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The Busta Cake Mistake

Maplewood, NJ, has one Jamaican corner store, Pop's Grocery. While both of my parents were born and raised in Jamaica, they decided to move to Maplewood before raising my three older siblings and me, so the only things from my Jamaican culture that resonated with me were stories of their upbringing and some of the delicious dishes that my mother would cook every week like curry chicken and oxtail with rice and peas. While I would hear these stories and find interest, they never really stuck with me because of where I grew up. My culture was something I was never consciously aware of since I wasn't surrounded by many people who were Jamaican except for my immediate family and my cousins, who I wouldn't see too often. So, when it came to how my environment would raise me outside my house, I would never actually absorb Jamaican culture most of the time. This would, in turn, lead me to develop a very suburban western accent rather than my parent's thick patois accent they got in Jamaica.

One prominent instance that made me realize the sheer extent of my detachment from my culture was when my mother asked me to make a quick run to Pop's Grocery. While I am not a stranger to this store and usually go there every other week to pick up stuff for my mom, during those occasions, I only had to grab the fresh Hardo bread that they would keep right by the front entrance, which made it so that I never had to actually speak to anyone there. However, this particular time, my mom asked me to pick up the Hardo bread and two snacks, one of which I had never heard of before.

"Johnathan, when you enter the store, I need you to get the bread and two other snacks I am craving. They're called Busta cakes and Excelsior crackers."

While the Excelsior crackers sounded familiar since they're just the brand name of these water crackers my mom buys often, I had no clue what a Busta cake was.

"B-Booosta cakes? What are those?"

"No, BUSTA CAKES. They're this coconut snack that I used to eat all the time when I was little. I want you to see if they have it there."

I stared at her blankly for a second, trying to understand what she said. Even though she clarified to me how to pronounce this candy, I don't think she realized that just speaking it louder would help me understand since she still said it with an immensely thick patois accent, which is something she doesn't usually do, so it was tough to comprehend especially when she's saying an unfamiliar word.

We entered the car to begin our short ride to the corner store. I didn't think it could get any hotter than it was outside with the harsh August heat, but my mom's 2008 Honda Civic took me up on that challenge. The car's humidity simultaneously made me sweat, dry my eyes, and burn my nose, which was quite impressive. As I put my seatbelt on, the metal edge branded the skin of my thighs; I took this as a final straw with the heat and reached over to turn the AC all the way until the car sounded like an airplane revving for takeoff. To combat this, I also turned the radio on. Alternatively, the sound of Z100 FM radio hummed in my ears as I anxiously tried to whisper the pronunciation of this snack under my breath. The drive was short, but it felt like we were going on a cross-country road trip. From the looks of it, everyone seemed to be outside, playing, laughing, and enjoying the latter half of their summer. The sky was pitch baby blue with no single cloud in sight, explaining the unforgiving heat beating down. As we slowly approached Pops Grocery and pulled into the parking lot, I turned to my mom.

"What should I do if I can't find the...uhh.. Busta cakes?"

"Just ask the cashier. It might be behind the counter."

This was the response I dreaded.

My mom then put the car in park and grabbed her purse to hand me the money, and I reluctantly took it and exited the vehicle to begin my walk into the store. I had no idea what these candies looked like, but I tried to paint a vivid picture in my head of what they could be so that I wouldn't have to ask the cashier for any help. Since Lord knows that would be me just begging to be humiliated.

I approached the little steps by the entrance and pried open the warm aluminum doors. My arrival was immediately proclaimed to the entire store by the blaring jingle bells that began to rattle and clank obnoxiously. As I took the first steps towards my doom, I was bombarded with a gust of cold wind that starkly contrasted the humidity of the outside dusk. Once I was entirely inside the store, the door slammed shut behind me like a trap door. Now, only one thing was on my mind.

*There's no turning back now.*

As I walked around the store, its aesthetic was very welcoming and unapologetically prideful. It'd be tough for one not to know this is a Jamaican store. From the vintage soccer posters plastered all around the four corner interior to the innumerable amount of Jamaican flags hanging on the walls and stamped on all the food packaging, it was safe to say that the likelihood of this store having any “Canadian” syrup was low, which is a bummer because I was really craving some. I wanted to make this trip quick, so I locked in and re-focused.

*Ok, ok, she said she wants Hardo bread, Excelsior crackers, and Bu-Baster cakes.*

This was the one item that I knew would give me the most trouble.

*They usually keep the Hardo bread in the front by the ATM, so I'll come back for that later. Let me check for those Excelsior crackers.*

I walked down the first aisle and made zig-zags through all of them until I found the crackers. As I walked towards the store's back, the reggae humming from the cashier's speaker got quieter and quieter. Then, it amped up as I walked towards the next aisle. This process repeated until I reached the bottom of the 4th aisle, where I stumbled upon a red, black, and yellow bag that conveniently had the name EXCELSIOR right front and center of the packaging. I grabbed it and walked along the other aisles to find the Busta Cakes. I made my way through all of the aisles, and the reality of my situation finally came to fruition.

