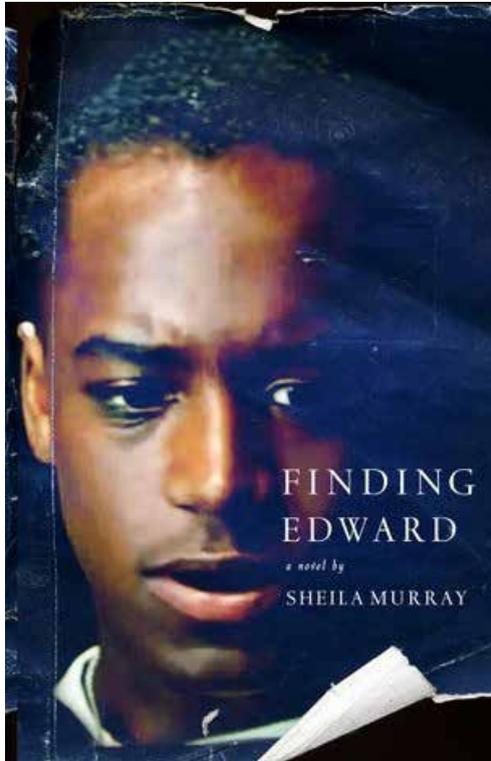


**Excerpt from *Finding Edward*
by Sheila Murray**



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One

The night his mother died, she said, "I'm glad you come to me early this evening, darlin'. You're a good boy, Cyril." He said nothing. Didn't remind her he often left his friends to come home early, that he always carried the family cell phone so he could be reached if needed. His mother's illness was unpredictable. Although the attacks were infrequent, the babies, his brother and sister, were too small to help her. It had been two years already since the babies' father died, and Cyril's father had been gone for so long he was almost forgotten. There was no one.

Her breathing woke him. The constricted suck of breath she'd made before. Worse this time. He sat beside her and fanned the hot air hanging heavy and moist over her head. His sister cried into her pillow, and his baby brother stroked her hair in imitation of Cyril with their mommy. After fifteen minutes, Cyril sent his brother to fetch a neighbour with a car to take them to the hospital. He made himself watch the fear in his mother's eyes as, desperate, she stared into his. He felt himself freeze in the August heat. The hospital was nearly two hours away.

His mother's breathing lasted for less than twenty minutes. It was noisiest just as the road turned toward Brown's Town. Then it stopped. Right at the silk cotton tree, with its enormous crown and ancient tendrils of strangling ficus vine dropping fifty feet from its branches. Just as the sky lightened with another morning. Their neighbour stopped the car. "For respect," he said. "I'll leave you with her for a little while."

The funeral was noisy with tears and singing. The pastor said the

right things because he'd known Cyril's mother for all of her forty-one years. She'd gone to that church just about every Sunday of her life. The wake lasted until four in the morning. Even the old ladies stayed with it. His mother was beautiful in a pink coffin with satin and lace for her pillow. Cyril felt singularly alone, his grief stained by anger at the tragedy of his mother's death and the dollar difference between those Jamaicans who could afford their medicines and those who could not. The ground he stood on had become unsteady, saturated with sadness.

It was a very different funeral from the formal Anglican observance that had served his mother's employer — whose house she'd cleaned for ten years — his adopted grandpa, Nelson. That had been four years earlier. Cyril, in a borrowed black suit, had sat rigid on a wooden pew, immersed in heartbreak and loss. Afterward, at the reception, he'd been unable to speak when Nelson's friends asked him how he'd manage without Nelson's tutorship, his mentorship. Cyril called it love.

But as his mother rested in the splendour she'd saved a lifetime for, her friends squeezed the speech from him, plied him with love and faith, gave him their very best counsel come straight from Jesus. They held up their church-sister's son, took their share of his pain.

After the funeral, the babies went to live with his mother's sister in Alexandria. Families were expandable. Sisters, grandmothers, aunties, and uncles looked after kids whose parents spent years working at seasonal jobs abroad, coming home in the winter. Or, having left for good, produced more family that expanded around the globe. Jamaicans were travellers. Many of the educated poured into the brain drain of doctors and lawyers and engineers who travelled to English-speaking countries, making new lives, creating middle-class English and American and Canadian chil-

dren who would visit their extended families back in Jamaica for Christmas holidays at the beach and stay in homes where hibiscus bushes were strung with tinsel and holiday poinsettia grew vigorous and tall in people's gardens.

