



# Cecile

By Wandeka Gayle

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Cecile sat under the tamarind tree in the school yard during the mid-morning break watching other girls play sightings with the old juice carton ball. They never asked her to join, and she never asked to play. Ezra, a stocky boy in her grade six class, discovered her that first time and corralled the others into what would become a daily torment.

“Hey, String Bean! You don’t see is the wrong uniform you wearing?” he said.

Soon, a group of laughing children congregated as Ezra continued, “String Bean! String Bean!”

He didn’t stop his sing-song chant until he drew tears that had been there just below the surface at assembly. Then, Cecile had suffered the stares as the only one in green and gingham in a sea of brown and beige. Her grandmother had said it would be another two weeks before she got her new uniform.

That they made fun of her wearing the uniform from her last school was one thing. That calling her “String Bean” poked fun at her skinny limbs was quite another.

“Laugh wid dem, Ce-Ce,” her granny advised, “What you think I do when they call me ‘Queenie’ because my mother used to starch even my bloomers?”

Cecile said she did not care about those at that fool-fool country school because her mother would soon come back for her.

Granny May just sighed heavily and handed her another piece of jackfruit.

May’s home was a three-room house that sat on one acre of farmland, but Cecile had been reluctant to leave Mountain View in Kingston. On bus rides from school, she loved to watch the fishermen out on Kingston Harbour.

Cecile’s mother, Elouise, had told her the news quite casually one morning over hominy porridge.

“You going to your granny house for a while, Ce-Ce,” she had said, grating a little extra nutmeg into her bowl as she said it.

“Is not for long,” her mother continued. “I going to stay with your Auntie Mitsy in Miami.”

The next day, her mother put a whimpering Cecile, still in her All Age school uniform, on a bus to Manchester, and with a kiss and a wave, was gone.

It would be weeks before Cecile found out that her mother had, in fact, turned herself in to police on fraud charges hours after sending Cecile away.

Those first few days in Christiana, Cecile found refuge in the outdoors than in people, like now under a dwarf almond tree near the very edge of school property to avoid Ezra.

It was while she sat watching a woman hang sheets so white they were blue on her clothesline nearby propped up with bamboo stalks that Cecile heard a crinkling sound.

She turned to find it was a girl opening a piece of foil and biting into a sandwich.

The girl stopped chewing when she caught Cecile staring. “Is what?” she asked, grimacing.

The girl was at least half a foot shorter, and somehow this made Cecile smile for the first time in weeks.

“I’m in Grade six-B,” Cecile said. “What grade you in?”

“Grade six-C,” the girl answered grudgingly.

“So why you eating all the way out here?” Cecile pressed.

“I always come out here,” the girl said, continuing to eat. “You notice me never ask you why you wearing a different uniform and why *you* in *my* spot? By the way, is true that you whole family get kill off in a turf war?”

“What?” Cecile stood up and faced her. “These country pickney don’t know nothing about me. My mother in Miami if you must know.”

Cecile noticed the girl was looking over her shoulder and followed her gaze to a boy in a torn merino and fraying shorts pulling a cart laden with plump crocus bags along the trainline.

“Shane!” the girl said racing over to him.

The boy left the cart and walked to meet her at the fence. The girl nodded at something he said, and he patted her shoulder. Cecile marvelled that this was the smiling girl trying to appear menacing moments before.

They looked back at Cecile and laughed, and the smile forming on Cecile’s face quickly dissolved.

Then, the bell rang.

“Who is that?” Cecile asked, as the girl ran by her.

“My brother,” she said.

“What him say?” she asked, running after her.  
“That you ask too much blinking questions.”

“I should get my right uniform next week,” Cecile said hesitantly when she found the girl sitting on the stone near the barbed wire fence a week later.

Today, Cecile had worn a white shirt and a brown skirt, which Granny May felt was as close as she could find to the uniform until the following week.

“*You* back again?” the girl, who Cecile learned was called Tanella, asked. “You hear from your mother in foreign yet?”

Cecile used a stick to draw in the earth. She looked back at Tanella and frowned at the girl’s smirk.

She had heard from her mother, but it was purely by accident.