*Damn, I'm going to have to ask the cashier. It's definitely behind the counter.*

I made my way to the front of the store and grabbed the Hardo bread since it was next to the register. I felt around each loaf to find the best one and eventually stumbled across a fresh bag of soft, warm Hardo bread that felt like it had just come out of the oven. It even had condensation building up inside the bag from the enclosed warmth. I picked it up and took all my items to the cashier. The cashier was a man who appeared to be in his late forties with dreads and wearing a Jamaican soccer team jersey. He sat down hunched over, looking at his phone and scrolling through his Instagram feed. I stood there waiting for him to ring me up, but it wasn't until I noticed his dreads were covering his eyes that I realized he probably couldn't see me. To get his attention, I crinkled the Excelsior crackers bag to make a sharp screech piercing through the reggae playing on the radio. This finally got the cashier to notice me; he put his phone away and turned the radio down, but not all the way off, so it still quietly orchestrated our conversation.

"Wagwan, Howdeedo?"

From what my parents have taught me, I knew this meant, "Hello, how are you doing?"

"Hello, I'm doing good. How about you?"

The contrast between the cashier's thick patois and my suburban dialect was painfully present. The cashier didn't even bother to respond to me. Instead, he gestured for me to give him the stuff in my hands. I handed it to him, and he began to bag my stuff.

"Dis all you gettin' today?

That was it. The focal point of my anxiety finally exposed itself in front of me. The part I've been practicing in my head to combat since being in the car. The part that determines whether I walked out of here a prideful winner or a complete and utter fake Jamaican loser. I cleared my throat and looked him directly in the eyes.

"Actually, no. Do you guys have any Booster Cakes?"

*I really, really, really hope I said that right.*

The cashier, taken aback with confusion, looks at me.

"Say dat one more time for me."

*Dammit.*

"B-Booster Cakes, like, the coconut candy?"

The cashier stared blankly for a moment, then chuckled when he finally registered what I was poorly trying to say.

"OH! Boy, ya mean Busta cakes!? How many ya want?"

"Can I just get one pack, please?"

He reached down and pulled out a tiny pack of Busta cakes, with about 10 of them in the pack. He scanned it and put it into the bag.

"Anyting else?"

"No, that's it." There was an underlying sound of disappointment in my voice now.

"Alright, ya total is $14.23."

I handed him the $15 my mom gave me, and he put the change and the receipt in the bag.

As I grabbed the bag, the cashier halts and asks me a question.

"Boy, where ya from?"

Not really sure where he was going with this question, I confusingly answered him with honesty.

"I-Im from here, like Maplewood. I live a few blocks down from here."

"Yeah, I can tell. Ya don't sound Jamaican. Ya parents from dare?"

"Yeah, both of my parents are from Jamaica but came here to raise me."

"Tell em fa teach ya more patois, ya gon need it if ya gon shop here or anywhere Jamaican fa dat matta."

"Alright, I'll ask them to. I know some of it, but I gotta learn more."

"Yea, good, cuz boy, dat suburban accent gotta go!"

He laughed it off, but I didn't find it funny at all. My face and ears accumulated a slight burn; if I were white, my face would be tomato red with embarrassment. I grabbed the bag and left the store with my head down. Even as I rushed out of the store, the cashier managed to get one final taunt out.

"Take care! Come back if ya wan more BUSTA cakes!" His laughter echoed as I exited the store and re-emerged into the blazing heat. I made my way to the car and got inside. I told my mom about what happened to me in the store, and she also found it highly humorous. I, on the other hand, felt betrayed by her.

*How could you do this to me? My whole life, you've raised me to only somewhat resonate with a culture that, in actuality, I have no knowledge and genuine pride in. Even other Jamaicans can tell I don't really live life through this culture. That's disgraceful.*

I didn't say this whole spiel to her while she laughed in my face. Instead, I told her that I wanted things to change.

"Mom, I know you find it funny, but I really can't ever go through that again. I need you to start teaching me EVERYTHING about Jamaica. I need to learn patois, the soccer teams, the best music, absolutely EVERYTHING. Please."

Once my mother realized how much this really affected me and how serious I was, she stopped laughing and matched my energy.

"Alright, if you want to learn more about Jamaica, I'll teach you more. I'm sorry if the cashier picked on you too much. I'll make sure that doesn't happen to you again." She started the car, and we pulled out of Pop’s Grocery on our way back home.

Since that moment, I've made an active effort to immerse myself in my culture as much as I could. I told myself I wouldn't return to that store until I felt confident not to allow that situation to repeat itself. To this day, I have yet to enter the store, but that's to be expected. It will take more than two years to reverse engineer seventeen years of detachment from my culture. Gratefully, I am comfortable knowing that I am more knowledgeable about my culture now than I was then, and I am much more prideful and outspoken about my culture now than I was then. The next time I enter Pop’s Grocery, I will order the Busta cakes with confidence and pride, and if the same cashier is there, hopefully, we can both get a good laugh at that brief, but pivotal moment in my life we shared those few years ago.