

Kyle wasn't the best-looking fella nah. Yet somehow he had a bessting in almost every girl school around. It was a mystery. And not just any girls mind you - it was the exotic, fair-skinned, Yoplait yogurt, curly-haired, sun-kissed peach to white-toned, 'getting drop right in front the school though they living two minutes away', 'look like ants cyah mash them' ones with plenty money and daddy issues. Once it red, it dead.

Those days we were still young. As much as fellas strutted and beat up they chest in the courtyard and on the football field, and 'gyallery' about conquests and exploits adapted from their fathers' porn collections, most had little real experience. Talking to girls was still scary and even the biggest shooters went about it in a roundabout way - nobody wanted to get 'blank'.

Kyle had no such fear. And he had no brands or money to hide behind. The only brand name he owned was a faded Adidas cap that sat sideways and ever so slightly to the left on his giant head, just enough that it exposed a rolled-up patch of 'gren gren' he twisted idly, usually during chemistry class. He was just exceptionally good at speaking confidently.

"If you play your cards right, I might let you kiss me," Kyle said as he grinned at Stacy one day upstairs in the new McDonald's that had just open. Stacy was a leggy, big-breasted girl from Excellence Girls with light green eyes and auburn hair with a blonde streak. We spoke about her all the time in school, and now she was seated next to me. I felt like I was sitting next to a celebrity.

“And who say I want to kiss you?” She replied with a raised eyebrow. She was a feisty one who wasn’t afraid to break a fella down like chilli bibi. Any other fella would have crawled in a hole like a cockroach that just tasted a dab of bug spray.

“That’s true,” Kyle said without breaking a sweat. “You still too young to experience the greatest moment of your life.”

After that, he and Stacy would deal for two months.

And while other fellas took a suave approach, Kyle went out of his way to behave ungentlemanly - to me this defied logic and I was a decade away from understanding why it didn’t. Perms, the little red boy with curly hair in we crew had plenty fans too but even he found himself on concierge duty, either holding some gyal bag or opening a door to put them in a taxi when the evening come.

Kyle never hold gyal bag. Not only that, the more he tease them, the more they like him. I was amazed to realise that someone could tell the prettiest girl, “girl you real ugly you nkow” and the response was not a slap and a cuss, but rather a giggle and a blush.

“Gyal don’t like no sorf man, Mark.” It was a simple explanation of his strategy - I could respect it but I was smart enough to know that it would never be something me with my coke-bottle glasses could execute. “Gopaul lock is not Seepaul lock”, as

mom would say.

Mommy Kyle or Xena Warrior Princess or just Xena, as Kyle called his mother, remained unimpressed. She grasped every opportunity to disparage Kyle and his “setta hoe” as she savagely referred to them. You see, Kyle’s father was a sweet man too - it was thirty years they make together this year but is really only the sugar slow him down. Prior to that, he showed no signs of stopping; the older he got, the younger they got. People say in he prime, he had one in every cardinal point in Trinidad - there were many children, both what he know and eh know about.

“Mister man, I did not send you to school for that. And you better not be doing big people ting. You could barely take care of yourself,” she barked one evening after PTA meeting. We were in a popular spot in school, right next to where Mrs. June does sell the box juice - a good bit of parents were liming around as well. But Xena was old school, she saying anything, anywhere, and eh care who mind she business.

“Me mammy?” Kyle answered mockingly. “Me who does be in church every Sunday? I don’t know about dem ting. That’s just my friend and dem.” He gave her scowling face a kiss but it was as effective as a drop of water on a hot tawah.

“Just your friend and dem? Hmph. You feel I born yesterday? I eh taking that mamaguy nah. You is really your father son. I not working my finger to the bone to send you to school to mind no white baby, you hear!” Susan, his current ‘friend’, a

slim white girl with pouty lips and an always too-short skirt immediately turned the colour of a Bajan cherry.

Saying that I looked up to Kyle would be an understatement. Damian my best friend was cool as the morning dew and I admired his messy nonchalant affectation but Kyle was something different. He wasn't rich nor a looker so what he did seemed attainable. Which made it even more of a magic act because no one had any idea how he did it.

The only bad thing you could say about Kyle is that he love 'other people' gyal too much, which even in secondary school was a dangerous occupation. He wouldn't huff his brethren bird or even someone at school - that was a code he strictly adhered to - but if a gyal he was interested in had a man he didn't know, well 'eff he' was usually the mentality.

