

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES...The Wit and Wisdom of Miss Ivy

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I have a friend who lives just around the corner, one of the few I have been able to see in the past couple of months of social distancing. More accurately, she is a friend of my partner Luke, his other woman, living five minutes away. During lockdown he has been her sole carer, in place of the shifts of official guardians who would previously visit several times a day to check on her (to her occasional irritation at the intrusion). She prefers the way things are now, with Luke as her helpmeet. In full command of her faculties and mobility, Miss Ivy Watts is just two months short of her 104th birthday, and requires little supervision to navigate her daily routine. She and Luke – whom she sometimes teasingly calls “Mr Bug” - have bonded like partners of old, though their friendship is relatively recent, dating from when he began visiting her couple of years ago, since discovering through acquaintance with her niece how close to him Miss Ivy resides. They both hail originally from Guyana. She has taught him how to bake patties, he has taught her to use her microwave and arranged for her to have a walk-in shower fitted, as well as installing a one-touch press-button telephone so she can stay in touch with family and friends.

Ivy was born on 29 July 1916, to Margaret Elizabeth (*née* Grant) and William Theophilus Watts in Fellowship, a predominantly African village in West Coast Demerara, British Guiana (now Guyana). The First World War was at its height in Europe, and in the month of her birth, the biggest and most infamous military clash of WWI took place - the Battle of the Somme, which claimed the lives of more than a million soldiers. Born on exactly the same day as centenarian Miss Ivy was African-American swing and jazz guitarist Charlie Christian, whose life by contrast with hers would be cut short at the age of 25 in 1942; he had contracted TB some years earlier, and was buried in an unmarked grave in Texas, only decades later being inducted into the nation’s Jazz Halls of Fame.

With existence in that era often a precarious matter, Miss Ivy has beaten the odds. She grew up in a hardworking family where life’s simple things were appreciated and enjoyed. She remembers that it was community in particular that mattered. Her father was an animal farmer who minded cows and pigs, as well as working as a pork-knocker (a freelance prospector for diamonds and gold in the Guyanese interior). Her mother was a housewife who birthed six children, three boys and three girls. Ivy was the second child and eldest girl. Through domestic science classes at school and at a social club known as the Sunshine Club, Ivy learned everything necessary to run a smooth household.

“My mother couldn’t find money to buy the uniform for me to join the Girl Guides. But we had the Sunshine Club, our own thing. We get by very well. Sing, dance, do embroidery - everything... The overseer for the village, he get married to my relative, and she had a piano so we used to go there and practise... And when they does do concert at school, you know how they does roll up the curtain? You see the light get on you and then you bow or curtsey. Wooow! I used to sing, let me tell you... We had good times.... ‘Too proud to beg and far too upright to steal.’ We had so many mottoes from school, things to guide you through your life. ‘Before you do a thing, think what the end would be.’ So if you did go astray, you did *want* go astray, because the people from school do them best.”

Her journey was not to be easy. When Ivy was in her early 20s her mother died suddenly aged 45, and it was left to Ivy to raise her younger siblings – Edna, Donald, Vincent and Doris (eldest brother Joseph predeceased their mother). “Ivy, you are the big one – you must look after them,” she was told.

“Well, my mother she ain’t have no life. My mother didn’t leave a penny, so I reckon she must be left her blessing. And that was all,” she says philosophically. “Hard work, struggle...”

Ivy never married: “Me no depend on any man. Care yourself, that’s what you got to do.” She has always successfully provided not only for herself but as necessary for relatives. Eventually, like other migrants seeking self-improvement, she took the opportunity to travel abroad and, via Barbados and New York, reached Britain in 1979. She has lived ever since in North London, making her living as a seamstress, crediting her longevity on the fact that she has been self-sufficient. She could have bought a house but decided that she alone did not need one, and is happy to be where she is.

“It’s convenient. Look where the road is. Look where Luke lives. He no got to get bus, he ain’t even need bicycle. Mr Luke only got fi walk – he nah run, he nah drive,” she laughs. “You know there is a God? Cheers! Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallei-lujah! Wow! Where your glass? Chin-chin!” She does a little twist dance in her rocking-chair, singing: “*And I drink me wine and I tumble down... bumbadum-ba-ba-beedabeeda, bumbadum!* You can’t go further than there...the floor is the limit... O mi Gawd. I thank you. I got a life. I used to live a life and it’s still a life because of ‘Mr Bug’. You can stand the bites! Don’t worry, you scratch this side, and you dig that side, then you steady, pull yourself together. All is well. And I tell you, I am so blessed, so thankful. No talk behind your back.”

