

Chapter One

D'you know what my problem is? My mouth doesn't know when to stay shut, and one of these days I just know it's going to get me into serious trouble. It's not that I talk too much, although I know some people might argue with that. If that was the trouble I could probably force myself to keep quiet sometimes. The problem is that every now and then I blurt out what I'm thinking without meaning to. You know, sometimes you might be saying one thing and thinking something else entirely that you don't want the person you're with to know about particularly? Well sometimes my brain doesn't know the difference and it will engage my mouth when it should be putting on the brake.

Take that day at the post office for instance. I didn't really expect a letter that day. I'd just posted mine to Mama the week before and it was too early for her to reply, but out of habit I went with Nadine up the road to the post office. I sometimes wished that we lived in Kingston where the mail was delivered to the door. Out in the country, we had to queue at a window in the post office and wait while the postmistress checked to see if we'd got any letters.

‘Any letters for Lilith or Joy Patterson, please?’ I recited the words as usual but, as I said, I wasn’t expecting anything, so I was watching Nadine at the window next to me. She was playing cat’s cradle with a piece of string she’d fished out of her uniform pocket while her letter box was checked by the other postmistress.

Most times she only took two seconds to look through the letters in the ‘P’ cubbyhole before she said ‘no, nothing’, so it was only when she said, ‘Here it is,’ that I realized that she was holding an airmail letter through the window to me. It was registered and I signed for it, with my heart galloping like a runaway donkey.

A registered letter usually meant money from abroad, either for me or for Granny. If it was from America that meant the money was Gran’s, but if it was from England I had a fifty-fifty chance of getting some cash. And who could tell. It might be the letter I’d been waiting for.

I shut my eyes and sent up a little prayer before I looked at the postmark. Yes! It was from England. I turned it over as I was walking to the steps of the post office. My heart slowed as disappointment swallowed all the excitement. It wasn’t from Mama.

‘Just because you get letter, you too good to walk with me now?’

I was so wrapped up in the letter I completely forgot to wait for Nadine. I stuffed it into my school bag and hooked my arm through hers to show I wasn’t

vexed with her or anything, even though I knew she was just joking.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I forget. I was thinking Mama write me, but is only from Cousin Sophie for Granny. You get any?'

'Not a message.' She gave me a sideways look. 'So you not going to England then?'

'What you talking 'bout?'

'Well you always saying how you just waiting for a letter from you mother and you gone to England.'

'Lord give me strength, Nadine, what wrong with you? How much time I have to tell you. Me mother sending for me next year.' Boy, you can be so stupid sometimes, I thought. 'Course, I didn't mean to say that aloud, but my stupid mouth just blurt it out.

'Who you calling stupid? You think because you going to England you better than anybody?'

I opened my mouth to say something spiteful and then I saw her face. I linked my hand in hers. 'I sorry, Nadine. I didn't mean it you know.'

She looked at me and a little smile brightened her face. 'A'right . . . Race you down the road.'

We were on a little hill above the main road and there was a lane with iron railings along the side. People were supposed to use the lane to get to and from the post office, but all the school children ducked underneath the railings so that now there was a little spider web of shortcuts in the red earth from the lane to the main road.

Nadine was almost under the railings before I

realized what she was doing. I dashed after her but she scooted underneath and, because I was so tall, it took me longer to get under. I was tearing after her shouting, 'Wait, Nadine. Me wasn't ready yet!' She was speeding across the road, her two pigtails flying out behind her.

I was focusing on the pigtails, trying to shorten the distance between us. With my long legs you would think I could catch her easily, but Nadine was like a rabbit when she got going. I was concentrating so hard on catching up that I didn't see Maas Josh and his handcart.

Maas Josh was the smallest man I'd ever seen. He couldn't have been more than about four and a half feet tall. I borrowed a book of fairy tales from the library once and there was a gnome in it, the spitting image of Maas Josh. It had the same squashed face that looked like maybe a mule had sat on it by mistake, the same tiny eyes and the same feet that looked too big for his body and turned out like they were not on speaking terms with each other.

Maas Josh used his handcart to wheel his ice-cream bucket 'round town every day. On our way to school we would see him churning the ice cream under the big guangu tree in front of the market. By recess time the ice cream was ready, pink and melt-in-your-mouth delicious and we'd troop out to the school gate with our dollars, where he'd be waiting. It was much better ice cream than you could get in the shops.

That day being Friday, he must have been selling in the market and was pushing the empty ice-cream bucket home. Nadine scooted across the road in front of him, and I, just behind her, was unable to stop myself and ran slap into the handcart. The air rushed from my lungs like a burst balloon. I was flat on my back in the middle of the road, spread out like a squashed bull frog.