"You see she how she watching me? That man gyal easy to huff boy Mark," Kyle said as we walked past Subway in the mall a day. I couldn't discern any interest or favourable body language myself so I remained doubtful. As we stood, the girl exited the mall with her boyfriend hand in hand without so much as a look.

"You doh believe me eh? Ok watch this," he said and proceeded out the mall behind her with an exaggerated gangster crawl. Ten minutes passed and he still didn't return.

Eventually, when I went to look for him I found him leaning against the wall in deep conversation with the same girl but her man was nowhere to be found.

It wouldn't always be so easy. There were a few times he narrowly escaped a good cut-ass. This was the time he was dealing Shakti, an eighteen-year-old Muslim with a hijab and a sweet face under it. The story was that her parents put her in an unhappy, arranged marriage since the age of fourteen to an older, ruffian of a man. Four years later she wanted to feel 'in thing again' so she pick up with Kyle the one time she sneak off to a bar lime with a few friends. We warn Kyle that husband and wife thing is not thing to play with but he eh listen.

It didn't take long for her 30-year-old husband to find out and word outta road was that he wanted to kill him. For weeks strange men camped outside the school gate waiting for Kyle who made his exit over the back wall and through the bushes. Eventually Michael Mendel who spent some time in juvenile detention and had street links intervned and reasoned with them and they left Kyle alone.

I thought this incident would have scared Kyle but it only make him more reckless. No matter how many times we warn him, he simply laughed it off. Eventually, our warnings became a toothless part of the routine, ignored like FBI warnings on pirate DVDs.

As much as possible, I made sure to hang around Kyle. A lime with him wasn't an excursion out. It was a self-contained, adventure replete with side quests,

achievements, stakes, villains, heroes and final conclusions to be regaled later.

One lunchtime he invited me as we went to take a smoke behind the bathroom. It was just me and him that day. I never smoke but I always tag along for the lime.

“Mark wah you for this Saturday? A few smallies from Convent want to try this new beer in Uptown’s,” Kyle said as he pulled on a Du Maurier cigarette that he rub down with Vicks to make it smoke like a menthol.

I lived almost an hour from school and was the only one from deep South. As I traveled home, the surroundings progressed from ‘road with pockets of bush’ to ‘bush with pockets of road’. Traveling up to taste beer wasn’t a casual trip for me. But this was Kyle. I would rather miss my birthday.

To ensure my parents couldn’t say no, I lied and told them I had to study. It was only so many times I could use that lie but I felt this was as good as any.

We never actually reached Uptown’s. We reached as close as downstairs but in typical Kyle fashion, our adventure quickly took a detour - as we were heading in we bounced up Brenda, one of Kyle’s many ‘friends’.

I never really take a liking to any of Kyle’s girls - they were attractive but had the same vapid self-assurance that didn’t elevate them above two-dimensional walking mannequins. But Brenda was different. Something about her got my attention and I

felt both pleased and uneasy when she came around. She was pretty but not in a showy way, with smooth mocha skin and a low slicked-down haircut like the RnB singer Monica. Her sultry lips were luscious objects of intrigue; they moved fluently between a smirk and a genuine smile allowing her to seamlessly morph between an almost church girl persona and a 'bad ting'. In my imagination, she was really a good girl pretending to be bad.

This was the same Brenda that ran track for St. Bridgets and was responsible for a good bit of us breaking school and showing up for the sports day. When she walked or ran, she moved on her toes with a dreamlike strut as if the heavens had commissioned a cloud for her every step. Her father was Michael Babba, the owner of the Babba's Bath and Body Works franchise that was a staple of every mall in the country so she lived in a big house in Gulf View with a pool. When her parents were out, she would throw big fetes at home that everybody went to. I could never get to go but when Kyle tell me what went on I felt like I was there.

"KYLEEEEE," she screamed when she saw us. She ran and gracefully jumped into Kyle's arms, giving him a huge hug. The rest of us shifted to the side to give them room.

"Yes Brenda, long time I eh see you too," he said laughing. "Was the plan my girl?"

"Well everybody is so hyped to taste this new... beer," she said rolling her eyes.

“I’m just really here to meet my friends so..”

“So you don’t really want to go then?” Kyle interjected. He watched her intently and she sashayed nervously from side to side. I could feel her melting under his magic like a pennacool on a hot step.

“Kyle, you see you. You will get me in trouble,” she said biting her lips and looking around. “Last time Gerald almost ketch us.” Gerald was her boyfriend, a big strapping creole who played Intercol football for Benedicts.

