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Novel: No More Yellow.

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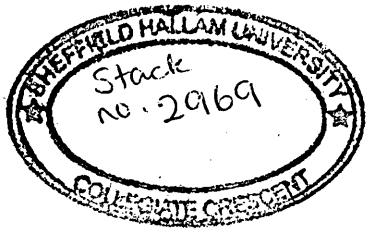
Novel: No More Yellow

Susan Jenifer Yearwood

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Master of Philosophy



October 2005

Chapter One

All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them. (Prov. 8:8)

I don't think about it anymore – that summer. Too many things came to pass that made me what I am today – and that's not saying much. When I say that I mean that I don't add up to much these days despite what I had dreamed for myself – me and Frankie against the world.

Frankie was my imaginary friend (I hate to even think about it now) that I conjured up at nights. When I say that she was my friend I use the term loosely as she had started to became a bitch to me that summer, asking things of me that even I balked at. Like telling me to have sex with the next man that offered, even if it was the funny Asian man who walked down the street noisily jangling his keys. Me and Baljit called him the finny-finny-hand-man after he invited us into his house one day and we ran away from him, the vision of his spotless kitchen through the front doorway staying with me. I'll go in next time, I thought to myself, or rather Frankie thought through me. I'll see what he has to offer. That's one of the things I remember about that summer without Baljit, the loss of what I came to decide were childish things. It reminded me of the time we had gone to the finny-finny-hand-man's house the Christmas before to sing carols and he had answered the door with a wide belt in his hands. Whatever threat

we posed wasn't clear, me with a battered carol book in my hands and Baljit sporting a bobbly, worn woollen hat over her waist length hair and sucking on cola cubes. I imagined that he saw more than one black girl pressing his doorbell through the obscured glass of his front door and a legion of long-haired Sikh girls. He flew out of the open door and screamed out, only to be confronted by two cowering children. I'll never forget the look on his face when his senses returned and he stared at us in bewilderment. My momentary terror faded as I watched vulnerability creep into his face, to be quickly replaced by fear and loathing. After that we played Knock Down Ginger like the girls that we were then, but that all ended that summer when I decided to take Frankie at her word and become someone else. I didn't think about it at the time as such, but I had just found out some devastating news and Frankie was fighting with me to reveal it to someone – anyone. The news was that my grandfather Stanley was not really my grandfather. He was my father. I had been lied to all these years. That wasn't the only overwhelming fact. My Mother was supposed to be his daughter but was in fact the daughter of a drifter who had come into Grandma (literally) by chance on a dismal day in St. George – Millicent had written as much. That was a lot for a young girl like me to take on, too much perhaps, but I didn't think like that at the time. Just felt hurt at Mum going away and not taking me with her, especially as Baljit was taken to the Gujurat that summer without even a word to me. The whole family, except for Dev, gone for six weeks. Without a word to me. I hadn't been outside the country, only to Wales, but had heard of kids from school that had. I bet their mothers wouldn't have even thought of leaving them at home. I thought about my Mother's excuse a lot that summer – she couldn't afford the both of us going; I would be bored; next time – and felt the tyranny of being a child under an adult's care. I wished

myself older more than anything and Frankie encouraged me in her sly, underhand way. I like being sly and underhand though I'm not too good at it. Not in the way that Frankie is. I chose the name because of its hidden ambiguity, as Miss Scott, my English teacher would call it. Frankie. It was cute to me, even cool. Better than my name – Ella. Better than anything I represented. It was just so easy for everyone to walk all over me when I was me but when I was lying in my bed in Frankie-mode nothing could touch me. Just look at what Mum had done to me. That wouldn't have happened if I were truly Frankie, body and soul. So I thought then, but they were childish thoughts, fit for nothing but the childish adult I was to become. Never quite grown yet, never quite coping.

That summer was the start of all my downfalls. Grandma's leaving was just yet another thing to contend with and the fact that I lost my grey pencil skirt to the new owners of the house on the Avenue, to be replaced by a blue mini skirt that showed off my black-kneed, skinny legs. At least by then I had grown out of the baby thing as that had started to get embarrassing, especially after the beating Mum gave me the last time it happened – wanting a baby was too much of a burden for any fourteen year old to bear.

I slept in a dead man's bed. Before she left for the island my Mum warned me that the mattress wheezed and told me it was the dead man coughing under my weight. I slept uneasily sometimes, thinking Frankie thoughts more and more. I pulled the mauve bed blankets over my head and slipped lower into the covers just in case he pulled his rough head from under the bed and asked me my name. Silly, I suppose, and considering I had begun to think of myself as a woman it all smacked of me being childish, not quite there yet. I didn't suppose my Mum would be scared of the man if she was

sleeping in this bed, if her shoulders had to nuzzle into springs instead of foam. I didn't suppose she would sleep anyway, as all she seems to do is listen to music into the small hours, old tape cassettes whirring into daybreak – *Do you really wanna know about hard times*. I didn't at the time.

The bed I slept in was in one of the spare rooms at my Grandma Lillian's house. I was staying while my Mum was away. She is four and I am two – that's what she used to say whenever I called her "she". Not the usual "She's the cat's mother" but something else to put me in my place, to steady me. I hadn't heard her say that to me for a while and even if she did say it I wouldn't listen. I hadn't even finished secondary school but I was still a woman. Didn't she say that I was? So she can't stop me. No one could stop me. Doing what? I didn't yet know.

I listened to myself closely at those times. This was new to me, this listening, because before I came to this realisation, I didn't know that there was anything to listen to. It seemed that the moment I stopped sucking on Blackjacks to harass the liquorice into making my tongue black, and by the time I hesitated in the dance that told me not to step on cracks in the pavement for good luck, that I had to listen for what was to come next. The past was all that was left of a missed opportunity, something unsung and dead in me. Now I had to find a way to shed the old clothes and put on something new. What used to be in the space of radio commercials and comic talk on the all night talk-ins I listened to had been bludgeoned into thinking unexpected things. And I was not dreaming. I say they were unexpected because I hadn't ever thought that way before and it was doing my head in. I actually don't remember the thinking process happening to me at all, except at school. What I do remember is that feeling of déjà vu coming to me for the first time, or it felt like the first time. And

it kept repeating itself, but I wasn't sure if it was happening or not or what it all meant. Sometimes, I would think of Mum and her putting her hair up into a bun with a chopstick through it. Then the next minute one side of her face would be caved in and bloody and I'd be watching laughing as if she's Lady Macbeth just jumped off the turrets like in the Polanski film. I didn't think that was fair. I don't think I liked her even then but I didn't think it was fair. Maybe if I was much kinder to her, showed her more kindness, was more of a kind person – what's another word for kind? One of the unexpected things was that I thought quite early on that it was OK to dislike her as I hadn't chosen her. She could be outside of me, just like anyone else around me was, so that when I heard her screaming and outright rage I didn't need to understand her or make it all my fault. She was a part of my past in the way that being a child had become the old me. I was becoming someone else, accepting what life threw up instead of denying my place in this new world. My dislike had a place, just as the new winklepickers I brought that needed re-heeling already, had a place. Wearing them took me to that new place, as did the dyed grey (the black colouring didn't take) pencil skirt I persuaded Mum to buy for me. At the time I wanted to say whatever I wanted to say and let go of the childish side of listening – listening to grown ups, doing as I was told – I could let them know how I felt instead of being careful with my words in the way that children always are.

That English teacher, the same one who showed us the Polanski film, took me aside just before the summer break and told me I had potential if I applied myself. I suppose she meant to be kind, but she talked down to me in the way that they all do. As if I was a nobody. Mum talked to me in that way, and I used to tolerate it because I had to. I didn't know what I would do when she got back from the island. Maybe I would tell her what I thought of her,

make it seem bold somehow as if I had something important to say, not some little tale told that usually brought on her scorn. Maybe that's where my potential lay, in setting the record straight now that I am a woman since it's come. I'm not the first out of all the girls at school my age, I know that. I know because when I went on that trip to Wales a couple of years ago with my classmates, Merri had a pair of bloodied knickers in a paper bag on top of the wardrobe, just by her bunkbed. I was tidying up and found it. So she had obviously seen it come before I had. I thought then that I was behind in some way (although I soon caught up), without that something that made me part of the group. Not that there was any group then or now that I could be part of. There were the standoffish girls with their Burberry macs and umbrellas, swapping boyfriends as if they were all in competition with each other. There were the tough girls putting on Jamaican accents and asking you to do their homework. And then, of course, there were outsiders who always found that other person to latch onto, to make them feel whole, a person who was just as lame as they were. I didn't see myself in any of these girls with their fakery and neediness. I didn't need anyone anymore.

The unexpected things come to me as noises and pictures in my mind. Not often, but enough to show that I could make myself new and let go of the old. I sometimes thought that I was mad, whatever that meant. I see things so clearly, then in the next second understood nothing at all. I wrote that down in my diary the day that it occurred to me, about three weeks before the summer break began. First I know, then I know nothing: I said. It scared me, not in the way that watching Daleks or noises in the dark from the fridge used to scare me when I was home alone and a child. But in a way that stayed with me when I pulled on my t shirt in the morning, and lay with me when I slept.

I thought of boys a lot then. If I had the potential I needed I would have longer legs because David Pleasant who was in 3C said that's what men look for in a woman. Leon Nurse looked at me funny sometimes, but I was convinced that if I had the legs to suit he would at least come up and talk to me just like he did the other girls. Baljit included. But some of them didn't have particularly long legs and in some cases mine were distinctly longer, so what could it be? I told my English teacher once that I could see things so clearly sometimes that it hurt, but it would be gone in the next second. What I called running jokes she called daydreams, and I knew that I could see more things more clearly if I had a boyfriend. Loads of girls at school had one. My Mum would kill me if I even considered it but she could talk. There was Sam with the overactive thyroid that made him sweat. He used to give me pocket money after I'd sat on his lap for at least ten minutes and watched cricket with him. Then there was uncle Courtney who taught me how to play jacks and poker. He was always eager to see me out of the house when he came round, and I would go to Grandma's who was never pleased to see me. I'd almost forgotten about Graham who was soft spoken and generous in a way none of the others had been. He would let me sit with them, even though my Mum didn't want me to, and tell me stories about his dad's time as a fighter pilot in the Second World War. I thought he was making it up.

I was in bed early that summer, and thinking of school and boys and men which made my head feel light and murky all at the same time. I moved the blanket from my head to look at the filmy grey sky with streaks of blue poking through. I hated the distance. You know the one that opens up between you and the sky just when you think its over with, just when you think you could

conquer anything. But then there's that great big distance and that open sky and everything isn't easy anymore.

I got up before the sound of my own breathing took on a life of its own. I felt icy fingers grab at my ankles once I stepped down, but I shook them off. I was too old for that. I was truly a woman now. A coldness slipped back around my shoulders and I shrugged and tossed my head as if I had hair to move. Just solid, fat plaits. Nothing like a woman's hairstyle, except if you count Mrs Styles who lives at 42. Funny, seeing a woman wearing tough looking short plaits at her age. Made her look dumb or something but she wasn't. Not according to Grandma. And she should know. I couldn't find the hot comb the day before but would look again today. Grandma could press my hair to at least give the impression of me being older and wiser, not some dumb kid, as Judy Blume would say.

Before the bed, before the sounds and images in my head and before Mrs Styles there was Cotsworth Gardens and the house I lived in with my Mum. She shouted less then, it seemed, but I could be wrong. Unreliable, me. Liked to think of things as being just so just for the hell of it, without any thought to how things really were. That's what I thought made me good at English classes. It's for the daydreamers or the ones with running jokes up top. When I think of the Gardens now I think of the time spent at the makeshift desk in my bedroom next to my Mum's room. It was an old dining table with wobbly legs and a rash of repeated berries and other fruits as a design on the lacquered top. Everything about the house was wobbly and unfinished: the stripped walls in the hallway uncovered unused wall plugs and ancient, shed wallpaper; the back door had to be shoved open and kicked closed as it was too big for its opening; the carpets had seen better days – the brown patterned one in Mum's bedroom

was in strips by the front window and curled at the edges so if you weren't careful you went flying over it. The Gardens was a safe haven for me. A quietness sat around it like a snood holding everything in so that it didn't escape from me. It was a lonely place also, without the noise and bustle of the Avenue (Grandma very rarely left the radio off during the day, listening to talk shows and information programmes that I felt were a bit deep for her), and I felt sheltered from intruders once the front door closed behind me and I was alone with Mum. She loved it too, but she hated the fact that I was there to share in it, so made a point of saying how it was her house and she would not pass it on to me because I didn't deserve it. In the end, there was nothing to pass on.