There wasn't very much excitement in Prospect at the best of times. I remember once everybody came out when a bull broke its rope and galloped through the village. So before I had a chance to get up and recover myself, a crowd had gathered round me. The embarrassment was killing me, the sun was blinding me and I closed my eyes. That was a mistake.

'Who-oooh! Maas Josh, you kill Sister Patterson one grand pickney!'

'She dead? Who dead?'

'Is Joy. Sister Patterson little girl.'

'Give the pickney air. You all don't crowd round her so.'

'She don't have no use for air if she dead. Pickney, you dead?'

And poor Maas Josh was trying to tell anyone who would listen, 'Is not my fault. She just come flyin' down the bank into the middle o' the road.'

Someone agreed with him. 'Yes I did see it, Maas Josh. I will be a witness if you need one.'

'Thank you, Ma'am. Dem chil'ren would o' never

look where dem going. Suppose was a car coming instead of me handcart? She would o' dead for true.'

'You think we should move her?' someone else asked. Well is about time, I thought. I could be really dead for all they know and they standing there arguing over how to share out the blame.

'No, you not suppose to move a accident victim. You might interfere with the broke bones.'

'Who say she have any broke bone?'

'Maas Josh, I hope you handcart insure, for this bound to cost you.'

'Somebody get a car. We going have to take her to the hospital.'

My eyes flew open then. I couldn't lie there and allow them to cart me off to hospital.

'Praise the Lord, she not dead. Pickney, how you feeling? Which part it hurt?'

I got up, brushed the dust off my uniform and picked up my bag. Now that I'd recovered my breath, the thing hurting most was my pride. I hardly noticed the twinge in my side where I'd connected with the handcart. Nadine's frightened face was peering at me.

'I all right,' I said. 'I not hurting anywhere.'

Maas Josh took off his battered felt hat, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and jammed the hat back on his head. He looked more like a gnome than ever.

'You not hurting anywhere?' he asked. 'You sure?'

I nodded. I think he saw that as adding insult to injury.

‘So what you mean by jumping in front me handcart like that? You trying to give me heart attack or what? When I see you there on the ground I say to meself, “Lord, I kill the chile.” An’ you stand up there telling me you not hurting. I have a good mind to . . .’

‘Control youself, Maas Joshie! No harm no done. Make the child go on home to her grandmother. Come on, chile, run home to you granny you hear.’

I turned gratefully to the woman who had come over from her shop across the road.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I said and turned to leave. The crowd was walking away, disappointed that there wasn’t going to be an ambulance or a police car in the district today.

‘And next time look before you gallop into the road, you hear. I going to talk to you granny ’bout you. Some o’ you shouldn’t let out on the street. You all too dangerous.’

I made up my mind not to buy any more ice cream from Maas Josh.

Nadine came and linked her hand through mine and we walked off. Neither of us said anything until we were out of sight of the few people still standing around Maas Josh. Then Nadine was the first to speak.

‘Boy, Joy, you frighten me. I think you dead for true.’

‘Nadine, how much people you hear handcart kill?’ I asked scornfully.

‘But, Joy man, you did look dead with you eye dem shut like that.’

‘Well, as you see, me no dead.’ I was getting tired of the conversation. I didn’t want to remember how stupid I’d been. Since infant school they’d been drumming it into us: ‘Look before you cross the road’. It’s true that in Prospect you didn’t usually have very much to look for. Not too many people had cars, and since the district wasn’t a short cut to anywhere, not too many vehicles passed through either.

But that was no excuse. I could just imagine how Granny would carry on when Maas Josh told her. It didn’t bear thinking about.

‘And it would o’ be my fault.’ Nadine was like a dog with a bone when she got hold of an idea.

‘Nadine, don’t talk stupid. Me should o’ look where me was going. Now just forget it, OK?’

Nadine nodded. ‘You want to go and pick abbe?’

The abbe were like tiny coconuts, the size of cherries. We had to break them open with flint stones. If we were lucky, the hard shell would crack open and the nut would come out whole, but most times it would splinter into little pieces and we had to pick them up bit by bit off the dried leaves on the ground.

‘No, I have to get home.’

We walked in silence for a while. Nadine tried to make conversation, but even she soon got tired of one-word answers.

‘Why you so quiet today?’ Nadine peered into my face. ‘You fretting ’bout what you gran going to say when she hear ’bout the accident?’

‘Cho, I not thinking ’bout that. I have better things to worry ’bout.’