“Almost doesn’t count,” he replied with a wink.

“You playing brave,” she said. She looked down and asked, “And what about Stacy?”

“Why you bringing she into this now?” Kyle answered sardonically.

“No reason. I just don’t want to collect no buss head.”

“Anybody home by you now?” he asked.

“No,” she answered smiling coyly.

“Well ok then. Let’s have a proper lime. Some nice wine, not that stale pee.”

Damian watched from the side with a disapproving expression at the idea of drinking wine over beer - one look from Kyle and he read the play.

“Oh gosh Kyle, why you have to be so?” she giggled. “Ok let me go and tell them. We’ll meet you down there ok?”

As she walked past, she stopped and looked me up and down. I quickly looked away. I didn’t have the best track record with girls so I feared the worst.

“Who is this one Kyle? You never bring him here before.” I had seen her many times before but clearly I didn’t make an impact. She smirked rudely and put her hands on her hips still circling her prey. Abruptly she stopped and smiled the most innocent smile - the transition was whiplash and I felt my legs turn to overcooked spaghetti. I tried to say something but all that left my throat was a mumble that even I couldn’t understand.

Kyle laughed. “That’s my boy Mark. He normally does be home studying, that’s why you don’t see him. He bright though. In ten years he either go be a doctor or lawyer for sure. With plenty bitches.” If somebody could make being a nerd seem cool it was Kyle.

“Really?” She seemed impressed as she turned back to me. “You doing Add Maths by chance?”

“Yeah.” I muttered feeling increased confidence at the sudden change in topic.

“Me too.” she answered.” I am soooo dotish when it comes to that. Even lessons not helping.”

After a few seconds, I realised she was staring intently at me for an answer. Rushing to reply I said, “No, it’s easy. There are a few books in the library that explain it real simple. Trust me, once you get one of them, you’re a boss.”

She gave me a winning smile and I felt confident to continue.

“Differential equations, integration, factorials, all that you can study. I was doing some integration the other day and...”

“Ok, calm down boy,” she said with a dismissive flick of her bangled wrist and swiftly pivoted to face Kyle again. The other guys laughed and I felt a debilitating urge to crawl into the drain next to us and swim with the wabeen.

“I’ll see you later Kyle. Stop studying so hard Mark,” she said with a condescending pat on my shoulder. All I could muster was a stiff smile in response.

“Ok we’ll see you,” Kyle said still laughing. After she left, he turned to me and said, “I feel she like you lil’ bit you know Mark.”

“Yeah right,” I said, my ego still feeling bruised.

“No I serious.” I looked at him and he wasn’t laughing.

We stopped outside the liquor mart in a semi-circle as always - it was Kyle, Damien my best friend, me and Carlos, who wasn’t a part of the core crew but sometimes tagged along, especially if gyal was involved.

Carlos was older than us but he looked even older than that, sporting a full beard already and plenty of hair on his chest. It worked out because he was the only that could get through with buying alco. Ironically, he was Muslim and didn’t even drink.

“Kyle you does really think with your prick you know. For the cost of the wine we could-ah-call about two case ah beers,” Damien said shaking his head.

“What I go say? You know gyal is my weakness,” Kyle answered with an infectious smile and a shrug. Damien laughed and immediately none of us could vex with him.

“Alright nah. So which wine we getting?” asked Damien.

“I say two bottle of hard wine,” Carlos chimed in. We all looked at him confused. Even I knew that was nonsense.

“Mih boy, you mad ah wah? This is not dem Junior Sec gyal you does be tracking on an evening. Look for like a nice Moscato or something,” Kyle said.

“Moscato boy? But that is like \$200,” Carlos countered.

The rest of us felt worried. As much as I would love to lime by Brenda, I only had \$40 and I needed \$20 to travel. Damien and all was broken - his stepfather was giving him money next week and he already borrowed a twenty from me till then. It seemed like the plan buss before it even started.

Damien, the leader in most situations, spoke up, “Kyle, I think we ha to duck dem girls you know. Is true we can’t show up with hard wine,” he said laughing, “but we can’t afford Moscato either. Watch mih,” Kyle looked at him and Damien gave him a bounce, “ is not so bad doggie, we could still cause it in Uptown’s.”

It really seemed like that was that. Kyle watched all of us serious serious in silence for a bit like he was calculating something. When he smiled, we knew he figured something out.

“Hear what, don’t worry allyuh self,” he said

“What you mean? You going and try and sting a bottle? That guard look like he could run eh.” said Damien.