Despite it all, I loved the Gardens because it was big enough for me to escape to a corner and not be disturbed, with a book, like *Lolita* (the girl who lent it to me had said it was a dirty book, but it wasn't as far as I was concerned), which I just finished on the day we left the Gardens. We left chicken skin under the floorboards for spite when the bailiffs came and Mum cried for the first time ever, at least in my child-time. The chicken skin was my idea as I hated to let her see the slight laugh in me, that bit that wanted to find her funny instead of cry with her. So I said something to cover up the lack of my own tears and waited for her to do one of two things. Blow up like a newly lit Bunsen burner, or start to scheme. My Mum made plans. Plans that would make a master schemer falter in his step. The trouble was that I listened to her. I believed her when she said that she could do as well as Mrs Major's daughter and go to university to increase her chances of getting a better job. She was a nurse on day shift, just as Grandma Lillian had been, but didn't want to go onto night shift to make better money because it would disrupt her sleeping pattern – even though, as far as I could tell, she didn't sleep. So she attempted a course

in business management after lying about her qualifications and then tried to get other students to do her work for her. It all came to a head when a man who was helping her told one of their tutors and she was suspended, then left the course. Her other scheme running at the same time, how to find a man to finance me and my daughter through full time university and school, had run out of steam and I was left wondering why such a specialist in the art of scheming could come to live in a crumbling two bed, acid mother living opposite, sombre daughter in tow like the grim reaper telling her the time every minute when she wanted to say *It's my time. It's my time*. So she said. She hated me being there but that was her problem. I hadn't asked to be born. That wasn't my fault.

That summer I was there, staying with Grandma but really living just across the street in the two bed with the whistling and splintered window ledges and rusty, splitting window frames. We lived at the top. It was empty at the bottom. And I hoped it stayed that way. I told Mum this, just when she wanted me to agree with her, just when she wanted some peace. So she lashed out.

It wasn't a new thing to taste blood when she slapped me, but it was a new thing to tell her I hated her. That was when all hell let loose. Fat and heaving with fire, that's how it felt, right in the pit. I hated her for it, pushing me to it, and she looked at me as if she couldn't recognise me. As if all the shouting and throwing chairs and acting like a prize bull was supposed to have endeared her to me. I didn't want to see her cry though as I didn't know what that laughing feeling would do to me next. Would I laugh out loud? So I clammed up and watched her melt into a petulant two year old. I was the nasty four year old stamping on her toys. Though I'd actually said it, it was said in a heated moment and I thought I should tell her in a matter of fact way, just let her know that she was a disappointment to me. Then it would all sink in instead of

be drowned by the next round of sad songs or a lighted match at a nub of sensi. At the time she questioned me as if her life depended on it, and I gave in to her.

"Do you want to see me dead like your father?"

I didn't answer. Liar. He's not dead. He lives across the road.

"Do you?"

Should I have said yes, just to see what she would do? Or should I have cried just to shut her up. I did neither, just looked at her, smelling the sandalwood and sensi on her skin. I thought that stuff was supposed to calm you down.

"Why did we have to move here? Right next to Grandma. She doesn't even like me. And he hates me."

"Oh, hush yuh noise. I 'in see him kissing my tail either, but he still my father. Just stay out a his way and he'll stay out of yours." As if staying put was all I could ask for. I wanted him dead. Mum's eyes shone like black marbles. I didn't answer her just in case she slapped me again, but I liked to think that I was being merciful to her. She sighed, phlegm bubbling in her throat as the last of her tears left me hungry for more. A day of crying, it was. The day we left the wobbly Gardens for the splintered Avenue. And it still is a crying shame. I couldn't wait until I could leave her. I didn't know what it would feel like to leave her, but I hoped that it would be something like triumph (and it was). I didn't blame her for her tantrums and irritability. I blamed me for being so scared of her for so long. I told her that I wanted to see her dead that day but that wasn't true. I wanted her to see me live (but she didn't).

Mum kept that hard look in her eyes until she left for the island. I thought the look meant that she was missing the Gardens, but came to know that she hated the Avenue. She complained about the echo in the flat because of the

emptiness we sat on. I should be singing not talking. I should be Marian Anderson at Carnegie, she said. I told her I thought that the whole point was that Anderson didn't sing at the Carnegie Hall. Hadn't we seen the same programme? It was a sickness, I thought, because she never remembered anything the way that it was. It always became contorted in some way, the wrong way up. The more she did it, the more she irritated me. So, by the time she was headed off for her time on the island I was certain that I wouldn't be on the Avenue for long. She said that her trip was a chance to catch up. But why, I said. She'd left there so long ago, why go back? To what? Just to see what is there for me: she said.

I took in the sandalwood and the staleness around her lips as I kissed her neck and watched my dark brown fingers touch her lighter brown bare shoulder. Once her plane departure gate went up on screen she said goodbye without looking back. I watched my Mum's retreating back and thought absentmindedly that she would miss the royal wedding on TV. But maybe they would show it on the telly over there, as it was a former colony and, according to Grandma, everyone spoke English and respected the queen. I tried to imagine a whole island full of people making the same sounds and thinking the same thoughts. I could only come up with an image of an old postcard someone had sent to Grandma with a small white woman holding up a placard saying "Anyone for anyone" with a government minister pulling her strings. I wondered who was pulling their strings.

"Seasons change for a reason. You notice the wind this morning?" Grandma sucked on a boiled sweet. She ate anything that was sugary.

"Yes. Why didn't she take me with her?" I was being polite. Always the best thing to do with Grandma or she might start to think there was some conspiracy to seize her belongings and put her in a home. She was like that, Grandma Lillian. Always suspected the worst from everybody, including me.

"This is the first time she guyn back. She need to test the water first. You never know what you guyn find." Grandma finished the sweet packet while we sat in the departure lounge until time for the plane to leave, then opened another, her mouth working all the time. I looked at her and thought of family. What was the point? No matter that I used to stay with her every weekend up until I was twelve years old. We would go to market and to church with always that same distance between us that I couldn't reach into to close up and she didn't want to. I knew she hated me then but didn't know why.

My Grandma was a hand taller than my Mum and slight (except around her middle) but sturdy like a carrying word. Her hands held surprises like boiled sweets and hot slaps. But she wouldn't be doing much more of that anymore. Now that I had grown and could give that look back. The look that says who's in charge without even moving your tongue. Her lips were the colour of burst blackberries, her dyed black hair short and shocked like a woolly halo. Her eyes told something and everything, seeping blackness as if they were a story in itself. I sometimes give in and wonder about her now that that summer has long past and she is probably long gone. We will never know. She never got in touch with any of us. I wish I had told her that I knew more than she thought I knew about that story she held within herself. But at the time I thought there would be a time to tell and there was always a time to keep quiet.

"When I go to the island I'm going to throw a huge party and invite all our family and the whole island will know about it". I lied, watching her reaction.

She would burn for a bit, that slow burn that told you she was thinking bad thoughts. Then she would suck and suck until she thought up something cutting to say, but it would be said with such delicacy, such a pause behind it that you would think you were hearing the holy grail.

"Them people 'in care about you, soul. They don't even care about me and I born there. Your mother 'in guyn out there to celebrate. She looking to see what she left behind."

We left the airport to return to Blackwell Avenue with the high wind tossing our light jackets. To my utter shame and indignation, Grandma wore a green Harrington, despite the fact that she wasn't a sixteen year old white skinhead boy. Saw it in the sale, she said. A bargain. Let the skinheads take it from me, as if it were a game. As if I was joking. The look was beginning to look a little stale on them let alone my old Grandma. I didn't like the way she saw all the animosity as just one more thing to step over and get on with life. It meant more than that to me and must have done to her but she wouldn't let on. One day a teddy boy who went to my school – the only one there, I might add – spat at her and called her names on her way to the shops. She told Stanley and he went looking for him. So she must have cared, no matter what she said. But she would never let on, not our Lily of the Valley. Stanley used to call her that and she wore the Avon talcum powder of the same name as if it meant something. They mostly argued and spat at each other in that way that married couples have of making their argument the centre of everyone's attention. I just ignored them, especially him. The next time he says anything to me I'll throw something back at him, I told myself. Something witty and bold that will shut him up, the liar. Something that will make me tower over him instead of him being over and above me. Sometimes I think maybe he saw me as that many-

headed girl through some glass of his own making, ready to do battle with him if he let his guard down or even showed that he cared.

When I think back to that summer and remember Marva telling me my father's name, even though I knew it, and Lillian taking a shared inheritance and running, even when I knew that she would do something stupid, I think of the yellow fog. It was the last time I would sleep in a dead man's bed and the first time I shared my Mum's secret - that a white man was her father and that Stanley who was supposed to be my granddad was actually my dad. I felt something I couldn't put a name to once I'd let it out, once I'd let go of it. I'd read about shame and knew that it had anger, hurt and self-pity all buried into it. There was a distinct pathway into it that took you through self-recrimination and self-doubt and no easy way out. Then I remember the yellow fog. Yellow because it's my favourite colour and a fog because nothing was clear anymore, everything was hidden and disguised and I wanted it that way. I didn't want to be one step ahead of other people all the time because what it threw up I couldn't deal with. Not then, not now. Friendly, the fog was, but with an underlying ill will that made me think of bees. So fat, so furry, so soft – but with that sting.

Yellow fog. That's how I remember that summer – though what's a fog got to do with summer? And maybe I remember things in the wrong order, at the wrong time or place, in the wrong space. That's all because I have pockets of not thinking straight and seeing things in their absolutes instead of different tinges. That's how I remember the colours, mostly reds – not rounded and blurred like rose petals but flat and chiselled like the planes of fashioned stone.

Like precious rubies. The yellow came after, after the darkness that came down for me, without a wall at my back to hold me straight or a hand to steady and warm me. I remember the yellow, and that it was a fog, because I tell myself I remember it. But it came with a particular event, a particular occurrence, like an omen I like to think. It came the day Marva arrived.

Chapter Two

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (Prov. 22:6)

By the time I reached the bathroom I had shaken the ice from my ankles as well as stretched the sounds from my bones. The sun that barely reached my bedroom window was probing the bathroom and I smiled as I bent over the brown wash bowl Grandma has bought especially for me. My cousins were coming to stay. I didn't usually like company that I didn't know but this could be something different for me to think about, to take my mind off the making of the new me.

I had to pass the wallpaper in the hallway to get downstairs and this, as always, was a revelation to me. The bursting rosebuds, red and yellow and pink and blue, crashed into the space as if they were speaking and holding court. The colour was mesmerising to me and seemed to hold the only joy my Grandma's house had for me. Brightly coloured wallpaper seemed to supplant the dull, uninteresting lives that touched it each day, just for that moment of looking. I would forget to look later when I run upstairs to use the loo. I made sure that I didn't stub my toe on the bookshelf that sat on the landing above the first stair. The books, tattered and pristine, musty and white-leafed were not jammed together as usual, but there were pockets where books had been taken from their usual place and instead sprung a dark hollow. *The Captive Wife* was

not there with its flurry of papers as a bookmark, neither was my copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird* which I had noticed was there the day before. The miniature brass Victorian kitchenware items that covered the front of the shelves were missing also and I wondered if Grandma was having a clear out of sorts. I had looked in her wardrobe only the day before and seen the large gaps in between the patterned blouse she wore to church and the yellow trouser suit that she wore to gatherings outside of the church. These things had been taken without ceremony and packed somewhere else because they were not in the house as far as I could see. I wondered what Grandma was doing.

Once in the kitchen, dough stuck to my fingers like Gloy glue, so I added more plain flour to the mixture I was making. I smelled the corn oil heating and hurried up with the muffin dough. I tested the oil with a sprinkling of flour – it bubbled – then added the first round, patted bake. I let each muffin rise and brown around the edge before I turned them with a fork. The small kitchen window was open to let out the smell of frying and a spluttering breeze in. The muffins were still soft in the centre – I lowered the stove under the pot and popped them back in. The muffin fat bubbled. I liked cooking. Grandma and Mum always made clucking noises when I cooked and that was good for me as I didn't have to think about getting around them or pushing the right buttons, as Mr Hopwood said about my essay on Pliny and the Senate. I pushed the right buttons for him because I cared about what I wrote, whatever it was. I cared about what I cooked and they liked me like that. When it comes to Caribbean delicacies, I can pickle a pigs head as good as anybody and my black pudding melts in the mouth. Grandma sometimes called me Francine, my great-grandmother's name, when I was in the kitchen and I let the thought settle on me, imagining her small, thin dark fingers darting through cake mix or breading

fish to fry. But the thought never lasted that long. Old, dead people. We learn about them but don't think about them longer than is necessary. Sometimes I think that I might have liked Francine. Grandma once told me that she was kind, but in the same breath near enough said that she was stupid.

