the first issue came off the press on Christmas Eve, and how he stood on King Street selling copies to passersby.

When -- one traumatic year -- he placed himself on the cover of his eagerly-read Man of the Year issue, many laughed at his outrageousness, but I knew what he had gone through that year to deserve the title.

Another "anniversary" he made into a family ritual, was the annual trip on Emancipation Day to James Hill, Clarendon where he had been born and where his father's grave rested. There, in this dirt road, he told us our history and of slavery.

It was difficult for a child to live under the constant scrutiny of public attention, that being "the Blake children" caused us. The sensation of his divorce from my mother and subsequent legal battle to secure paternity rights for his daughters, as well as the flamboyance of his dress and lifestyle, placed us firmly in the public eye.

When I was older, I saw in Clark Gable a glimpse of what ladies must have seen in my Daddy. White sharkskin suits, polka-dot ties, crisp shirts and two-toned shoes (it was our job to clean them), were complimented by his latest-model American car which he changed every year. He frequented the top business and social clubs and gatherings, and was noted for being at one time the "only Black man" on

the Kings House invitation list.

New Day

The sheltered childhood we led, was continued when he packed us both off to boarding school (Hampton -- in those days 100 girls, ten black) to "learn to be ladies". I fear his money was ill spent on me in that hope for I was the ugly ducking who took a very long time to turn into a swan ... if at all, but Hampton gave us a wider outlook on the world

than any other Black Jamaican of the time, and when we later came to school in Kingston at Wolmers and St. Hughs, life was less colourful, though no less restricted.

His gruff sternness and strict discipline increased, as his business problems grew worse, his second and third marriages failed, and his two girls were becoming young women in the age of Rock and Roll.

His disappointment at how he was thrown off his own magazine by those he had invited to save it, sank him to the bottom of an abyss from which he never totally climbed. He turned to heavy-drinking and soon had two duodenal ulcers. It was in this

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state that he started NEWDAY, the magazine that was soon to eclipse the ill-run SPOTLIGHT and existed until he had a health choice -- retire or die. He chose Long Bay, Portland and later Anchovy, where his house overlooked the sea until to his dismay, a hotelier built a wall.

My first job was, of course, on NEWDAY, as a typist and some time journalist. My first story, a book review published at 17, makes me at 47, a 30-year veteran of my profession.

"Make a name for yourself at home where it matters."

"The subject of my "following in his footsteps" was mentioned only occasionally, in our later years, when he showed some pride in my "taking after him", saying that modernisation of the world had enabled me to take the art of writing from its status on the printed page, into film. TV and broadcast communication media.

But his real wish for me was to have "married well" and early, settling down to a life of "good works". Alas, I was to disappoint him severely in his

hopes for my life, but I was fiercely determined -- after 20 years under his roof and influence -- to find and make my own life, to sing my own song -- whatever it was. So I left for England, much against his wishes and spent the better part of 10 years there, living a nice life and becoming, in the process, the first Black to appear regularly on television as a journalist/interviewer.

Returning in 1972, Pop dismissed my achievements: "You've made a name in England -- now you've got to make a name for yourself in Jamaica, at home where it matters. You've got to give something, make a contribution, whatever it is."

I reassured him that those were the reason for my return, knowing full well he would not approve of the methods I used, but hoping he would understand.

He disapproved strongly of my creation of the 1974 Jamaica Black Film Festival, but the fact that he lent his name, prestige and his column to its support, ensured that the cinema company, the JTB (Jamaica Tourist Board) as well as his army of influential friends, helped make the event the historic occasion it became -- getting on the phone even to try and soothe the ruffled feathers of those who were upset that they had not been consulted first.

"Give me some paper and I'll draw a front page for you"

Typical, too, was his interest in my latest venture, the EASTERN COMET newspaper I started two months ago. "Not enough advertising, Babs," was his gruff comment on his last visit to me, ten days before he died. (Pop, why is your foot so swollen?)

"And it needs to look more lively. Give me some paper and I'll draw a front page for you."

It was one of few promises he failed to keep. Restricted from visiting him by a new "house law" which forbade me to enter his sick room (Oh, those constantly-changing "house laws"), I was waiting for his return visit.

What my Pop, Evon Blake gave me, was a way of dealing with life that makes me call no man my master; that enables me to go anywhere - do anything within the bounds of decency and bravery, a belief that Jamaica and the world were mine; though he was disappointed that I had not grasped more from life, not choosing to see -- until very late -- the pleasure I had received from the immaterial things. Ours was a sad-happy, bitter-sweet relationship.

especially affected by the direction in which my Black consciousness had taken me.

Bred to be a Black copy of an upper-class English woman, life in the mind-spaces of the Beatles, The Hippy era of the 70s, Black Power and eventually Jamaican culture, led me inevitably to that lifestyle which is described as Rasta.

Finding my spiritual, cultural and racial foundations in this frame of mind, was the inevitable consequence of my upbringing -- the life my father gave me, as well as the life I gave myself -- but we had many ideological clashes on these issues, until as a stepping-aside by me from some of the extreme realities of how belief in a Black Christ manifestation and a Black Zion, was being expressed.

A lion at peace

But that was when he had been strong. Weakened in the past five years by the annoyance and discomfort of hiccups, he softened and mellowed and the raging bull became a lion at peace.

I remember him best of all, not as my father Pop, but as "Grandpops", which he became to my 3 1/2 year old son, taking us into his house when we had nowhere to live after his birth, and eagerly looking forward each morning to the smile of recognition and happiness from the only grandchild with whom he grew. Indeed, my son was his special love, and we were both with him on the day he was taken to hospital, amid the hustle and bustle of a house which had become a sorting and distribution centre for his beloved Red Cross Gilbert relief effort.

Sitting by his hospital bed, praying for his recovery, willing him to draw breath after having been given over as gone ... my tears flowed as I held in mine one of his gnarled, work-worn hands -- those fingers which had pounded at such speed over millions of typewritten words, and given me a memory and legacy which are uniquely mine, and his. My little Pops.

"A Blake never cries," I heard his voice echo in my memory. Oh yes, little Pops, how else but with tears could we hope for the Mercy of the Almighty Father for the soul of so precious a father as you.

As my first stepmother, Miss Jacquie sobbed her grief over the long-distance phone, she recalled his words at an earlier illness: "When I die, let them know that I have lived."

Yes Daddy, you certainly did.

And I am your future. Love, Pops.



Evon with his daughter and grand-child



With Edna Manley, Ferdie Sangster, Albert Huie at the 1948 launching of the NEW DAY