But I didn’t look at her, and we were both quiet after that. To be honest, I wasn’t thinking of anything else. Granny was very poorly and I didn’t know what news like that could do to her blood pressure. I had to think of some way to prevent Maas Josh from telling Gran about the accident.

‘You stopping?’ Nadine asked when we got to the track leading up to her house. I sometimes stopped to play with her on my way home. To tell you the truth, it was more for Nadine’s mum’s sweet potato pudding, which was always waiting for us and tasted like something the angels would leave heaven to have, but I didn’t feel very sociable today.

‘No thanks, I have to go and see how Granny is. She wasn’t feeling too well when I left this morning.’

‘Is her blood pressure again?’

‘Mmm.’

‘See you Monday then.’

‘All right, see you Monday.’

Nadine quickly flung out her hand and hit me on the arm before I could get away.

‘Last lick!’ she shouted as she ran up the track.

Usually, if she managed to get her touch in before me, I would chase her and try to get the last touch for the day because I hate to lose. But today winning

didn't seem so important. So I just shouted after her, 'I will catch you Monday!'

I watched until her blue uniform disappeared round the bend in the track. Then I turned and went back the way we had come. I had to talk to Maas Josh before I went home.

Chapter Two

I headed back towards the post office. I was rehearsing what I was going to say to Maas Josh to try to persuade him not to come and complain to Gran.

I could tell him that Gran had gone to Kingston for a few days and wouldn't be back till the weekend. I could tell him that Gran had a bad heart and any disagreeable news could kill her. But that was silly. I was a terrible liar anyway. I blame it on Gran and her church. She's always drumming Christian virtues into me, so that now I find it hard to sin with a clear conscience.

I decided just to tell him the truth and appeal to his good judgement not to disturb Granny now. People in Prospect didn't like to hear of their children causing problems. They thought it reflected badly on them and that other people would think they were failing in their duty. It was bad enough when another child complained about you, but when an adult did, it was serious. The shame was not just yours, but your parents' as well. Gran didn't need this just now.

As soon as I reached the bend before the town, I saw Maas Josh pushing his handcart up the road. It

was like a good sign to me. I didn't relish the idea of talking to him in the town where somebody else was bound to overhear.

'Excuse me, Maas Josh,' I said, with what I thought was deepest humility.

Maas Josh stopped the handcart and came round to stand protectively beside it as if he thought I was going to run at it and knock myself over again.

'What you want?' he asked suspiciously.

'I sorry I bump into you handcart, sir.'

He wasn't sure how to take this. He stared at me a minute longer, then said gruffly, 'Well look where you going next time and don't do it again. If it was a car you would dead by now, you know.'

'Yes, sir.'

We stood like that eyeing each other warily, me wondering how to ask the question on my mind, he probably wondering what I was going to get up to next.

'Well,' he moved back between the shafts of his handcart and prepared to continue on his way. 'Don't do it again.'

'I can ask you a favour, please, sir?'

'Favour? What kind o' favour?' He was immediately suspicious again. I sighed. It is a hard thing not to be trusted.

'Well, is me gran, sir. She not too well and I 'fraid if you tell her 'bout the little accident now, it might make her worse.'

'I see.' He said it like he saw a lot more than there

was to see. He thought I was just trying to save my own skin. I had to make him see it could harm Gran to have anything else to worry about.

‘I don’t mind if you tell her when she get better, Maas Josh,’ I said. ‘But her blood pressure really high and it will get higher if you tell her now.’

‘A soh?’

I nodded vigorously.

He tilted his head to one side, like a little bird considering a worm.

‘She really bad, you know, Maas Josh, and if you tell her, that will send her blood pressure up higher and she might get so sick that they might have to take her into hospital, and then they would come and take me because pickney not suppose to live on they own, and when Granny come back and find out that me not there, she will get upset and get sick again and have to go back into hospital and she might even dead and I know you wouldn’t want that on you conscience.’

‘A’right. A’right.’ Maas Josh threw up his hands in surrender. He was looking at me as if I was from another planet. ‘You better go home to Sister Patterson now,’ he said. ‘If she so sick, she bound to need you.’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

I was almost skipping on my way home.

Chapter Three

Granny was still in bed. I threw my school bag on to my bed and tiptoed into her room. I could see she was worse than when I left for school. Her mouth was drawn up into a tight pouch with pain and her forehead glistened with moisture like young banana leaves in the early morning dew. I crept over to kneel by her bedside. I knew she had to be bad to have stayed in bed all day.

‘Evening, Granny.’