Grandma's humming in the dining room and cursing the flies under her breath and I'm glad it's July 1981. It will be my fifteenth birthday next month and Mum's promised me I can have my hair relaxed. Not that I need her permission, but I need her money. Some of the older girls at school wear a straight do. Mum just puts gel in hers and it straightens into large curls all at once. As with everything else, she says my hair is like my father's – tightly curled and liking it that way.

"You finish them muffin, yet? You guyn have all in here fry up before the girls come!"

"I've nearly finished. And the window's open." I broke four eggs into a bowl and added butter to another pot. I poured evaporated milk onto the eggs and mixed everything with the muffin fork. The eggs scrambled in no time and I let Grandma taste some with the first batch of fried muffins.

"You cook good. Your mother must be good for something". Lillian placed the cherry drop she had been sucking on a saucer beside her.

"She didn't teach me. You did. Don't you remember?" I turned the next muffin batch with a clean fork and tried not to be irritated by her forgetting. Like mother like daughter. It was as if she was surprised that I could cook.

"You must love to cook if you can remember that. You couldn't have been more than eight years old." Grandma Lillian sounded as if she was not really listening to her reply. I knew that she just tolerated me. I was not her

number one priority, even though I will be living under her roof for a while. She has someone else on her mind. Probably Stanley.

"I was ten. You bought me a blue jumpsuit with sequins on the collar for my birthday and taught me how to bake at the old house. Before the bailiffs came."

"Your Mum guyn sort all that out once she get back. I only wish I coulda help she, but... ." Grandma's voice trailed off and I turned to see her pinning a handkerchief to her bra strap. I thought I heard her say "that man guyn be the death of my children."

"Say again, Grandma?"

"Never mind. You see Stanley?" Grandma looked up towards the ceiling. "Must still be in bed. I wonder when he and that musty bitch guyn get out of in here."

I didn't like to hear Grandma talk about Grace like that, but I didn't say anything. Grace was a friend of Stanley's who was staying until she could move into her new place in Hackney. Grandma said she could sleep in the other spare room on the condition that she moved out by the end of the summer and Grace took that as a kindness.

I liked Grace. She bought the Daily Mirror and left it in my room when she'd finished with it. Sometimes we discussed the latest story about Diana Ross, Michael Jackson or Brooke Shields and passed comment on the mystery of their private lives and how much money they earn. Once she hot combed my hair for me and put it up into a Chinaman's bun. Grace talked to me like I was here and real. Grandma spoke to me as if she would rather she didn't have to and Stanley only looked in my direction when he wanted something. There was something going on between Grace and Stanley. I could tell, don't ask me how,

but I knew. The letters for a start. I didn't know what I should do about it. I liked Grace but Grandma is my Grandma and should be told. But I'm the keeper and bearer of secrets. They know I'll keep my mouth shut. Here's quiet and dangerous, Stanley would sometimes say when I entered a room he was in, and I suppose he was right. Now I know about him and my Mum, Millicent, I suppose I have the choice of saying something about it. But they must have discussed this, known that I wouldn't say a thing if I did find out. And why make it so easy to find out?

I was used to rifling through my Mum's things, moving her private belongings violently aside so that I could make some impression on her. So she knew that if she kept her diary amongst the tampons and suspenders that I would find it, filtered through the odour of Chanel No.5 and breath mints. It even had the white drifter's name, Ben, written in red italics under 21st January and a drawing of raindrops on twigs.

I sometimes wondered how my Mum got on with her parents. I hardly ever saw them all together. When I did their talk was light and heavy all at once, as if a hello carried the weight of bloody daggers. I liked that bit in the play, especially when the daggers lead Macbeth around a bit. That's how Stanley must feel with me around. Some dagger. Shouldn't have done what he did, should he. Shouldn't have taken advantage, if that's what he did.

Grandma used to come round to the Gardens now and again, but her visits were short and not very sweet. She would talk to Mum about people and places I didn't know and say "Millicent, let's stop before we go too far" and then leave. I didn't know then that her passing by was supposed to be a diversion, a place to get away to, away from Stanley and the house. Or that my Mum only allowed half-an-hour per visit – visiting rights she called it. She meant it was

Grandma's time to see her, not me. Otherwise, why would she leave me with them for the whole summer? And I suppose that's the fallout from me being here, the fact that they don't like each other any more – they must have done at some time, before it all happened, before I came. But then I'm not sure how it all happened. Did Millicent agree to his attentions or was she forced in the way those women are in the Daily Mirror headlines? Does Grandma know about it or has she been spared from hearing the truth? I doubt it. And that's probably why they argue so much and hate each other. I think she should leave him and suspect she will at some stage. Fifteen years is too long to hold onto something as rotten as a relationship like that.

Lillian watches me and asks me my name.

"Ella."

"Then why you stand there with one hand behind your back like your great grandmother? She did stand the same way." Grandma returned the cherry drop to her mouth and sucked on it noisily. She sat back and closed her eyes, telling me to wash the dishes, and I watched her dark brown face turn to stone. A glint of oil shines on her rounded cheekbones, giving her a polished, finished look and I imagined having to breathe life into her if no movement came from her soon. And watching seemed wrong, somehow, as if my eyes should be diverted to another part of the room. She had admonished me for looking too hard before and Sister Jones had taken my chin in her hand and said respect your elders. That was the day of my holy communion where I wore a bleached white cotton ankle length dress and white satin gloves. Mum had placed a white carnation in my hair but Grandma had taken it out as soon as she had gone. There'll be no photographs here, she had said and pressed a soft smelling handkerchief to my forehead, then hers. It was one of the hottest

summers on record and the people of Eastham walked with hope burning their bare shoulders (West Ham was doing well in the First Division and could go even further over the next few years, maybe even win the FA cup). I had attended the church with Grandma for as long as I could remember and carried her King James Bible for her most of the time. That day, I had been looking at her because she had sworn as I sat in my pew and she watched Bessie Major settle in her seat. I didn't want to be behind her, she had said in a spiteful tone and I looked at her hard. It was nothing new, nothing out of the ordinary for her, but she never brought it to church usually. I asked her what she said, just to embarrass her, and she told me not to stare, causing Sister Jones to turn round in her pew and tell me off. I felt embarrassed and told Grandma I didn't want to go ahead with the communion but she sent me to the front pew with a slight tap across the cheeks to keep me in check. I was crying by the time I got there but I didn't know why. She had done worse, but now it seemed that there was no sanctuary from it, as if it would follow us wherever we went. She would always be this spiteful, unmannerly, disgusted with the world and me. When she wanted to, she would tell me a bible story in her own words, usually the prodigal son, which she would change to daughter, and the story of Ruth. Grandma would open, then, like a late bud, all new and fresh. Her eyes would brighten, swell and tighten in times with the spoken words and the sweet in her mouth would stay in her cheek, stilled by something that made her eyes dance. Only when she spoke of the painted eggs her grandmother used to sell did her face lift as much and even then there was no song to go with it, no hymn to hum under her breath like it was breath itself. Grandma liked to hum hymns but it always seemed to me as if she did it for show and not because she liked them. There would always be this sideways glance to see if anyone was around her

before she started, just to hear how pious she was being. I got that word from the book *The Exorcist*. It seemed to sum up what she was trying to be.

"You finish them dishes yet? Grandma slapped and scratched the side of her leg as if just bitten by a cat flea. "They say a person does always return to you, somehow, someday, sometime". And I knew she was not talking about uncle Prince and my cousins. And I knew she expected me to answer. As if I should know who's coming to the Avenue. As if I should have something to say. But I knew as well as her that all the church attending and bible teaching was a joke, one of those running jokes I gave pictures to and called something else. Just so I don't have to see them as they were – me being made a fool of. I didn't believe in god anymore than she did. It was all another thing to be seen to do. Artifice, Miss Scott, our English teacher, would say and I would remind myself to tell her next time, next time there were not so many people in the room, that I knew all about artifice which, I learned, was another word for secrets. I wished I could tell Miss Scott now.

Stanley and Grace came downstairs together. Grandma sucked her teeth, finished her sweet, then took another muffin from the bowl.

"So you get up, sleeping beauty?"

"No thanks to you. Who the fuck use the Hoover at 8 o' clock this morning?"

"The place 'in clean itself."

"No, and a man 'in function properly when he 'in had he proper rest!"

"Man? That's what you calling yourself these days. You hear that, Grace?"

Grace smiled sheepishly. Her face was round, open and her peppery brown skin looks mushy around her eyes. She was nowhere as tall as Stanley

but had his tongue. But never to me. Sometimes, I was tempted to tell her about the icy fingers and what darkness does to me and the running jokes. But I didn' t think she would understand. I didn't mean she was stupid or anything, but she would still see me as a child. She didn't think I was a woman already because my period started. She saw me as innocent, she told me. You're too innocent to know the half of it, she had said, nursing a bruise on her arm. She had looked bad that day, as if several feet had trampled over her, but I hadn't let on, just as she said. Don't say you saw me like this, she had told me. And I didn't. I helped her get cleaned up and waited for her to sleep before turning off the light and going to my own bed with the old mattress and the dead man living underneath. I hardly ever slept easy.

"Bwoy, I scared a you, Lillian. Your mouth could curdle milk."

"So could your underneath."

Grace laughed out loud this time and looked at Stanley. He looked angrily in my direction and I took the last batch of muffins from the pot, my ears burning.

"You ready, Grace?" Stanley stood by the kitchen door like a stranger. When I thought of number 32 Blackwell Avenue I didn' t really call it his house. I saw it as Grandma Lillian's home. Not because of the story about her dad and how he bought it with money from a bet, or something. And not because Grandma usually called it "my house" instead of "our house". But because Stanley looked wrong wherever he stood or sat in the place. He was tall, like a Mile High, Grandma said. One day I'll be as long, she said, but I couldn't see it. So his arms and legs dangled over kitchen chairs and sofas like misplaced sticks and when he stood he stooped slightly as if he might knock his head on the ceiling. Grandma said the house looked untidy when her husband was in it

and I knew what she meant. He looked grey, now, next to Grace' s mid brown and yawned, rubbing his stubble. He was usually clean shaven, smelling of musty alcohol, and I noticed that his clothes were crumpled now. I then remembered that Grandma and Stanley had an argument the previous night about his ironing. Grandma picked at her teeth with a fingernail.

"You ready now?" He said, and his voice rumbled like milky cocoa bubbling in a pot. He cleared the phlegm from his throat by spitting at the back door and then faced Grandma.

"We guyn to check if she house ready yet. The estate agent should a call, but there 'in no point in waiting for he. We might as well get on with it weself".

"You 'in have to tell me a thing. Summer over yet?"

"No, Lillian, but I 'in want to outstay me welcome". Grace almost whispers. "The sooner we get this sort out the better. Mek the chile come."

Stanley and Grandma said no together. Grandma told Grace that my cousins would be here soon and that I needed to stay. Stanley looked even more annoyed. Grace took a muffin and called it a Johnny Cake. She left with Stanley loping behind her.

Stanley left his smell of Brut aftershave and stale rum in the hallway. I opened the windows in the front room and watched them walk down the Avenue together. The odd car moved steadily along the Avenue, its roar breaking into the uneven melody of sparrows and magpies. I marked the day of Marva's arrival by remembering Stanley's back moving away from me, shoulders angled, and sloping towards Grace. I thought to myself that he looked ready to fall on her and crush the last breath from her. Her small frame, like Grandma's, withered beside his bulk that seemed to look large despite their distance from

me. I looked away once I suspected Grace was safe and thought what a fool she was. I would never let a man treat me that way. Doesn't it say so in all the women's books that I've read in the local library – which used to be my favourite haunt before I took my Mum's words about being a woman to heart? These books said that these women never learn from their mistakes and I wondered how you get that way. Forgetting all over again. It must have been Stanley who bruised her because of the way she had looked at him the following morning. All hurt and slow burn. I wanted to slap her, make her slap him, but he was being extra nice and it seemed to work. Mum was still here at this stage. I had moved over to the house earlier than her departure because I wanted to hurt her some – but I'm sure I didn't succeed. What I would have given for her to walk in now, with Stanley offering to take Grace to the immigration office to see about her sons. What crap. Mum can always make him look smaller than he actually was, just with one of those looks, but she did more than that. She put him in his place, which was somewhere near that irritating bit of dirt that gets into the crevices of sideboards. She laid into him like a goodun and he had to take it because she was Grandma's daughter and he was not her father even though he should be.

But that's another story.