“Don’t worry I go pay for it,” he said and promptly pulled four crisp blue \$100 notes out. It was like seeing Michael Jordan hit the winning buzzer. My heart soared seeing him come through again. Even Damien smiled and shook his head.

“You win the Lotto or something?” Damian asked.

“Don’t study that nah. Carlos, link we with two of the nicest Moscato you could find, ” said Kyle as he handed him the money.

“Ah boy!” Carlos said as he rubbed the notes together making a scratchy sound. Five minutes later, he returned with two glittery pink bottles in a plastic bag.

After we secure the bottles, we made our way down to the wharf where the taxi stand was located. The predominant smell was fish and sweat. Several brown-band maxis were lined up across the road from us and eager maxi hustlers known to us as ‘touts’ jostled people into the maxis as they went about their business up and down the street.

“Siparia by two, Siparia by two,” shouted a magga-thin, tout. He was decked in a thread-bare white vest, shredded short jeans and a dusty black suede clarks on his ashy feet with a sizable gold chain around his scrawny neck.

Not too far from him, a piper popularly known as ‘Maljo’ was getting ready to do a backflip for money. His normal going rate was \$10 but when times were hard, it

wasn't uncommon for him to risk his neck for as little as 50 cents.

"Shift over so nah man. You eh see I trying to do something," Maljo shouted at the tout. He warmed up like a Baptist catching the spirit and dingolayed side to side covered in sweat like a well-oiled capoeira dancer.

"Dan! You don't have a dustbin to find food in? Nobody paying you to break your neck today," he retorted. They went back and forth as a crowd gathered around the pair.

We left them arguing and made our way to the taxi stand right in front of Joey's bar. Joey's was filthy, dusty and dark - the only things remotely modern were two shiny roulette machines that were occupied by two depressed-looking, pensioners, each with a glass of rum balancing on top of the respective machine.

"You all drinking anything before we head down?" asked Damian.

"Nah hold strain. Brenda father have real stocks, trust me. Look this car empty, lewwe move one time," Kyle replied.

We bundled a gold 2019 Sentra. I was the tallest but Kyle took the front seat and I made do with a window seat in the back.

Gulf View wasn't too far away, so it wasn't long before we reached the mall and

into the posh surrounding area where Brenda lived. The road inside was new and smooth, with several striped humps every few metres to allow us to slow down and admire the properties. Even the smallest houses had large expanses of green lawn and at least two vehicles in the yard.

“Right here drive,” Kyle instructed.

Brenda’s house was even more enormous and impressive than I imagined. Since Kyle paid for the drinks, I pulled out a precious purple twenty note and paid for the driver. We all got out and all of us except stood mouth agape gaping stupidly at the sheer scale of the place.

“Steups, I swear allyuh never see a mansion before,” Kyle said.

And it wasn’t just one house on the property - there were three separate buildings on the compound each with a slanted red slate roof and castle-like walls decorated with black framed candle-lit lanterns. Well-watered palm trees flanked each entrance and a black, resin outdoor fountain with a ripple design, gurgled in the middle of a circular tiled driveway. The third building, the smallest one by far but still larger than my entire house, was the pool house and we could hear music, laughter and splashing from that direction.

“Look like they waiting on us, “ Kyle grinned as he pressed the bell. The giant gates parted to reveal Brenda standing with the gate remote in hand and dressed in

a pink lilac two-piece bathing suit under a see-through floral wrap. Her sexiness was an immediate assault on my senses and I quickly looked away. From the corner of my eye, I could see her smiling mischievously.

“You all coming in the pool right?” She shouted.

“Kyle, I eh bring no bathing trunks eh,” I whispered out of earshot.

“You is kicks yes,” he whispered back. “You never went by rich people before? They have trunks, towel...everything you need. The cleaner go come take everything when we done.”

No one wanted to be sitting po’ me one so we all got dressed to head into the pool. Carlos was shame to show he big belly so he kept his vest on. Tufts of black hair covered his arms and back and formed a furry carpet on his chest.

“Carlos you have more hair than vest boy,” said Damien.

“Why you doh hush yuh tuntun?” he replied laughing.

I wasn’t happy with my chicken chest either. I inhaled to make it look a little more stately as I gazed around for a place to store my glasses. Only Kyle and Damien looked cool; Damien was wearing a ‘clipse’ pair of white Nike short pants and a matching Nike cap flipped backward - he had a skinny chest like me but he could pull

it off because he didn't care. Kyle had a man's body - shoulders, veiny biceps with definition and the makings of a six-pack, not gym muscles but the result of a lot of yard work at home.