One day after school, Cecile had found an envelope Granny May left on the old piano with her mother’s name on it. It did not have the airmail stamp like those her father or her Aunt Mitsy sent but came from a place called Fort Augusta.

Cecile snatched it and went into the backyard. The looping words said that Elouise was sorry to burden her mother with Cecile, that she did not know how she would go the next four years in prison, that she never wanted Cecile to visit her there.

Cecile lingering at: “Don’t bring Cecile for visits.”

Then, she folded the letter, put it back on the piano, crawled under the outside steps, and wept.

“Yes,” she said so forcefully to Tanella now as though the lie had to be dislodged from her throat. “She going to send for me to go to Miami too.”

“At least your mother far away,” Tanella said. “I wish mine was too.”

“You don’t mean that,” Cecile said, tossing the stick on the ground.

“You can say anything. You don’t know that woman,” Tanella replied.

“Is because she don’t make your brother come to school?” Cecile asked.

Tanella got up and looked over at the train line. “She have to choose one, not both,” she said solemnly.

Cecile looked at her but didn’t know how to respond.

“I going to get a suck-suck from the tuck shop,” she said finally. “You coming?”

But as she said that, she spotted Shane climb over the fence and walk toward them.

Tanella’s face lit up. Cecile saw that he was as ragged as he was the first time she had seen him.

“Why you girls don’t play ring game like normal pickney?” he said from two feet away.

“You act like you too big when you turn eleven next month just like me,” Tanella said.

“You’re twins?” Cecile asked.

“Twins?” Shane laughed.

“Him have a different mother,” Tanella said quickly.

“Tanella stop tell story,” Shane said.

“Was just a little joke, man,” she said, chuckling.

“We grow up in the same community,” Shane said.

Cecile looked back at Tanella who had folded arms and a pouted lip, feigning outrage.

“No wonder they call you ‘Pit Mouth.’ You tell too much lie, man.” Shane laughed.

In one motion, Tanella reached up and slapped Shane upside the head. “You really use that name that Ezra call me?”

“You won’t like it if I hit you back,” he grumbled, rubbing his head.

“Ezra always calling people names,” Cecile said quietly.

“See. String Bean understand,” Tanella said.

“Don’t call me that,” Cecile said softly.

“What? String Bean?” Tanella said, turning and staring full into Cecile’s face.

Cecile did not remember hitting her, but suddenly Shane was pulling them from the dust where Cecile had been pummeling Tanella with tight fists.

“Tanny! Why you mus’ trouble people so?” he was saying as they struggled in his grip.

When her breathing settled, Cecile looked over at Tanella, whose braids were coming loose and sticking up around the crown of her head. Her socks and face were brown with the savannah.

Tanella broke out laughing and pointed at Cecile whose white shirt now had streaks of cow faeces and was ripped right down the front.

Cecile looked down, screamed, tugged off the shirt, and crossed hands over her bare chest.

“Is what you hiding?” Tanella asked. “You no even have no breast yet.”

The bell rang, and they looked back at the school pavilion, but the three of them just stood there.

“I live over that train line,” Tanella said finally. “I can lend you a blouse.”

“I not going anywhere with you,” Cecile said, dropping her hands at her side.

“Well, go back, and let the principal deal wid you,” Tanella said.

Cecile stood there for a moment, it slowly dawning on her that it was better than having to explain her nudity.

“Is that house there,” Shane said, pointing to one of the dilapidated wooden houses with the bamboo stalks and the clothes line. Cecile stared at Tanella who was no longer smirking.

“I can never understand you girls,” Shane said, as they walked toward the fence. “If anybody should get one lick up him head-side is that boy, Ezra.”

Tanella laughed. “No. The only way to catch that little piglet is through him gut,” she said.

“One time, this girl at my old school did pour urine into a teacher’s passion fruit drink,” Cecile said.

“Piss? Yes, we should do that!” Tanella said, promptly falling over the fence in another bout of giggles. “Can imagine him face when he see what him really drinking?”

Cecile grimaced. She stood on the train-line and looked back at the school building, the savannah now once again a bare expanse of brown grass.

Tanella's yard was strewn with rusting tires and the hull of a car. Bottle fragments littered the red earth, yet as Cecile followed Tanella into the house, the girl made no acknowledgement or apology. Shane had said goodbye at the barbed wire fence and had pushed the hand-cart in the opposite direction towards town.