Stanley left more than a damp alcohol smell and a bad taste in my mouth. There was Grandma. She sat at the kitchen table as if her whole body was numb and her jaw slackened. I asked her what was wrong, but she looked towards the front door without saying a word. I wanted to cry suddenly. For myself, I suspect, because I couldn't imagine crying for her. She hated me just as much as I hated her. My Grandmother was what Miss Scott called astute in a Lady Macbeth kind of way. She could sense an opportunity to make money

like a professional, small time hawker and could sum up a man or woman at a few paces. With her looking vulnerable like this I felt ashamed to look at her. All the sharp talking was gone and the mouth was still, as if even a boiled sweet couldn't make sense to her now. She was crestfallen in the way small children feel crushed when a favourite toy is taken away from them. If she spoke to me sharply now, I didn't think that I would blame her in the way that I usually did as she seemed mortally wounded. Her dark pretty fingers traced her ruffled collar and I thought how the plaid skirt and the wasted eyes didn't suit the fashionable white blouse, how she would be better suited to something simpler. But the local market dictated what she wore not any fashion sense. And it seemed to be that she had the money to look sharper, cleaner, less messily put together. But Mum always said that she was tight with her money and with her time and patience. She had been surprised that Grandma had agreed to take me over the summer at all, and I had begun to think of Grandma's irritableness as irrationality. She sat there as if the whole world was lost to her when only a few minutes earlier she had all the mouth for England and more. I always got the feeling with her that you didn't truly know what was going on in her mind (whereas in comparison Mum wore her heart on her sleeve). By the end of that summer, I knew why I thought that way but would never have any way of telling her.

Before I realised what I was doing, I sat at Grandma's feet and held on to her left leg; it felt solid like stone and just as cold.

"Are you alright, Grandma?" I held on as if her leg would slip away from me. I felt like a fraud.

"Yes, what you fussing for?"

"I thought there was something wrong?"

Grandma looked down on me as if to say, "You know what's wrong."

She looked away. Grandma rarely showed affection. She drew away from me and pushed my head from her knee and I looked silly sitting there picking at my toe jam. She reached over to the transistor radio and turned the dial. I had been using it the day before so pop music blared out of it and she had to search for her station that's just the sound of talking voices. I sat and listen to talk about Russia and Afghanistan with no real idea what it was about. The news footage I had seen made no sense to me either. All I knew was that the Russians were supposed to be the baddies, as always my History teacher said, but what would he know? I thought she might know about the letters and daren't look up. Stanley gave them to me to pass on to Grace before her stay. It only happened once in a while, when I visited Grandma and he was there. Stanley would call me into the front room and close the door, shouting to Lillian that he needed some tobacco from the specialist on Atkins Street and would send me for it.

I liked the bus rides. There was something special about hearing stolen pieces of conversation one minute, then the quietness of the top deck at the back once most of the people had got off at the Greengate. I had to take three buses and walk another ten minutes before I got to Grace's flat. The last time I went she had packed everything in crates and Harry's Storage men were packing them into a van. She took the letter and called me peaches. I said I looked nothing like peaches. More like chocolate.

"You're my honey coat, lip smacking, juice-making chocolate sugarcake. You ever have sugarcake?"

"Grandma's made them before…"

"Bad for your teeth". Grace's teeth are bad. They look like brown tombstones. She tells me they started to yellow as soon as she had her first child – "all them chemicals flying up in me head." Her teeth were missing at the sides.

I asked her how old she was and she laughed.

"Young enough to harbour shark", and she waved the letter. She looked young then, because her smile lifted her cheekbones to her eyes and they shone. Grandma called her Mrs Mop as she wore a new hairstyle called the wet look that made her hair drop in spirals like uncoiled springs. She placed the letter on her gingham lap and I asked her about her children. They lived in Jamaica with her boyfriend Porter who used to work on the Cuban railway. Sacked from his job for stealing, Porter returned to Jamaica penniless and with less toes than he began with due to what he called "treacherous rails". Grace, in the meantime, had saved up enough money from babysitting and running errands for the tourists in Ocho Rios – what errands these were she never said – to buy a one-way ticket to England for herself. The children and Porter would have to follow later. Grace once told me London would eat her children and she half wanted them to stay where they were. But the promise of England was too much to ignore, even if its capital did swallow children whole and spit them out like unrecognisable clumps. Nothing could match the empty feeling in the pit of the stomach eating one meal a day while watching tourists frolic in the sea, Grace had said. The feeling took on a life of its own until it was a thought so urgent you could taste it. England. And promise.

"Them still back home." I watched Grace open the letter and grimace.

"Nuff problem. And more problem 'ere fuh we." Grace's accent thickened and her eyes moistened. She was usually funny, taking the mickey

out of the people we both knew, calling Grandma The Sucking Machine and making Hoovering noises every time she passed a sweet packet. Like this, crying and all that, I didn't know how to respond. The sound of shouting barrow boys from the local market on the main street reached the flat and Grace shut the window and kept saying: nuff problem fuh we. I remember wondering why she had the window open in the first place; it was late winter and the air was thick with ice. I didn't realise until I left that lingering by the flat doorway was the hard smell of petrol.

Chapter Three

... every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards... (Isaiah 1:23)

"Where' s the dead man?"

Louisiana spread her legs as she sat on the bed and stretched over to look between them. My brown suitcase, the one I insisted on using to move my stuff across the road, poked out from underneath it.

"He's under there in the mornings." I watched her hair swing. It was like a black curtain without the rod. I had never seen hair like that on a black girl's head. Isabella-Rose stood beside me with a tennis racquet in her hand.

"If he's down there, we gon' flush him out."

Isabella was tall and messy in a Stanley-kind-of-way. Her legs and arms were just all over the place. She stood, now, with one hand on her hip and swung the white racquet down on Louisiana's head. My elder cousin jumped up from the bed and looked up at her sister. She kicked at Isabella who blocked the move with her free arm. Louisiana aimed a blow at her head, all the while making Yahh!! noises and Isabella grunted back. They were playing, but then Isabella forced Louisiana into a headlock and she started to scream. Grandma knocked on the ceiling from downstairs and I pulled Louisiana away from her sister.

"You're gonna get us into trouble. She's already had to get the broom out to knock."

Louisiana stopped crying as easily as she had begun. "Why doesn't she chuck this old bed out anyways. She must be loaded."

"Why do you say that?" I sat on the bottom bunk bed that wass in the corner of the room opposite the wardrobe. I started to think how stupid I was – I could have slept in one of the bunk beds all along – but then I would have had to go back there eventually. And why did I tell my cousins? I didn't even know them, and it was the first thing that I said. They must think I'm stupid, or pretty young. Isabella was already hanging over the top bunk looking through one of her bags.

"Didn't dad say that Grandma had two houses?" Louisiana chucked a tennis ball at Isabella's head. She ducked.

"Yeah, and she sold one off to the woman down the street, right?"

I remember Grace telling me that Mrs Major had bought a property from Grandma and that Mum had been upset. She had wanted to move into the house and sell the Gardens place before the bailiffs became interested. But she was too late. I wondered aloud what Grandma would do with the money.

"Probably buy more of this stanky furniture. You ever seen anything like this before, Isabella?"

"Only in a decrepit motel." They laughed and Isabella took aim with the tennis ball. Louisiana jumped behind my bed and started pretending that the dead man was trying to grab at her.

"Mind! His fingers are icy."

"And his breath stinks. I don' t see why he didn't just pack up and go back to the island when he had a chance."

"Or come to Brooklyn and live with us."

"We weren't even alive then, stupid."

The two threw the ball back and forth between them and I watched it fly over my head. Louisiana watched me and said: call me Louisa. Everyone else does. She threw the ball at me and I caught it.

"So, where's your man?" Louisa looked steadily at me. Her voice was loud and confident and I caught her winking at Isabella who looked away.

"Man? I haven't got one". I melted like shifting sand as she looked at me almost piteously. My stomach hurt.

"My man's name is Robert and he works at one of the Interstate motels. So you ain't never rocked, right?"

"Rocked?"

"Knocked boots, got some, had sex?" She continued to look at me as if I was something that she doesn't recognise, let alone speak to. I studied my plastic shoes and took in Louisa's black sling backs. I didn't answer, worried that my voice might waiver. What's it got to do with her anyway? For some reason, I remembered the time the boys had grown tired of football and decided to chase girls instead of a ball – me, Baljit and Annabel. Wilson, a boy who had recently come over from Trinidad, had already tackled me to the ground. I squirmed under his weight and managed to push him off me, but when he was gone his weight stayed on my mind. I ran with it towards Baljit and Annabel, the first on the ground, the other at her heels, pulling. Mike Fisher, a boy in my year, was holding one of Baljit's arms behind her back and trying to get his other hand up her skirt. She screamed and yelped and Annabel laughed hysterically. By the time I had run to them, three older white boys had joined the group.

"What you doing tryin' to feel up a Paki."

"Even those two niggers were at it," his friend said, the disgust on his lips sitting dry on the air like squealing chalk. Annabel stopped laughing and I pulled my hands away from Fisher's neck. The older boys seemed to be waiting for an answer, their khaki Harrington jackets flapping against their arms. Afterwards Annabel said that they should have been reported as one of them was wearing steel-capped boots and they were banned from the school premises. But I was thinking of other things. Like the look in Baljit's eyes once she stood up – distant and lonely yet noticeably wild. Fisher had looked at the older boys and smiled sheepishly. When his gaze returned to Baljit it bounced off her as if she were invisible. The Trinidadian walked off with him, his shoulders hunched and gait cocky as if in warning. I felt phlegm gather in my mouth but didn't have the guts to spit at the boys who remained, one rubbing his shaven head while looking at my blue blouse. I felt sick. I left the playing field as I had found it, the same vast expanse with nothing to puncture it but us kids with the air steaming from our mouths and voices lifting the stillness, causing it to pause. A creeping disgust and hatred filled my lungs until I felt my head go heavy and fingers go numb. I promised myself then that the weight of white boys' heavy bodies would never have the chance to stay on my mind. I told my Mum about it but pretended it happened to another girl, someone more stupid than I was. She laughed and said that taught her for playing with white boys.

Louisa was still watching me. I noticed that her lips were the same. The same as the time my Mum told her a bee must have stung them and pressed in its wings to make that bow indent in their centre. We were little, then, and playing in a park somewhere – it could have been the park on the Avenue – and

uncle Prince was holding open their coats ready for them to step into. We were going home to the Gardens where Mum had just bought a house and they were going to America. Louisiana held me around the neck and kissed me hard on the cheek. Isabella just waved. I asked Mum where they were going and her answer sounded like a slow hand clap.

Uncle Prince never wrote to us; Mum always said he thought he was too good for us. America had made him big-headed. The Vandegroot family that lived in Mile End were to blame, she said, as it was they who had told him the story of Upper State Albany, New York and the heroic trek of the Dutch to find safe harbour there in the 1700s. I knew he had looked it up himself because that's the kind of thing a man like him would do. He didn't need to be told. He just needed to feel driven. Grandma said that he had become fascinated by the history of the family who could trace their descendants on the maternal side to the first settlers of Fort Orange and regaled him with stories he would be hard pressed to hear from his own family. She hated him for that, I knew, but he was right. Everything was kept too close to the chest around here. He did not think twice when Grandma Lillian offered him some money to realise what he hadn't stopped talking about for years and make their history his too. He could only settle in Brooklyn at first - property in certain areas was cheaper - but had his sights on a number of places, one of which would be their new home in the next ten years, providing work and other enterprises continued to pay well. He worked as a senior mechanic in a car hire firm in the day and an occasional club bouncer at nights. He had offered Grandma Lillian a place to stay minus Stanley, so Louisa said. Grandma Lillian had always refused. And I knew why. Yet another way for a favourite fat bee to get its hands on all of her honey. And he wasn't even that clever about it.

When uncle Prince stepped into the house that day, he seemed to want to start off on a bad note, to want his bad mood to touch everyone.

"You hear what those bastards at Customs do to me and my children? I just about get my family out without getting strip-searched! What the hell is happening to this country! The asshole who come questioning me wasn't much older than Louisiana, I swear. I coulda killed him."

"Don't cuss in front of the children." Grandma muttered something about respect and his lack of it.

"Cuss. Cuss! My kids was lucky to get outta there without getting raped! What the hell has happened to this country?" Uncle Prince sounded like the man who played Tom in 'Roots'. He was tall and broad like him as well with Stanley's stilt-like legs. I wondered about his thick American accent and why Grandma didn't have an English one even though she had been here all these years. She had once told me that uncle Prince had needed someone else's dream to follow and that he didn't have any sense. He seemed too big and strong to need anyone's say-so to follow a dream. I didn't need anyone, whatever my dream was, so why should he?

"They getting worse. Soon they guyn run all us black people out of in here, you hear? Specially with what happening with them young boys in Brixton now!"

"Why do you always have to get so melodramatic? Who asked these kids to take matters into their own hands? Brixton, of all places. They're their own worst enemy."

"Millicent's doing the right thing checking out what's happening back home." I listened closely.

"For her maybe, but not for you, Mom. You need to move forward, not go backward. You' re still a relatively young woman. There' s no need to play the watchdog over this place no more. You've paid your dues."