"All that hard work Xena giving you have them abs coming out nice boy Kyle," Damian commented.

"Yeah boy. He have that spranga finish for real," Carlos added.

"Me?" Kyle said as he flexed his muscles. "This eh nothing big."

"Watch how he playing thing nah," Damian said laughing.

Brenda was by the pool with three of her friends and promptly introduced us - Ayanna, Carly and Anastasia. Not too long after we were acquainted, Brenda whispered to Kyle and immediately they disappeared inside the house together. Her friends giggled knowingly and chattered inaudibly amongst themselves.

"Well that was quick," Damien quipped loudly. The girls laughed. "Anybody want any Moscato?" he asked.

I normally don't drink but I had a little bit and was pleasantly surprised. It tasted like a fizzy juice. After two drinks everyone warmed up and we started laughing and having a good time.

“What’s your name again?” Ayanna asked. I had to squint to realise she was speaking to me.

“Mark, “ I said.

“Mark you have really nice eyes,” she said. I blushed in reply and everyone laughed. It wasn’t the first time I heard that but it was really a curse - I was blind like a bat so I was always wearing my glasses, therefore, no one would ever get to see them.

Eventually, we went into the pool and settled at the deep end. I couldn’t thread water so I stayed judiciously by the edge and held on for dear life.

Suddenly we heard a scream then silence. Then a gruff male voice broke the silence again.

“Wait nah Brenda, you have a fella here? What de hell going on? Nah nah.”

A scuffle ensued and you could hear things falling and breaking. It sounded like a real battle was taking place. If that wasn’t Gerald, all ah we drop down dead one time.

It was a mystery that he even get inside in the first place. The wall was almost ten

feet high with razor-sharp barbed wire on top. I looked and looked and eventually, I saw it - a blue and yellow checkered jersey covering the barbed wire by the bedroom area. A lot of bandit does use that same technique - rest a jersey on the barb wire to not get scratch and vault over.

Damian snapped me out of it.

“That’s we dog getting beat dey, what allyuh doing?”

The girls scurried to the pool house one way and the three of us rushed in the opposite direction right toward the commotion. As Damian and Carlos rushed ahead ready for the confrontation, I lagged cautiously behind to provide support from an advantageous position.

Damian and Carlos entered first. Just as I was about to follow, Brenda sprinted out like a bat out of hell knocking me flat over on my back. As I slowly got up, she didn’t look like the Brenda I knew - she wasn’t smiling or smirking; she looked scared and embarrassed with smeared makeup and hands covering her bare chest.

My church-boy instincts kicked in and I completely forgot about Kyle. Instead, I sprinted back to the pool as if someone was after me and grabbed my towel. When I reach back, she was slumped in a crying heap. I swooped down and swaddled in the towel and she immediately broke down and threw her arms around me. She cried silently for a while until my shoulder felt soaked.

“Gerald is a good boy. He doesn’t deserve this treatment you know,” she moaned. “He treats me soooo good. Last year, he sold his best football boots to get this necklace for me.”

Only now I noticed it around her neck - a delicately beautiful understated thing that didn’t look like something a ruff-neck footballer could pick out.

She sniffed and attempted to dry her eyes. “I told him not to come today but he didn’t listen. I would have saved him from all of this.” She considered for a moment and began crying again. “He’s on a scholarship and can’t get suspended again.”

“Why do I always find myself in this position?” she babbled. “Why does Kyle always make me do this?” She searched my face for the answer and then looked away.

“I thought you like Kyle,” I said. She turned and cocked her head with an expression that said “really” and buried her head in my shoulders again.

“What’s your name again?” She asked.

“Mark,” I said.

“You have really pretty eyes, Mark,” she said watching me straight in my eyes

with a smirk and then a smile softer than the currants roll in Linda's bakery when it now leave the oven. Our eyes made four and I felt electric all over as she leaned forward and closed the gap between us. I never kiss a girl in my life but she moved close enough to me that I could feel her moist breath on my cheek. At that moment I didn't care about Gerald or Kyle. I closed my eyes and waited on the moment.

"You see, I tell you she like you." I looked up to see Kyle coming limping toward us as Damian and Carlos helped him forward. The right side of his face was swollen profusely but he wasn't vex. He was missing two teeth but he was smiling and happy for me.