I don’t know why I was whispering, except that her eyes were closed. But from her uneven breathing and the occasional grunt of pain I knew that she wasn’t asleep. Her eyes fluttered open and she turned her head towards me, slowly, as if she was afraid it would fall off if she moved it any faster.

‘You come, me pickney?’ She was whispering as well, but only because she was too ill to speak any louder. ‘Beg you go out the back and pick some . . . some . . .’ Her hand moved feebly trying to grasp the word that was just out of reach. Her memory was getting worse too, but I knew what she wanted.

Out in the backyard, I collected what I needed.

Some periwinkle leaves, a couple of flowers from the passion-fruit vine that was climbing all over the Milly mango tree, and a few of the softest leaves near the top of the little Queen of the Meadow bush. The soursop leaves were more difficult. I wanted a couple of big ones but the lowest branch was way over my head. I had to wrap my legs round the trunk and pull myself up until I could hold on to the branch and swing my legs up and over.

If Granny could see me now she would probably have a heart attack on top of all her other worries. She was always saying it was time for me to stop behaving like a tomboy and act like the young lady I was. She had no idea how much fun you could get from climbing trees.

My uniform was tree-bark stained when I came down. I knew I should have changed before I tackled the soursop tree but this was an emergency. All the same, after I'd put the passion flowers, Queen of the Meadow leaves and the periwinkle in a pan to boil with some crushed garlic, I went to change into my yard clothes. I didn't want to upset Granny. I would wash out the uniform after I finished cooking the dinner.

The water was boiling away when I got back into the kitchen. I poured some into a mug, added some sugar and took it in to Gran with the soursop leaves. There was a bottle of bay rum on the table beside her bed. I placed the mug and the leaves on the table and went to lay my hand against Gran's forehead. It was

burning. I loosened her head-tie and her thick white hair fell free. I felt a cloud of fear settle over my head because I knew now that Granny was really sick. She would never leave her hair unplaited all day unless she was very bad.

I took the bay rum, poured a little into my hand and rubbed it over her head, face and forehead. She moaned softly and I stopped, scared that I was hurting her, but she opened her eyes and a tired half-smile lifted the corners of her mouth, ironing out the lines mapping her face.

‘Just a little more, me love,’ she said.

‘OK, Granny.’ I poured some more bay rum into my hand. ‘But make sure you tell me if it hurt.’

Another tilt of the mouth corners, but she just grunted.

I put the soursop leaves on her forehead and re-tied her head-tie over them. I didn’t know how they worked, but they always made her feel better. I handed her the mug of tea.

‘Thank you, me child. God bless you,’ she whispered.

I felt my throat tighten and the back of my eyes start to sting. Granny’s attacks were becoming more and more frequent and each time they seemed to get worse. I think I would die if anything happened to her. I couldn’t remember much about Papa’s death. I was just over three when the wall he was building collapsed on him, and even Grandpa’s death a year later didn’t leave too much of a scar.

Granny herself seemed to soften when Grandpa went, and now, although I dreamed day and night about being with Mama in England, Granny was a second mother to me. I thought how upset she'd have been if Maas Josh had done what he'd threatened to do and come to tell on me. Thank goodness I'd stopped him.

I went to the kitchen to cook the dinner. I had to try and find something to cook that Gran could eat. There was a huge pumpkin and some yams in the basket by the kitchen door. I noticed them as soon as I went in and I grinned to myself. No problem. Gran could never resist pumpkin soup.

I was peeling a slice of the pumpkin when I heard him.

'Mind you dog!'

My heart jumped like a startled bullfrog. Maas Josh! I couldn't believe he would do this to me. He had promised. More or less. But now he was here, and Gran too weak to cope with what he had to say. You just couldn't trust some people. What was I going to do now? Stupid idiot. I was sure he'd meant he wouldn't say anything. But now I thought about it, he hadn't actually said he wouldn't tell. He'd just let me believe he wouldn't. And now here he was on the veranda.

'Anybody dey home?'

I decided I had to go and talk to him. Perhaps I could persuade him that Granny was too sick to see anyone. That was the truth, in my opinion anyway.

‘Oh, I was just thinking nobody dey home.’ I watched him lower the sack and the machete he was carrying on to the veranda. I had a good mind to run and push him back down the steps before he could do his damage.

‘I come to see you granny. How she is?’ Did he have to shout?

‘She sick bad, Maas Josh.’

‘A soh?’ He looked hard at me for a minute.

‘Yes, sir. I don’t think she can see anybody now for she sleeping. Maybe you could come back tomorrow?’

He bent to pick up his sack. ‘I sorry to hear that. I bring . . .’

‘Joy, who that out there with you?’