Cyril's immediate family was tiny: his mother's sister, Vi, was his only real aunt. But there were many cousins whose blood relationships were muddled and whose catch-all titles were uncle or aunty. Canada-Uncle Junior was one of these.

"Two more small ones won't make much difference," said his Aunt Vi as she embraced Keesha and Daren. "But, Cyril, you must go to Junior in Canada. When your mommy was still with us, she wanted you close. But here is not your future. Foreign's where you're going to find it."

The goodbyes and promises followed. Small gifts and requests. The excited jostle of neighbours and the tears of his brother and sister. His college friends, the boys, pledged to meet up when they finished their studies. Cyril had become the enviable one whose life was suddenly thrown wide open, though his friends' parents watched with some concern.

He'd paid the bills, the electricity and the water and the costs left over from the funeral, after the executor lawyer had released Nelson's legacy, intended for Cyril's graduation from college. The lawyer had said the money could come to him now, given the circumstances. Cyril gathered the courage to leave his home and the people there who made up his family. He did it immersed in a grief that made him compliant with other people's wishes.

Cyril left home because his mother was gone and his father had only ever been absent. He left because he had so badly failed to keep his mother safe. Had not challenged the illusory pride that had stopped her from asking other good folk for help. The cost of a prescription was a small thing beside the value of her life. She'd

thought her God would keep her safe. Cyril had failed to understand the peril she'd brought upon her herself. He had neglected to protect his mother even though he'd been aware of her naïve belief.

Because other people said he should, Cyril used a part of Nelson's gift to buy an airplane ticket. He took two suitcases from the giveaways that Nelson's family had provided — one small, one large. He bought black shoes and black socks for Foreign, and a wallet to safeguard the precious plastic cards that would prove to the world that he was who he claimed to be. A new dark-blue passport contained the coveted Canadian visa, granted because of Junior's assurance to Canada that Cyril would not become a burden.

His mother's friend drove him to the airport. In addition to his two suitcases, Cyril had a small carry-on bag with Nelson's address book inside. He wore a dark-blue blazer that had belonged to Nelson. It was a little too big; he walked with a stiff, straight back so his shoulders filled it. He forced a confident stride as he approached the check-in desk.

"How long are you going to be away?"

His mouth was sticky and dry, and he licked at his lips to wet them. "At least ..." He sucked moisture to his tongue. "It will be at least a year," he said, watching the clerk's face to see if the open-ended nature of his travel shocked her as it did him. She smiled and handed him back his passport. His excitement overcame his trepidation. He was to be travelling as Nelson's friends did. As his father had. Easy as the drive from Kingston to Negril. He'd have real wings to fly across the sea.

His mother's friend watched him as he walked through the glass doors where only passengers were allowed. "Walk good," she called. "Send us an email when you get there." When Cyril turned to look back, stopped in a long line to pass through security, she'd already gone.

Cyril had never left his country before, had never been on a plane. When the engines roared and the huge thing began to hurtle down the runway, the old lady strapped in the seat beside him cried, "Jesus is taking the wheels," and Cyril's thrill spilled into laughter. He was flying into his future.

Face to the window, he saw below him the green miles of his mountains and the extraordinary turquoise sparkle of his sea, the big hotels of Montego Bay that were so quickly far away, distant ships on the water, and then, incredibly, the way clouds looked from the inside and then from high above.

When the captain announced they were thirty thousand feet above the ground, Cyril saw his mother moving through the brilliant blue sky: her thin and faded pink cotton nightgown, hairnet a cap on her head, knees curled in toward her chest, not quite fetal but deep asleep and unaware of her rush through the heavens. Her vulnerability startled him. He wiped his fingers over his eyes to push back tears. He was not surprised to see her there. He'd been waiting for her. "You are able to see through the creases in the universe," Nelson had once said. "You are four-eyed, but I promise you, Cyril, you are not destined to become an Obeah Man. Your ability is your own personal blessing, not for exploitation." His sight arrived without invitation and heightened his vision with a gauzy, bright light that changed what he saw. How he saw. When it happened, he stilled his mind and allowed himself to see what was revealed. It was his mother's gift; she'd had second sight too. "Don't tell your teachers, Cyril," she'd warned him. "It will trouble them. I have seen the spirits of the living and the dead all my life, and they are my friends." But the spirits hadn't warned him of the things that mattered most: the loss of Grandpa Nelson and then his mother. He had never missed his father, but he missed his mother in every step of each day.