Uncle Prince took a cigarette from his pocket and lit up. I had never seen anyone smoke in Grandma Lillian' s house before. I watched the smoke float in Grandma's direction. She coughed theatrically and held her hand over her nose. Uncle Prince kept puffing.

"Where is he?"

"He's taken a friend on an errand. She's trying to buy a house."

"She'd be better to ship her ass to the States. She from Carmichael?"

"No, she's Jamaican - from Spanish Town, I think. This place suit she. Jamaica too small for the likes of she. America might be a bit too... I don't know... full!"

"Full of what? A man can find whatever he wants in that place. He can earn enough to give his wife and children a comfortable life if he tries hard enough."

"Then how comes you still struggling?"

Uncle Prince laughed a little, then looked at me. "I suppose, to be honest, the old island is just that bit too small for us too." He smiled at me and asked how old I was now. I told him fifteen years old even though I was still technically fourteen but I knew that I looked more than that. I had always liked uncle Prince, what I remembered of him anyway. And the story about the Dutch family seemed to smack of a romanticism that I couldn't even come close to. I could imagine it, write about it if I had to for a history essay but I could see more in Stanley's roughness than I could in Uncle Prince's dreams. They seemed pitted against anything that seemed sane and honest, but at the same time he

was like a hero to me, taking on life no matter what. Apart from the fact that he seemed to like to be noticed as soon as he walked into a room, he was interesting to me in a way neither Mum nor Grandma could be, let alone Stanley. He looked at Grandma and raised his eyebrows. I thought I heard him laugh again, but I couldn't be sure as Louisa and Isabella started a commotion in the dining room and uncle Prince shouted suddenly to shut them up.

Grandma sat at the kitchen table and looked smaller than I had ever seen her. She wore a green butterfly clip on her white cotton shirt and the pleated plaid skirt reached her ankles. Her hands were on the table, balled up like fists and her eyes looked black flat.

"You want something here, Prince, or you guyn leave the girls now?"

"OK!" Uncle Prince looked a bit surprised. "I'll leave them with you. See you when I come collect them on Thursday."

"Alright. Say hello to your wife. And where that accent come from?"

"Christine. Her name's Christine, Mom. And the accent comes from my home." It was as if I was watching a play and uncle Prince was the leading man, all teeth and glowing assurance. He gave Grandma a look that stopped her in her tracks, and I couldn't wait for the day that I could do the same to her. After kissing his daughters goodbye and patting me on the head, he left. Grandma sat like a little ball of anger for a few more minutes, so I took my cousins upstairs to the room they would share with me.

His name was Mr Sealy and he helped Lillian out of a fix. She needed someone to look over the house before they came, before they left the island for England. She knew that the house was standing because she had the deeds,

but did it need any major work done to it before they could set up home? Lillian had come to him because she knew he was planning to travel to England anyway, his family following on. And he had experience in construction. He had helped to build some of the new hotels up in St James through his father-in-law's firm. An odd jobber really rather than a craftsman like the other men around him, but he would have to do. Lillian knew that he was a bit of a conman, doing as little as he needed to do to get by on as much commission as possible, but she had had no choice. *Mrs Ellington, I like your daughter.* Creepy, that's what she told me he was, creepy. And I wheedled out the rest by chance because she was in a talkative mood that day, and quite wistful for her. Stanley wouldn't go to England without Lillian and I thought what a big wuss he was. Mr Sealy died there before his family had a chance to see him again or to squat in the house, something Lillian had suspected they might do. Everybody wants something for nothing, she said to me when I asked her the name of the dead man under the bed. Be careful if you does ever give them, because it is never enough.

"Do you think you two could keep the noise down. What about Grandma?"

The cousins were singing now at the tops of their voices. I told them how much I liked Candi Statton and they sang her new tune and showed a lot of teeth. Then they told me to join in so that we could pretend to be the Three Degrees. Grandma started banging again by the time we got to the chorus - *Will I have to wait forever. Will I have to suffer ... .* I couldn't get the others to quieten down. I stayed quiet for a few minutes, then left the house.

Mum had left me with my own keys to the flat on the Avenue. The flat was even closer to the park than the main house and from the front room window I could see sparrows and blackbirds in the park trees. There were boxes piled high with Mum's Cosmopolitan and Root magazine collections and black bin liners full of clothes all over the place. I crouched down in the corner that met the larger front window and felt my chest heave as if I'd been running. I pulled a screwed up paper package from my jean skirt pocket, chewed on one of the sherbet bon bons in it and thought about Grace, then, with her wooden crates surrounding her and the smell of petrol in her doorway. And I remembered what Grandma had said about Jamaica being too small for her. If Mum did decide to go back to the island, what would I do? Would it be too small for me, too?

There was no noise from traffic at the Gardens but here on the Avenue it was only possible to fool oneself for a few moments that there was such a thing as quiet. I thought of the way Mum left the radio or cassette player on all night but hardly put it on during the day, or the telly. And I remembered how modern the wobbly furniture had been at the Gardens, just second-hand, or something, although she would never admit it. Unlike Grandma's house, where bits of the furniture looked like something out of a 1960s film. It seemed as if Grandma had hung onto some of the things Mr Sealy had used and made it her own. Just as we would make the furniture from the house our own again in the new flat with its chipped cornices and cobwebby corners. But for this new, noisy place Mum had promised to get an Allen key to sure up the most persistent, creaking offenders. She never did. The flat had potential, like me, but it was never realised. All the stale thoughts and recriminations we brought with us to the Avenue nestled on the sky blue settee with the little gash on one of the arms

and fell over the plastic wrapping on the square dining table that had been my desk. We touched them each time we woke up and made them new again. New, as the flat would always be to us; unsettled, unfinished.

Darkness came down like a blue-black fog and I closed my eyes to try and forget time. My mind's eye was coal black with round corners. I felt the coldness of the wall on my back and it helped to keep me sure of where I was – at first. Then, somehow, I totally lost the need to move and my limbs loosened and relaxed. My ears felt as if they were about to pop and my mouth fell open, dry. The wall kept me safe as I floated in darkness so warm that I felt my face flush. I almost fell into it and opened my eyes only when it allowed me to. Huddled shapes seemed to surround me in shadow, but it was not dark outside. I closed my eyes again, but the feeling had gone. The wall was something I leant against to help me stand up and my limbs were steady and strong. I thought about where I would be in five years time, a question Baljit told me the fifth formers got asked before they leave school. I won't be on the island, I decided, because now I knew that it is too small for everything I wanted to do. Maybe I'll live in New York like that girl in *Edith Jackson* and have kind people look after me even though I don't realise that they're being kind. I wouldn't live in the southern states of America because the black people there lived in hovels and had no rights – or so it goes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Maybe I'll chose somewhere else and something else to be. Like a politician (but what if I end up like That Woman!) or a graphic artist – but I'm crap at art. My options seemed limited but I knew at least that I would have a child before I'm twenty and let that fill my life for some time. All that soft, talcy-smelling roundness in my arms would be heaven. And I wouldn't have to give it back or be beaten for

taking it. That was one of Frankie's more unpopular ideas. But that's another story.

I picked a scab from my knee and licked away the blood.

Chapter Four

I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came. (Job 3:26)

The sun sat like a topped grapefruit on grey clouds and bled saffron trails like a vertical lava lamp. I locked the front door to the flat behind me and walked out into the late evening and thought how dark outside seemed from inside the flat. I headed towards the high street, my flat rubber sandals plopping against my heels, and licked sherbet sugar from my lips.

I was going back on my word and I knew it. There was an evening event at the library, a scrabble contest for kids from around the borough. I felt like going and it was not as if I was reading again, as I promised I wouldn't. Not now there was something new for me to be. Louisa got my back up and I hated her for it. That look that she gave Isabella, as if I was a joke or something. That sisterly thing they have that needed no words. I didn't have that with anybody, not even Baljit. I didn't think I meant anything to anybody.

I didn't notice the woman until she was right upon me but she was the one who looked startled to see me. Her hair was being beaten about by a tough, unseasonal wind and looked like streaky stained yellow candyfloss. Her thin lips were fuchsia pink. She handed me a leaflet without looking at my face. I took it and stared at hers. I noticed that one side of it was slack and heavy and her mouth dangled like it was frowning. I said thank you. A young girl, with

equally yellow hair but a softer face, ran up to hold her hand, and stared back at me. The woman looked like she was smirking now and looked at my face as if she had remembered something she had forgotten.

I walked on, wondering why the woman was handing out leaflets in the near-dark. I thought I heard my cousins laughing at me and dismissed the idea as quickly as it came to me. I noticed a group of young white boys at the top of the Avenue but pressed forward, keeping my head down. They're like the black guys in Hackney, always small pockets of them standing around somewhere. Sometimes you see black guys doing the same thing around here, but rarely. There just weren't as many of us in this area. The Asian boys hung around Lucky Dip on the main road leading to the high street. It's a penny arcade for boys, I reckon, because I've never seen any girls in there. All around it, the other shops stood back in their dinginess and envy, as Lucky Dip's flashing lights and heavy congregation meant money exchanging hands, or hand to machine, whilst elsewhere the traditional butchers were going under (didn't Mr Thomas tell Mum only a couple of weeks ago that he might have to sell up to an Indian?) and the local supermarket was growing bigger by the day. There was even talk of a black hairdressing salon opening up in the near future, and all the while the main road was changing, the people were murmuring. It seemed as long as the traditional butchers sat alongside the fish and chip shop, the pawnbrokers/jewellers rested happily on the corner there, and the Hobbit Furniture Store remained with its prams and cots sitting outside on the pavement, day in day out, everything would be ok. No one need be alarmed. But they were getting funny about us being here, about us owning shops. And about old cinemas being taking over to show Hindi films. They were starting to cry foul. It left you feeling nothing, as if nothing was enough to care about.

Some of the white kids at school always talked about fighting this thing, this change as if it was darkness itself, creeping up on them from all corners. I felt a bit sorry for them because I didn't like darkness myself. But after the nothing feeling and sympathy went away, there was this strange feeling of triumph that I couldn't explain. Probably watched too many episodes of *Roots*. What was there to feel triumphant about?

I smelled seasoned chicken and what I thought was frying plantain. The smell got stronger once I was outside Bessie Major's house. The porch door was closed but the door to the house was open and there were suitcases in the hallway. One was small and square brown, the other was taller and currant black. There was a crocus bag, the same kind that grandma kept her clothes-pegs in, but larger. I could see leaves with green pebbley fruit sticking out from the stems stuffed in the bag. I looked up when a pair of brown legs knocked against the leaves.

Mrs Major stood in the porch wearing a yellow smock dress that billowed around her. I understood her more than most of the women my Grandma's age. When I said understood I meant that I had spoken to her for more than five minutes without the interruption of a command like "Run upstairs and get the hair cream on the dresser for me" or "Pick yourself up from the floor". She always said I'm much too young to know all that she has to say, but she listened to me when I spoke to her and sometimes held me to her chest like I was lost. I used to like all that but I'd decided not to like it anymore. Mum said Bessie told her she had been on a liquid diet throughout the spring and her hunger made her breath smell rotten. I could see she had lost some weight but none of the spongy dumpiness from her walk. She crashed towards me.

"Ella, did your mum get off safely?" She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. She had grease spots on the front of her dress and oily fingers.

"Yes. She said to say hello."

"I bet." Mrs Major wiped her hands on the tea towel on her shoulder.

"How's that grandmother of yours. Still living off her ill-gotten gains?" Mrs Major spoke a bit like a school teacher. Grandma said she had elocution lessons when she first came to England, but that she was as black as the rest of us. I watched her pick at her nails with the towel, a faint look of disgust around her mouth. Then she looked at me.

"I'm busy. I have guests, my dear. What did you want?"

"Nothing. I was just passing the house to get to Baljit's, then the library. There's an event this evening… ."

"She isn't there. The family's gone to India for the summer. Left that trouble-making boy here, though." Mrs Major's eyes watered, "Oh, those blessed onions". I handed her a crumpled tissue from my pocket. She took it but her eyes were hard once she wiped them and still darting backwards and forward, as if they are marbles knocking against an invisible wall. I've never known someone's eyes move as much as Mrs Major; it gave you the impression that she could take in everything in a scene without missing out the smallest of details. Didn't it make her feel dizzy? "What do you want here?"

"Nothing!"

"No one sent you?"

"No."

Mrs Major looked younger than Grandma. They had similar skin, soft and round brown, but Bessie fashioned her hair like a Jones Girl, straight and tonged, and wore bright purple lipstick and matching eye shadow. I'd never

seen Grandma wear make up. Grandma dressed like a church lady, high collars and long, buttoned skirts. Whether she was fat or thin, Mrs Major always looked as if she was going out to party. The smock she was wearing now was no house dress, despite the grease stains.