Thanks, Gran. Perfect timing. Just when it looked like I was about to persuade Maas Josh to come back some other time. The only good thing was that her voice was so feeble he was bound to realize I’d not been exaggerating.

‘Excuse me, Maas Josh.’ I turned to go to Gran’s room. ‘I think we must o’ wake her up.’ I hoped he got the message that he was to blame.

Granny had propped herself up on the pillows. It must have taken some effort because she was still panting a little

‘Granny, you all right?’

She waved away my concern. ‘Who you talking to outside?’

‘Is Maas Josh, ma’am.’

‘Maas Joshie? Him gawn?’

‘No, ma’am, him still on the veranda.’

‘You left the big man on the veranda? You don’t offer him a seat and some refreshment? Girl, where you manners? Go and invite the man inside.’

I went back to the veranda with my tail between my legs. Maas Josh was standing where I left him, turning his felt hat over and over in his hand.

‘Granny say for you to come inside please, Maas Josh.’

He followed me into Gran’s room, clutching his felt hat close to his chest. I thought he was going to bow when he saw her.

‘Sister Patterson,’ he said. ‘I hear you wasn’t feeling too well, so I say let me come and see if I can do anything to help.’

‘Thank you, Maas Joshie. Me glad to see you. Sorry I can’t get up.’ She saw me hovering. I was waiting in dread for Maas Josh to tell her about the accident and thinking maybe I should find the smelling salts just in case. And I forgot my manners again.

‘Joy, get Maas Joshie a seat make him take the weight off him foot them. Lord, give me strength. What’s the matter with you today, girl?’ She turned back to him. ‘What I can offer you to drink Maas Joshie?’

I came back with the chair and the glass of water he’d asked for to find them discussing Maas Josh’s family. I glanced quickly at Gran, but she didn’t look

too concerned. In fact, the company seemed to be doing her good because she looked a bit better. So he couldn't have told her yet.

I wanted to be there when Gran learned about the accident, but I knew better than to hang around when big people were talking. I went back to the kitchen and the pumpkin soup with my heart heavy as a river rock stone in my chest.

While I peeled and cut up pumpkins, yams, chocho and carrots, I was waiting to be called in to explain my behaviour on the street. I heard Maas Josh leaving Gran's room and going towards the veranda. He was leaving without saying goodbye to me. That was not a good sign. I waited with my heart in my mouth for Granny's call, which is probably why I didn't hear Maas Josh come into the kitchen and I jumped when he spoke just behind me.

'You have a mug I can put this in for you granny, Joy?'

He held out a green coconut with the top chopped off. So that was what he had in his sack. When I thought he was leaving he'd just gone out to the veranda to get the coconut. Without a word, I gave him a mug and he tipped the coconut water in. I wanted to beg him again not to say anything to Gran, but my pride wouldn't let me. If he could ignore what I had said before, then there was no point in pleading with him now.

'You want one?'

I realized that I was staring at the coconut. To tell

you the truth, the glug-glug-glugging of the juice into the mug was making my mouth water. I adore jelly coconut, but I didn't want Maas Josh to think I was coveting Gran's.

'I don't . . .'

'Is a'right. I have plenty in the bag. You not going to rob you granny.' He put the empty coconut on the kitchen table and turned to the door. 'I will take this in to Sister Patterson and then chop one for you.'

And that's what he did. When he came back he handed me a coconut with the top chopped off, and put the sack with the rest on the kitchen floor next to the pumpkin basket.

'I shave off the top of them a'ready so when you granny want another one you just have to open it with a knife. You think you can do that?'

'Yes, Maas Josh.' I didn't bother to tell him I'd been chopping coconuts since I was nine.

'A'right, I going now. Look after you granny, you hear.'

'Yes, sir.'

Not a word about the incident at the post office. I waited for Gran to call and ask me about it. Nothing. I took her the pumpkin soup when it was ready and waited for some hint that she knew.

'That Maas Joshie is such a nice man,' was all she said.

I had to agree with her. And that was before we found out just how nice he was.

I'd just finished washing the dishes from dinner

when I heard another, 'Mind you dog!' It was Miss Hannah from the corner shop.

'Maas Joshie tell me you granny sick,' she said. I bring her some milk stout to build up her strength.'

By the end of the evening, seven people had come bringing fruit, vegetables and various bottled concoctions to build up granny's strength. She was exhausted by the time the last one left, and so was I. I fell asleep almost as soon as I lay down, but not before I'd made a promise to myself to buy at least three ice creams a week from Maas Josh.

In all the excitement, I completely forgot about Cousin Sophie's letter.