Something through the window catches her attention. “Look outside. Perfect. Not even breeze blowing. Watch the tree. Dead still. And them trees does normally be dancing. If you see them rock and roll,’ she demonstrates, “double down, come up back. Look them now! Still, still, still. Hmm. Not a leaf moving. Like if somebody just put them there and hold them. Normally these trees does be swaying, tossing to and fro,” she swings her arms, “and now look them. Not a wind. Eh-eh!”

Life in lockdown is a strange experience, comparable with nothing she has ever known. While the Spanish flu ravaged Europe when she was a child, she escaped harm within her family’s frugal existence on the South American continent. She feels sorry for today’s generation. The numbers of the dying shock her and she is fully aware of being safe and secure in the sanctuary of her modest council apartment. Remaining a fiercely independent woman, she is delighted that she did not make the move to sheltered accommodation that some had suggested might be better. The figures for those vulnerable elders who have succumbed to the virus in so-called care homes are tragically high, since the needs of these residential establishments have been neglected by successive (Conservative) governments. Miss Ivy, sharp of eye and brain, is grateful to have retained her health.

Her home occupies a ground-floor space easy for her to navigate unaided, renovated by Luke in the past year with fresh paint, new wallpaper and fancy curtains, converting it into a warm, user-friendly area that she loves. The walls are decorated with some of her favourite things: proverbs, a map of her native

land, memorabilia of a bygone age - a paraffin lamp, mechanical china clocks (no longer functioning) and other ornaments. Mostly there are photographs to tell a story of close but dwindling family - pictures from special dress-up occasions with her siblings and their descendants, of her younger self posing in stylish hats and patterned frocks. One wall displays a congratulatory certificate marking her 100th birthday; on another, pride of place is given to a framed poster of Barack Obama, whose inauguration as the first black president of the USA was unimaginable until it actually happened – well, could anyone have conceived either that the White House would have its current occupant? A polished wood radiogram is part of the furniture, though superseded by a more manageable device for playing her treasured LPs: Harry Belafonte, Louis Armstrong, Diana Ross, Lou Rawls, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole...

A much used television set keeps Miss Ivy alert to the continuing vagaries of the outside world.

What we are all experiencing is given context by the sweep of her life, encompassing as it does two world wars, several pandemics and all manner of political leadership – the stuff of both dreams and nightmares – bookended by the relative peace of rural Guyanese community, and the surreal calm and solitariness of urban lockdown. The last and youngest of her siblings died in late 2019, as Ivy was planning to visit her in Guyana for her birthday. So Ivy determined to attend the funeral. Not many would have thought to undertake the 12-hour transatlantic flight there and back at the age of 103, but she made it without incident. Talk of another trip is on hold only because of the Covid 19 crisis.

Miss Ivy worries for her young family members. She only had rain, sun and wind to contend with, never had to face anything like this. All this sickness she cannot understand. She can read without spectacles, needs no hearing-aid. She attributes her robust constitution to the fresh cow's milk she drank as a child (cans of evaporated milk now do duty instead), and swears by having a hard-boiled egg and an orange to start each day, an occasional evening tippie of Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry, sometimes pressing a can of Guinness on Mr Bug to share in her happy hour. She still has the moves – a video that went viral on the internet shows her dancing into her 103rd birthday party, while DJ Luke synced the strains of Tarrus Riley's "She's Royal" to her entrance. She carries a tune with feeling and, as a former member of the Older Women's Choir of Hackney, is wont to fall into song without prompting, imbuing any situation with irony or hilarity. Her very first trip in an ambulance last year for some hospital tests was an occasion for the accompanying medical staff to cherish as she entertained them throughout the journey with lively chat and vocal renditions, including "Show Me the Way to Go Home". Never having spent any time in a hospital ward she was wary of being admitted, but in the event enjoyed her brief stay, had only praise for the National Health Service staff, and could return soon enough to her own home.

As we all try to survive under the cosh of the virus, she muses: "Everything was all right long ago." In truth, her tried-and-tested mottoes have served her well. Her wit and wisdom shine bright. If she were standing for election to run a country, people could do worse than vote for Miss Ivy Watts.

"You see me here? What you see is what you get. ... I will tell you in your face. Like it or lump it. That is your blasted problem.... Me, I don't pretend." For every situation she recalls precepts learned in youth. Counselling against wasting food, she recites a poem from schooldays, ending triumphantly:

*'Tis wilful waste brings woeful want,
And I may live to say:
Oh, how I wish I had that bread
Which once I threw away.*

Then, chuckling, she adds part of a hymn, as a coda:

*Too late, too late! will be your cry,
Jesus of Nazareth has passed by.... Too late!*