"Excuse the mess. I'm cooking for my guests. What did you say you were doing here again?" Mrs Major reached forward to take a bit of pillow fluff from my hair. Her eyes softened. She leant further forward and I wondered why she didn't wear an apron.

"That grandma of yours looking after you?"

I nodded. She studied the plaits on my head. I fiddled with the tufts of curls at my temple that escaped the tight plaiting.

"Tell your grandmother I have some one here to see her. Just you let her know it's an old friend."

I smelled the chicken and cloves on her breath and smiled, but Mrs Major looked at me as if I should say something, know something. I stared at the suitcases and ignored her. I'm not letting on to anyone the conversation I heard just before Mum left for the island, before she had a chance to shut the door to the bedroom. I was in there getting together my books and cataloguing them – *The Chronicles of Narnia, yesterday's news. Top shelf. Forever, Judy Blume, keep this on the easy to reach shelf. No description on an index card for this one. She might read it.* Grandma came to the front door and shouted through the letterbox. That would get Mum's back up whenever she did that. Who told her to move so close to the dragon? They stood at the bottom of the stairs and talked in low voices but I sneaked over to listen. I had a habit of sneaking and listening into things when I wasn't supposed to.

"Whatever she wants here she 'in guyn get it." Grandma spoke as if she was losing something, as if something was escaping from her. It could only be money or Stanley.

"I don't know. Who paid for her passage? It must be Bessie interfering. Well, you know what to do if Marva asks you for money. The likes of her don't come over from the island for a holiday. They want a return."

"Well, she ain't getting any return here. You listening, Millicent, 'cause if I hear about you guyn behind my back and telling she things about me and mine, I guyn... ."

"I won't be here, remember." Mum was bristling I could tell, even though I couldn't see her. Grandma always had that ability to get her so annoyed she could barely speak.

"She'll be here in a couple of weeks." Grandma spoke almost to herself because there was no sound from Mum. She left so quietly I almost forgot to move from my hiding place behind the banister. Someone wanting money from Grandma. It seemed that that was always the way. When you had even a little bit more than the next person, the next person wanted some of it, so Grace said.

Mrs Major sighed and tucked the tea towel into her waistband.

"Forget it," she sucked in her stomach, smoothed her clothing and stiffened her back. "Don't tell her a thing." She walked into the house.

I have always wondered why Mrs Major hated Grandma so much. She never said that she does but whenever she talked about Lillian her voice got sharper. Sometimes, when she said "Grandma" I thought she was mocking me because her eyes and voice dance in a certain way. Grace says it's sour

grapes because she wanted Stanley long before I was born and Grandma got him. But I don't know if that's true. Who would want Stanley?

Mrs Major always asked how Grandma was and looked at me as if I hadn't answered when I said "fine". I remembered asking Grandma why they weren't close friends like they were back home – Mum had told me they had been the best of friends. But Grandma told me not to chat rubbish and her eyes bled to flat black. She seemed so sure that there was a time when I should know all these things but the present wasn't it. Maybe that was it. There would be a time. Or maybe I should just keep guessing and listening where I shouldn't and asking when others wouldn't. Maybe I'd get to the stage where I didn't even bother.

I moved away from Mrs Major's doorstep. The leaflet handed to me earlier flapped away from its place on the front wall towards the high street without being read.

"Dropping litter, eh? That's a criminal offence, that is". The boy walked towards me quickly and I could see his light, wild eyes before he was within feet of me. "Pooh, what's that pong!" He held his nose but kept up the same playful grin. I started to walk away.

"Eh, hold on. What's ya name?"

"Nothing, nobody." He knew my name. He remembered me, but pretended that he didn't.

"Nothing, nobody? More like fucking cunt. Come 'ere, ya black bastard …". He said this when I was far enough away from him not to be able to hit him, because that's the type of boy he was. I stuck two fingers up but I knew he was not watching now. Maybe that was what sniffing glue did to your eyesight – he had all that gunk around his mouth that it leaves. You didn't recognise the

daughter of a woman you used to fancy five years ago and once wrote a card to saying Dearest One. We all laughed at him then, Grandma, Mum and me, and his mum avoided speaking to us for a few weeks. They lived at the back of the Avenue.

He didn't follow me and I sat on the front doorstep of no. 32 with that nothing feeling doing my head in. Surely I should hear something, do something, be something. Surely there was more to this than just sitting on a step, waiting for someone to walk past who I could tell about what had just happened to me, offload it a little. I was nothing like the characters in books that go out of their way to make a difference. What difference could I make? And did I want to make a difference when what was offered up was no reward that I wanted?

There was that slow burn, of course, when Mum would send me reeling with one of her hot slaps or when Grandma talked down to me or, like now, I'd been insulted in a way I couldn't put words to. By the time I was seventeen I couldn't shift the residue of anger that locked me in a silence I would never recover from. All those years later it sat with me, like a full burlap bag waiting to burst and I couldn't put it down to lay out its contents and explain them away. Now, I thought evil thoughts to release that heady feeling; I imagined holding a gun to the boy's mouth and letting go of the trigger – messy, but efficient. I liked those Frankie thoughts because they calmed me down and held me in a quietness that I would never recover from.

Sometimes I felt as if my quietness was a hindrance rather than something to cherish. It helped me to hold on to those things people let go of without knowing it and I could think about it in my own sweet time, at my own pace after the fact and with Frankie in tow. Adult women talked about this

quietness as if it was a danger to them and all they stood for, and I knew why now. Holding on to everything I saw and experienced without letting on wasn't always a good thing. And I did let some people know, like Baljit or if I was feeling particularly low, Merri. But they didn't let me know about anything going on in their families, with their lives, which was a bit worrying. They had brothers and sisters that they could confide in. They didn't need me in the same way. Maybe I shouldn't tell them anything and just write it all in my diary, just like Stanley wrote all his secrets in his diary he kept under the bed. Maybe I shouldn't be silent any longer.

Tony Merchant was his name, and I'd get him back somehow for making me feel like nothing.

Chapter Five

Because thou shalt forget thy misery, and remember it as waters that pass away: (Job 11:16)

Isabella forked the sweet potato too hard and it fell across the table. She sniggered as she retrieved it, hiding her braced teeth behind her hand. Louisiana muttered that she was a fool underneath her breath, which made her sister snort and laugh louder. Grandma told them to be quiet and looked at Stanley from underneath her eyelashes. Stanley had that look of surprise on his face that never seemed to leave him, even when sleeping, and his mound of black and grey-speckled hair looked rougher than usual. Knotty even. His nostrils flared as he ate each mouthful, forking up the rice as if it might escape him, judging its weight then chomping on it. He'd been drinking. You could tell because he was humming at his fork and tapping his feet to a mute tune. And his eyes were dead, tired-hot with the telling of overproof Jamaican rum.

The table was laid as if it was Christmas. Grandma had a bunch of yellow and red chrysanthemums in a crystal vase in the middle of the table and had placed all the food on wicker mats around it: peas and rice; macaroni pie; fried snapper; steamed chicken; potatoes, sweet and English. Louisa ate mostly the salad that had lemon juice squeezed on top and Stanley looked at her over his bottle of Guinness.

"You guyn have to eat more than that. You guyn disappear before you leave here, 'in it?"

"No." Louisa speared a piece of cucumber.

"What did the estate agent have to say, Stanley?" Grandma sounded tired and I guessed that they had been arguing by the way they eyed each other sideways on.

"I already tell you, 'in I?"

"I 'in remember and Grace 'in here to tell me."

"What you want she here for?" Stanley's words sounded slightly slurred and his eyes were bloodshot. His long legs were splayed outside the table legs and he flapped them as he munched on the chicken bone. "She gone out," he said almost to himself.

"So I see". Grandma sipped from her glass of the Kool Aid uncle Prince bought for my cousins. "Mmmm. This thing sweet."

"Sweet like Prince. You can smell his perfume from out by the front door. He must think he a man already." Stanley pushed himself forward, chewing noisily.

"What else is he if he 'in a man?" Grandma laughed at Stanley but she seemed to be looking for an edge to him, anything she could get hold of and make something lasting from.

"I 'in know, but he certainly 'in seem able to face a man without going through his women. Why he 'in here now, huh? How come he wait for me to go out before he bring them?" Stanley pointed with his knife and rice fell from it onto the table. Louisa and Isabelle stared at their plates and I looked at the rice grains resting on his lips. "What's the matter with saying hello to his father, eh?"

"I already told you. He 'in know you won't be here."

"Him no better than the other one. Millicent. High and mighty. Look like she smelling shit..." Louisa stifled a laugh, "And, and, and... ."

"Try not to swear in front of the children... ." That would get him going. He hated to be told what to do and she knew it.

"Lillian, you calling these hard-back women children? Your eyes must be bad, girl." Stanley chuckled to himself and continued eating. Grandma seemed to relax but there was no telling. She asked Isabella to eat her gungo peas as well as the rice. Louisa looked at Stanley hard. I looked at Louisa to try and see what a man would see in her. Her legs aren't that long for a woman – she's shorter than me. But she ate salads like the fey girls at school. I read that somewhere once, that fey people were pretend in some way, putting on an act. These girls always held their knife and fork a certain way, talked to the boys while tossing their hair all the while and always saw themselves as girlfriend potential, always on the look out. Louisa was like them with her salad eating, bad look eyeballing ways. She was just that bit more complete than me. She was seventeen years old. I watched her poke at her salad and remembered her question to me and my response. I wanted to chuck the hot sauce at her head. But I didn't think I could wait until I was seventeen to be like her. Grandma switched on the side lamps with the tassled fringes on the shades and turned off the main light. Stanley seemed so irritable that I couldn't imagine him sitting down with us again. I had never sat at a dining table with him before, as he preferred to eat alone anyway, and I guessed that I was a little like him in some ways. I preferred my own company. Preferred might be the wrong word as most of the time I had no choice. There was no group of friends who hung on my every word, or mother who doted on me and wouldn't leave me alone for a minute. But somehow I had grown into a skin that I had first thought was alien

to me but now fitted like a snug snood around my head. The loneliness I felt that summer and what it drove me to do was just one of the things I remembered about sitting at that dining table, eating carefully so as not to engage Stanley's attention, sitting through grace and wishing I could spit out the words rather than say them as if I meant them. Stanley hadn't even been bothered to bend his head yet I had to. What would happen if I hadn't? Some kind of telling off would have started up that I didn't want to hear or get involved with. I was careful with Stanley and Grandma in a way I wasn't with Mum. I shouted, screamed, fussed and moaned to my Mum about anything and everything and she would do the same back and some. I couldn't out-screech her so I thought of other ways of getting at her that didn't seem to sink into her and leave a mark like her behaviour left a mark on me. Her absence sat with me at that dining table and I felt the awkwardness I had always felt being in my Grandma's house, but more so. Something rushed through me like a burp but there was no sound and no motion, just a harsh sense of being out of place. The cousins looked at me and I shifted in my chair.

"You want more fish, Ella?"

"No, I've had enough, thanks. Mrs Major says she has an old friend to see you."

Grandma placed her fork in her plate and cleared her throat. Who, she asked without speaking. Stanley looked up from his plate but I ignored him, just as he usually ignored me.

"I hear Mortimer went to the airport this morning to collect somebody but I 'in know who it is. You know, Lillian?"

"No, I... ."

"Pity. You 'in know when your son coming, you 'in know you got a friend coming to stay on the Avenue… what you does know, Lillian?"

Grandma's eyes slowly took in Stanley, but I missed what she said to him. Grace came to mind because she was wearing her dress. Grandma wore the lapels differently but it was Grace's dress that she was wearing when I visited just before the summer, when Grandma gave Grace her first taste of mauby once she ran out of sorrel.

"You 'in taste nothing like that before, uh?" Grandma had said.

"It remind me of a tea we mek back home." Grace seemed to admire her own fingers through the glass.

"We 'in sweeten this one, though. It suppose to be bitter."

"It alright".

We were sitting at the kitchen table and Grandma was shelling sweet peas. I was eating them as fast as she could pop them.

"Leave some for us, yes!"

"Thank you for letting me stay, Lillian," Grace began to shell the peas also.

"And for letting me stay too," I said, but Grandma silenced me with a stare. I wasn't officially staying yet, so should have kept my mouth shut. I chewed.

"That's alright, Grace. Wherever I can help. I will always do my best to help anybody." Grandma Lillian enjoyed her own lie because the edge of her mouth tipped up.

"Anybody? Only I was thinking. Stanley was telling me about… ."

"What? What Stanley been telling you?"

Grace looked slightly startled and sat back, "Well, it's nothing really… ."

"Look, I know you two is friends but I 'in letting you two carry on anything in my house… ."

"Lillian, I only saying you should get out more. Visit old friends. Let sleeping dogs lie, man, before the past catch up with you."