“How about you, sir?” The woman’s voice pulled his attention from the window. “What would you like to drink?” He didn’t know. But on seeing a drink can he recognized near the front of her trolley, he said, “I’ll have a Coke, please.” He felt a surge of anxiety because he had never before been served by a white woman and he didn’t know how much a drink would cost up here in the sky. All of the serving people were white. But there were lots of Black passengers, Cyril reminded himself. All being served by the same people. He was flying on an Air Canada airplane to Toronto. A place where most of the people would be white. All he had to do was figure out how white people in a white country behaved and comport himself appropriately.

“Pretzels or cookie?”

“Cookie, please.” He lowered his tray as the man in the seat on the aisle had done. The old lady fiddled with hers, and he helped. The trays anchored the both of them safely to their seats, along with their seatbelts. The waitress leaned across the man in the aisle seat with Cyril’s Coke. The lady, who had first refused a drink, now followed Cyril’s lead, understanding that it was included in the enormous price of the ticket. He smiled at her, and she nodded back. *Could be my granny*, he thought, but his adopted Grandpa Nelson had been much younger than she when he died.

Nelson was gone, and all of the kindness and patience that he’d given to Cyril was lost with him. But Cyril knew what Nelson expected of him now. To be a successful person in all the ways that mattered, which meant that Cyril should be kind in turn to the people he was going to meet, who would make up his new life.

“Where you going, baby?” asked the old lady in a thin, respectful voice that made him think of church.

“To Toronto like you.”

“I know that, darlin’, but why you going? I’m going to my daugh-

ter. She lives in Scarborough. You know it?"

"No."

"I have been a house cleaner all my life, but now I'm going to be a grandmother living in Canada with my grandbabies. I prayed for this a long time."

"I had an adopted Grandpa Nelson. My mom cleaned his house, but he looked after me."

"That's not right," she said, voice suddenly sharp. "An employer is not your child's keeper."

"I didn't live with him. But I spent a lot of time there from six years old, like with a grandpa. He was a university professor. He taught me things."

"White man or Black man?"

"Black man."

"What tings he teach you?"

"Fast cars. Nature and wild things. Magic stories. Poetry. Philosophy. Then grown-up things."

"Ladies?"

"No."

Cyril laughed as she kissed her teeth.

"*Chupse!* Young men should know about ladies. Learn it in school. How old are you?"

"Twenty. My mommy taught me how to behave with women."

"I can see that," said the old lady.

Nelson had a cancer that had grown, insidious, for a very long time. With its diagnosis, he'd finally learned the source of the pain in his shoulder and the exhaustion that had begun to haunt him. He was gone inside a month. Cyril was with him in the last days, as much as Nelson's family allowed. The drugs captured Nelson's mind almost immediately, and he rarely knew who Cyril was. He'd died with Cyril's school fees paid for the current term. A small

legacy was earmarked for university fees, contingent upon Cyril's graduation from Brown's Town Community College, where Cyril had been studying for only four months. With Nelson's passing, Cyril's mother had lost her reliable and generous client, and Cyril had to find work. Nam's Hardware, mirroring Nelson's generosity, increased Cyril's hours by hiring him as part-time counter help. Since then, his progress at college had been protracted — one course at a time — and he'd fallen behind.

"They're both passed over now," he told the old lady, who sucked loudly at her Coke through her straw.

Cyril longed for the company of spirits to travel with him. He turned back to the window. His mother and Nelson were gone, along with the sea and the world below, hidden by a blanket of cloud.

The plane began to shake and jolt like an old car on a bad road, turning Cyril's excitement into a churn of apprehension. Would the plane fall from the sky? Blow up in a mighty ball of fire? When the seatbelt signs dinged on and they announced everyone should return to their seats, his anxiety fixed on the nausea that pressed at the back of his throat. He assured himself that there was a sick bag in his seat pocket, though his embarrassment would be unbearable. He squeezed his eyes closed and pretended that he was in a car on the bumpy road to Sturge Town.