Inside the house was as decrepit as the outside. Cecile knew that by contrast, her grandmother had little but had always managed to keep a clean house. When she had lived with her mother in Kingston, Cecile had far more, and Miss Angela came once a week to keep it in order.

Now, looking at the scandal bags strewn all about, the trail of red dirt, the heaps of mouldy clothing, the piles of yam skins and orange peels, Cecile wondered if she wanted to borrow Tanella's blouse, after all.

"Come. Come," Tanella called her as they went into a room.

Cecile stopped short when she saw a woman lying on a floral sofa that sagged halfway to the floor.

Tanella turned around to look at Cecile.

"Is okay. She not dead," she said casually, pointing to the bottle on the floor. "She just finish her morning rum."

"Who is she?" Cecile whispered, following Tanella into the next room.

"The woman that say she is my mother," Tanella said, closing the door behind them.

Cecile looked around at the unpainted walls, the bare mattress, and the muted sheet, hanging as make-shift curtains at the window, as Tanella riffled through a drawer set. Then, she was holding out a faded t-shirt to Cecile.

"Is my P.E. shirt. You can borrow it until tomorrow."

Cecile sniffed it. It smelled faintly of cake soap and moth balls.

"Why you smell it so?" Tanella asked, for the first time looking hurt. "You not even say thanks."

"Sorry. Thanks," Cecile said, quickly pulling it over her bare skin.

A roach crawled out from under the bed, and Cecile jumped. It swooped into the air and perched on the hanging sheet.

"You never see cockroach before? Even city girls know about roach." Tanella laughed.

Tanella went to the window and looked out. Cecile followed, sitting on the ledge beside her.

"I staying here until my real mother come for me," Tanella said.

They could see the school pavilion from where they sat. Cecile wondered how many licks she could get for missing the bell, or if she could get suspended for something like this.

"You don't think she is your mother?" Cecile asked.

"No. Them tell me they find me out at the Church of God as a baby, and this lady decide to take me." Tanella said, hissing her teeth.

Cecile looked at her with a wary eye. She watched Tanella bend down and pick up a dog-eared Grade-six Reader.

"Is like this one," Tanella said, turning the pages, "The mother used to brush her daughter hair at night, hair that long long down her back, like river maid. The girl stupid and give pure talking to. If I have a mother like that, I wouldn't so fool-fool. I tell that lady out there that one day me ago run 'way and find my real mother."

Cecile remembered with dread the time when her mother told her she could not get the grater cake Granny May had sent one Sunday because she failed Language Arts. Cecile had gone to her room, closed her eyes tightly, and prayed her wicked mother gone, the mother who had brushed *her* hair for school, who had even let her press it out with the hot comb and had curled the bangs when she was the flower girl in her Auntie Mitsy's wedding.

*I should tell her the truth,* Cecile thought.

"You think my real mother could have hair like that that long long down into her back?" Tanella asked in a small voice.

Cecile noticed as Tanella's eyes became glassy.

"Maybe," Cecile said. "A girl with coolie hair in my class used to have to plait up her hair and wear it in a high bun it was so long."

Tanella chuckled and wiped her nose. "That hair you can buy out at Miss Daphne shop," she said.

They sat like that for a moment, looking at the drawings, not saying anything.

Then, they heard stirrings in the next room. Tanella dropped the book and moved the sheet. She deftly removed two of the wooden louvres and squeezed through the opening in the window.

"Come on. Her hand very heavy when she ready."

Cecile followed suit, climbing through. They ran across the backyard all the way to the barbed wire by the playing field.

When Cecile got to the fence, she lingered half-way over it, and looked back to find a figure in the window. She felt her heart sinking to see the woman's drooping, blood-shot eyes.

She thought of her own mother sitting in a cell so far away from her and wondered if she now looked this haggard, this distressed. Perhaps she would write her a letter to say that she had begun to forgive her, to say that this country school was not so bad but that she wished her back and loved her still.

"Hurry," Tanella shouted, already near the dwarf almond tree. Cecile jumped down.

She would ask Granny May for money for postage stamps, she thought as she sprinted clear across the field. <sup>2</sup>

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