I remembered the look on Grandma's face, then, and it mirrored that on her face now. That slow burn.

"It already catch up," she said then and I added the information from the conversation in our hallway to what was being said now. Something or someone was coming to do her harm.

Now Stanley was well into an argument about my Mum. As his voice rose, Lillian's fell, but once he seemed to settle she started to shout.

"You 'in do nothing for that child, nothing! I work for all of us to have what we got now and I damn if I guyn let you ruin my child's life because of some petty lie… ." Spittle flew from Grandma's mouth onto the potatoes.

"It's the truth."

"… lie some fool make up and you take to heart. You hear me? I had enough of this. Why you 'in let sleeping dogs lie, eh?"

Stanley sucked his teeth, "Shut up, woman."

"Don't you tell me to shut up in my own house!"

"Oh, you mean the place bought with a swindler's winnings." Stanley studied his plate, looking for more bones to chew.

"The only swindler rung here is you."

"And the only whore rung here is you."

The argument stopped as soon as it started. My cousins looked at each other, then at me, and started whispering. Isabella kept her head down, but Louisa looked back at me and smiled.

I washed the dishes quickly with lemon Squeezy and left the house again, the taste of fried red snapper on my teeth.

Outside, the sky was running blue. The main house stood in its own light, porch ablaze, pushing its frame red and sore-like against the darkened houses, trees and sky surrounding it. I ran with my back to the park, avoiding the massed shadows the caged huddle of trees would form. I caught sight of my new home sitting on top of the equally dark ground floor flat like the spent end of a match. The houses before me remained dingy in the settled darkness, with only a stream of light from an overhead street lamp releasing the Major's house from the murkiness. I stooped in front of the house, my arms resting on the wall. The avenue was clear; no white boys to bother me now. Inside, Mrs Major had swept back the heavy curtains from the big window and the door, so the front of the house was alight with the brightness of the streetlight and the lamps inside the front room. The room was long and wide, its walls tall and light with small pictures of grey-green fields and forests around them, and a large picture of a golden-haired Christ. I had been in the house before and looked for the seat I was in last by the large brown dining table at the far end of the room. I looked for the small gold carriage clock among the large and smaller, almost thimble size glasses, some coloured with pictures of sailing boats, some clear, that were on the shelving above the table. They looked like a glittering crown. The clock was gone. The rest of the furnishings were dark, the velvety brown chairs and sofa melting into the brownness of the carpet at their feet, and a shining brown radiogramme sinking with them.

Mrs Major walked towards the window before I could study more. I crouched down. Then I heard the noise and felt the heat from inside the house as the window opened. I sat up from my hiding place. Others had followed

Mrs. Major into the room; Mr Major sat by the far wall, his head pushed back as if he was napping. Then his head shot forward and I could see that he was laughing silently. A woman stood in front of him, her arms mapping out the story she was telling, Mr Major's facial expressions becoming rounder by the minute. I had not seen the woman before. She looked older than Grandma Lillian and shorter with light brown skin and a head full of white white hair. She must be the visitor, I thought, as pretty Evelyn, Mrs Major's daughter, and Gerald, her husband, walked into the room and turned towards the woman immediately. Mrs Major placed her arm around the woman's shoulders from time to time, or rested her head against her own. Laughter bubbled throughout the conversation, and I had difficulty in following its course. Their accents became broader and words faster, just as Grandma and Stanley's did when they speak to other islanders. I moved even closer, crouching just beneath the front pane of the window now, peeping in now and then, until much of the laughter subsided and the room quietened.

"The evenings get quite chilly despite the fact it's summer. Do you want to wear one of my cardigans, Marva?" Bessie sat down next to the woman on the sofa.

"I'll let you know when I start defrosting." They laughed, even though she seemed to get everything the wrong way round. The woman called Marva took the cardigan from Bessie and handed her an empty glass. Bessie pointed to the bottle of brown liquid on the crowned table but the woman shook her head. She wore a checked buttoned dress that kept opening at the thigh so she fiddled with the buttons again. She looked towards the base of the window and seemed to eye the wallpaper. There was a quietness about her that rested around the eyelids and streaked the broad nose and thin mouth like a glaze. I

lifted my head to look closer, take her in, and she watched me, silently. The surplus light showed her eyes to be blue from the sun and she squinted. Evelyn placed a small wrapped object on her lap and she turned to open it. Thank you, she said as the red wrapping paper fell to the floor to reveal the carriage clock I had seen on the mantelpiece only months before.

"Is this to wake me up? Don't you remember how good I am at getting up in the morning?" She spoke to Mrs Major.

"Well, there are no cockerels crowing around here to get you out of bed, so I thought you might need some help." Evelyn picked up the wrapping paper and knelt before Marva. "'Cause if you gonna follow me around you got to start early."

"Bessie, tell this child I 'in wake up a minute after 6 o'clock all my life and I 'in planning to do so now. You English people think you got the goods on early mornings."

"No, but I think the pace would be too much for you if we stay out all day; so lets start early and get back early afternoon."

"What you call pace is not always take up with valuable things." Marva pulled a pair of glasses from her pocket and wiped them on her dress. She put them on and studied the gold-coloured clock closer.

"How you mean?" Evelyn's accent returned to her as if it had never left the island and she rested her hands on Marva's knees. The old woman visibly stiffened but Evelyn stayed where she was.

"Girl, you know you pretty already so you 'in have to sit so close for the next compliment."

"No, but I may have to sit closer for the next prize". Evelyn's eyes glistened bright and her smile was as beautiful as the light reflecting on the

clock. Her mother asked her what she was talking about but Marva shushed her with a raised hand.

"Go on."

"I mean, if your mother was able to change the fortunes of the family down the road, maybe you could do the same for us."

"You all still playing around with that old tale?" Marva looked irritated.

"Maybe you can poison Lillian and... ." Evelyn was laughing.

"Evelyn, stop this rubbish. You shouldn't talk about people's lives like that." Mrs Major tried to stop the laugh from rising to the top of her voice.

"She speaks about Marva like that. That's true, isn't it, Mum?"

"Well, I did hear her speaking to someone at church the other day about the past poisoning the mind. But that could have been about anything." I saw Mrs Major push her hand at Evelyn's face, but the younger woman stayed firm.

"But she showed the woman she was talking to the bangle. The bangle you all used to wear. You two seem to be speaking a bit more now, so it couldn't have been about you, Mum. It was about Marva". Evelyn placed her hands on Marva's shoulders who sat up straight to face her.

"If we could afford it, we'd bring you over to live here." Evelyn changed tack and I noticed a look of quiet distaste about her.

"What make you think I want to live here?"

"You're a wasted woman over there."

"Well, I may very well become a wasted, old island woman here." Marva fidgeted uncomfortably and Mrs Major shooed Evelyn away.

"Give the woman space to breathe. She has a whole three weeks to make up her mind as to what she wants to do. Whether she's going to poison Lillian or not." They all laughed, but Evelyn hadn't finished.

"You still renting that house and the land it's on from the Hunters?"

"It'll do for now. But I guyn soon have to make provisions for when Nita get on. She mother left the world without a penny. Bellevue see to that."

"That nut house still above Silver Beach?" Mortimer eased himself forward in his chair.

"Yes, but it done had a lick of paint recently and does look real … new."

"We should see if they got any space for Evelyn." Mortimer laughed and the women tutted after him. Evelyn's pretty. Very pretty. Even the light seems to dim in her presence. She returned to Marva, sitting on the arm of the sofa beside her.

"Let's make sense here – you ain't here for a holiday."

"What make you say that?"

"Those Hunters breathing down your neck a bit heavier these days?" Evelyn leaned over and picked something from Marva's hair. They studied the item together then Evelyn flicked it away.

"Bessie, tell this daughter of yourn to lay off the rum. It might give she a seizure."

"It certainly helps to run her mouth." Mrs Major was becoming more agitated and uncomfortable. But there was a stillness about her that said she was listening closely.

"Evelyn, I don't want to sit here all evening talking 'bout Lillian. I've got better things to do. And so should you."

"But she still has your money."

"And she still has what's left of she locked up pride. She 'in getting rid a nothing just because I appear. I know that. Besides, I learn to believe that my life is above material things. She has her pride."

"And what about yours."

"Evelyn that's enough now. Anyone for some coconut bread I just baked… ." Bessie started to walk out of the room.

"No, thank you. I think I'll go up now. Come on Nita."

A chill began to settle outside. I realised that my neck was cold and my knees were numb, I'd crouched for so long. I turned to go. Grandma Lillian stood behind the porch wall, looking over my head and into the house. The light from the house made her dark cheeks, forehead and chin glow a burnished yellow and, for a brief moment, she looked golden. I stood beside her, catching the glow on my own skin, watching the visitor say her goodnights. Then, from beneath the inside ledge of the window, a young girl got up and walked towards Marva. I hadn't seen her before and the others had not spoken to her or acknowledged her. She was about my age.

We stood together until the others walked into the hallway of the house and more houselights were turned on. The streetlight covered our backs as we turned homewards. And I thought about the windows being open and the curtains not being drawn at the Major's house. That was unusual because every black person on the Avenue drew their curtains as soon as their lights went on. Only people like the Smiths and Arkwrights didn't mind others looking in. I knew then that Mrs Major could see me. I was supposed to see it all. But how to piece it together. Grandma was scared of this woman called Marva, who said that she meant Grandma no harm but, if she could, would get some money from her. And the Majors were in on it because Bessie Major hated Grandma now. But why did Grandma owe her money? What was this all about?

Grandma pointed towards the kitchen when we get back to no. 32 and I stood by the stove, my knees shaking.

"Never go back there again, you hear me?"

"Yes, Grandma." I lied, of course, and she knew it. So she told me not to answer back and gave me the old dreaded evil eye. I couldn't help shaking and I wanted to give her a look back but my eyes wouldn't stop looking surprised and slightly excited.

"Just do as you told. That woman you see there means me harm. No good can come of she being here. I know both she and Mrs Major from back home. No good can come of it."

Grandma moved closer to me, the naked light bulb reflected in her dark eyes.

"I hear you go back there and I'll kill you."

I'm scared of the dark. Not the corner's kind of darkness with its comforting house smells and walls for support if needed, but the type that has no limits or borders, no matter how far a hand reaches into it, the kind of darkness that falls over the tall trees in the park, over the chimneys on the Avenue, and over Grandma's face as we walked away from the Major's making her appear chiselled and stone-like.

Even though she wouldn't be much comfort, I couldn't wait for Mum to come home.

Chapter Six

They that dwell in mine house, and my maids, count me for a stranger: I am an alien in their sight. (Job 19:15)

I saw Marva before she saw me. She was with the girl from last night and they were walking away from me towards the park, stopping, starting, walking, stopping, starting again. They seemed to be studying the houses along their route and admiring the tatty hedges and dying sunflowers outside them. I caught up with them easily. I'd been out for a jog already, and at one stage my lungs felt like they wanted to see the outside of my chest. The track near the park was overgrown with weeds and there was the high smell of dog shit in a couple of places that seemed to come round much too quickly, so I had to watch my step. The smell just said summer. So did the sudden effort to lose weight. The lungs were another story, something I probably wouldn't want to sustain. Why run when you could walk? But the ache of it and the remission were one and the same thing, like a journey I had some power over. I had stopped when I couldn't run any further, but I would go further tomorrow and the next day and the next day. Then maybe I would give up and start sucking on sherbert bon bons again. The mixed race girl who just recently moved onto the Avenue with her family and looked like a cross between Bungle on Rainbow and a stoat walked by and waved. I waved back but had no intention of

speaking to her in case I laughed in her small featured face. Instead I turned my attentions to Marva and Nita, the girl from last night. I walked up to them cautiously with a little spring in my step to somehow show I was above them in some way. I didn't know if I succeeded.

"Hello." Marva was smaller close up and seemed darker. Her hair was less shocking today, pulled back into an untidy knot. My smile was weak, I knew, because I didn't know what to expect. At least we were not on the Avenue so Grandma couldn't see. I was not scared, of course, but there was no point in looking a gift horse in the mouth – it was pocket money day today.

"Well, hello. You had a good night's sleep after all that eavesdropping? You're the girl, right? The girl at the window?"

"Yes. Sorry." I put on my polite voice but thought she was rude to say I was noseying.

"No need to be sorry, m'dear." Her hair seemed a dustier grey in the daylight and she hung on to the girl for dear life. Her voice was sturdy like her hands but her legs seem to be causing her problems. "Cramp. All that time on a plane. You ever fly? Don't bother. I wouldn't have if I had had a choice. The houses over here so grand even though they're for poor people. I can't imagine Carmichael looking anything like this. Brick houses does get so hot." The girl watched me and we stare at each other for a while. Then Marva said *You're Stanley's child, aren't you*? It sounded like a song lyric, something to be sung. She looked at me as if I should say something, but I did my silent act. I didn't know what she meant. Does she mean granddaughter or daughter? Did she know?

We sat by the playground because Nita wanted to see the swings swing. She was as old as me but not quite over the little things that please

children. So it seemed to me. She didn't talk much, but let Marva do her talking for her. Marva had gotten over her cramp and was bending over a hedge to get a closer look at the flower garden. The smell of the roses from the garden reached us and I asked Marva if they have roses back in Barbados.

"Well, of course, and beautiful ones too. They're just as wonderful as here, but more so. You are Ella, aren't you?"

"Yes." She spoke quickly, so I had to keep asking her to repeat what she had said. Her accent seemed slightly different from my Grandma's and I asked her if she was from the same place.

"Originally, no. I come from St. Phillip. Past the Crane. You hear of it?"

"No."

"So, Lillian 'in teach you nothing, not even who your father is." I played stupid. Why was she baiting me?

"He's dead, died in Barbados."

"But you is Stanley's child."

"Yes, his granddaughter. Yes, I am." I wasn't ready to admit it to anyone, especially not a stranger. I supposed I had a romantic notion that Mum and me would sit down and talk about it. She might even cry again but this time I would cry with her. Then maybe I wouldn't seem so womanish to her and be her daughter again. Instead of what I am now, something in-between.

Marva looked at me. She seemed to have gone off the idea of getting a response out of me and went onto something else.

"We were girls together, your grandmother and me. And Bessie, of course. Nothing or nobody could separate us, even though we went to separate schools and lived in different parishes. Your great grandfather used to call us the terrible trio. You know what was so terrible about us? It was the fact

that we never said no. If one of them Hunter boys dared us to jump from a limb of a tree, we would do it or if we were told by grown women to not walk along the road with our skirts hitched up from playing in the sea we would ignore them. We didn't have the time for anybody but ourselves." Marva wore a lilac-checked dress today, and much the same as the previous evening's dress, its buttons were loose and kept opening across the chest. She played with them as she spoke about a man who lost his soul to the devil. I half listened because I had heard this type of thing before, saw a film, in fact, with some old guy with whiskers playing the devil. In Marva's story, the devil had bargained a deal with him, so it had been said in St. George where Marva ended up once she began to harvest cane for the Hunter plantation. The devil spoke to him every day until he made his mind up the right way, as far as the devil was concerned. Take a pot of gold and make it bigger and bigger until all that is left is big. The Hunter boy listened and learned from the devil's words, but one day, when his house was bigger than any house in the vicinity and his earnings larger than any one resident on the island, the Hunter boy said, now I can afford to pay for my soul back. The devil laughed and danced, laughed and danced until all the Hunter boy could hear to the end of his day's was the devil's laughter. Marva looked at me after she had finished, expectant, but still I wouldn't say anything. Let her make the first move. Maybe that was a move. Maybe that was her way of talking about the money she wanted from Grandma and Grandma was the devil or something. This woman was creepy. I had left my cousins sleeping and I thought of them now, their straight hair plastered across the pillows – they both had decided they were too tired to put on their overnight headscarves. I wondered who they were. What does a father make them? Daddy's girls or women already? What does a father actually do? Is it like on those tv sitcoms

where they're supposed to mow the lawn but never get round to doing it and start up hair-brained scheme after scheme? Because that's just like having a mother.

"Bessie tell me that story and I still remember it from my youth." Marva spoke as if she was dead sure that I was listening, but I was past caring. I didn't ask her any more questions because I wanted to leave her and get back to the flat, back to Mum's hiding place to take one more peek, but Marva asked me plenty more. What time do the pubs shut on Saturday (she called them rum shops)? Where can you buy suitable bed linen and household items at a reasonable price? Is Omo better than Daz? What is West Ham United? How is Lillian?

"She's fine. We're getting ready to go to a party later at Evelyn's house." I remembered the night before and the talk Grandma had given me. Take heed of your elders. Don't talk to strangers, especially old women who come from Barbados. I looked at Marva and wondered: Is she here to poison Lillian? If so, why is she asking about her? Maybe old friendships are hard to let go. I thought of Baljit; despite the fact she left for India without telling me, I'd still speak to her come school time. But maybe now there would be an even greater distance between us.

"Your grandmother still in love with Stanley?" Marva talked a lot for an old woman. It's usually harder to get blood from a stone than to get an adult to talk to you for more than five minutes that doesn't include orders. I thought this was an odd question to ask me and I shrugged my shoulders. I wanted to tell her about the arguing and cursing but felt too embarrassed to say, and strangely loyal to Grandma.

"We'll see." Marva stood up and held onto the girl tightly as if she might fall without her. But I thought her cramp had gone.

On the way back to the Avenue, I walked behind them so that Lillian didn't suspect we had spoken.

It was only later at the party, the dead party that no one, including Grandma, wanted to go to, that I realised after thinking about it that Marva had a limp. She had said cramp was bothering her, not that she had one leg shorter than the other. A miscalculation, perhaps, in the way she wanted to present herself, as this innocent at war with the devil – who was Grandma. If she could lie about that she could lie about anything, it seemed to me. Yet another one of adult's lies to chalk up for good measure. I should keep a tally and show it to Mum when she gets back. No more telling me not to tell lies. *Now you say you're sorry. Go on and cry me a river.*

We arrived at the party too early and left too late for the surprise. Why Grandma attended in the first place and insisted that we come along was beyond me. She had started to talk to Mrs Major again, and I knew that she had been invited because she had kept the invitation on the mantelpiece in the front room we hardly ever went into, but with Marva here now I thought that everything would change. But it hadn't.

Evelyn lived in Manor Park, not far from Eastham. Her nets scooped into a shell formation across the bay window in her front room and her carpet smelled of cat. By the time I picked up the pennies that had dropped out of my small clasp purse I was gagging from the smell. If Grandma didn't scrub her carpet every two weeks, Bridgetown would have her place smelling the same.

"Why are we here?" I could see the Opal Fruit colour Grandma's tongue as she answered Louisa. "I told you, to be polite. I was invited, so I came."

"But this is boring."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Have you ever been to such a boring party?" Louisa took me aside to say this and I tried to be surly in my response. I didn't like the way she spoke to Grandma but wasn't surprised by Lillian's dropping of the nice act. It was my place to be rude, or at least pretend to be polite.

"Yes, I have. It was at your place last year."

"Ha, Ha! You see that old man in the corner. Do you think he knows how to work that thing?" There was a man trying to get used to the stereo. It was one of those new gold coloured hi-fi systems with a turntable up top. All the lights were still on and there were loads of kids running around so this would be no real party. Not like the one I wanted to go to. Not like the one I had yet to see. I looked at Louisa and decided that I would do something I had promised myself that I wouldn't.

"Do you know where we could go to a real party?"

Louisa looked surprised, but pleased. "No, but I can find out."

She left me with Isabella who was looking at me as if I had just crawled out of a dustbin. "How old are you?"

"Old enough."

"I bet."

Louisa stood outside with some older kids who looked as if they might go on somewhere else. And the asking killed me, because I didn't want her to see me desperate, needy. Did I sound as if I was pleading? I hoped not. And what would I tell Grandma. I went to find her.

And the fact that it shouldn't be a problem started to bother me. She would say yes, I could go, without batting an eyelid. I knew this because she

had allowed me to travel on buses and tube trains on my own long before I was ten years old. Nothing awful ever happened, just came across some strange men in odd places, but that wouldn't have bothered her and I didn't let it bother me. I remembered once being on a bus and an old drunk man gesturing to me from the bus stop, offering me some of his can of lager. I stared and a woman on the bus asked me where my Mum was. Her eyes threw her own fear and disgust at me and I visibly shrunk. I knew I did because I could sense it. I hardly ever deviated from the plan, then; to pick up a bobbin from Mrs Carter down the back of the market a few bus stops down, to visit the old woman from the church through the park and over the other end of the borough. I could have walked these journeys but I enjoyed a bus ride so took every opportunity to have one. But I couldn't get over those woman-looks that strangers threw me that said something I couldn't understand. And I felt resentful at their part-clucking, part-meddling. I looked older than my age because I'm taller than average and filled out as Mum put it, so maybe that made Mum and Grandma think that it was ok to send me. Maybe. Or maybe they just didn't care whether I turned up again or not. Knowing what I knew now, it was probably the latter.

The teenagers were dressed quite casually, with one of the girls wearing a headscarf in the daytime. She showed me later that there were nubs of woven hair matting together underneath it as she was starting to lox up. I passed her now and started to smile but something stopped me. Some dread. I scowled instead and tried to look cool, as if I was not bothered. She scowled back.

Past the teenagers and to the back of the house was Lillian. She was talking to Bessie Major at the back door, her head hidden by the top of the

fridge freezer but I recognised her hand, long and elegant, resting on the draining board.

"Can we go outside? We'll be back later."

"Ok. Make sure them children get back in one piece." So, concern for them and not for me. I supposed uncle Prince would kill her if something happened to them. Who would kill her for me?

I stayed by the door, hidden by the freezer and listened to their conversation. Nothing stuck, my head was too full of the party I might be going to and I thought that Lillian's acceptance had somehow taken the edge off of it, given it a seal of approval. I didn't like the feeling. They talked about Marva, as any fool would have guessed they would, and Grandma put on this pleading, pitiful voice to try and get Mrs Major to see sense. About what I didn't know, but this was definitely crunch time for Grandma. She was begging for her life in there. But I didn't care. I was going to a real party.

"You 'in understand, Bessie, these are hard times for me too. You need a ten pound to buy a decent amount of food a week, I need that ten pound too. You need to pay your mortgage, I need to pay one too. You know that. I have just one place to live in… ."

"What about that place on Richmond Road?"

"Don't bother yourself with that 'cause that 'in mine anymore. And Stanley gamble away what was left of the money I get from it. You all seem to forget him and what I have to put up with. You 'in understand."

"We know, Lillian, we do know. But we were promised something and you took it away from us. Now we want it back."

"I 'in got it to give."

"Well, can you find it?"

We left the house too late to get our bus. I was half asleep on my feet, having got up early to jog, but I would be ready once I got there. I wanted to put Lillian, Stanley, Bessie and Marva behind me and look forward to something new, something that I would never forget. Unlike Dolores in that book, an old fool who knew no better wouldn't escort me around the country. I did have the fantasy having read the book that my Mum would die and a man would take me away, but we would do more of what I wanted to do – see west end shows, visit the Taj Mahal, go scuba diving off the Great Barrier Reef. I wondered if I would meet him at this party. I could only wait and see.

Chapter Seven

They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. (Job 21:11)

"These odd people, man, these odd times." He said that to me because he'd listened to my story about Marva and Lillian and because, I thought, he cared. He was older than me, at least seventeen, and had dry, crusty bits at the edges of his fingers. He smelled of fish, possibly sardines, and sucked on his fingers as if they tasted good. I watched him closely but not too close – he might think that I was staring.

We had taken the bus back to Eastham to one of the roads off the high street. The music coming from the house was so loud that the outer wall seemed to vibrate when I rested my hand on the entrance. I put on some bright red lipstick lent to me by Louisa. We had had two visits from the police by the time this guy started speaking to me and I had drunk more wine than I had ever drunk before. I had tasted it before as Mum kept some in the fridge most of the time, but not bothered to drink much of it, purely because she would start shouting and throwing things if you touched anything of hers. Once I did have two glasses then pretended the bottle had dropped out of my hand and spilled

when I was trying to get something else out of the fridge. She had done her nut.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"No."

"You bin drinking this? Then let me tell you something. The next time you take something of mine I guyn fight you for it. You understand me? Buy your own."

I wasn't that impressed by the taste so didn't bother to ask her for some money to buy some, but skulked off instead, sorry that she had caught me out. *Oh, but I'm afraid. I caught you in a lie.*

Bernadette, the girl with the headscarf on, had walked with her right arm pulled through my left from the bus stop to the house. She was older than me, but no more clever. She knew how to manipulate the people around her, which I always thought was a good sign; not too dumb or too accepting. She showed me her nubs of hair and I showed her my extended belly button under my fleur de lis embroidered top. A fair exchange, I thought, as my hair was nothing to speak of. I had picked it out of the plaits and left it open like a wild afro. Louisa told me I was five years too late to wear my hair like that and I told her that I didn't care.

The boys walked on in front, arguing over a small piece of puff one of them had found in his pocket. I would smoke it if they offered, I decided, but knew that they wouldn't offer. They seemed disinterested in us, as if we were tagging along with them when I knew it was Bernadette who had got an invite and they were all dependent on her. Their small backs heading away from me made me feel lonely and slightly upset. Was this a mistake? I felt stupid, dreaming of smoking when I could pick up any of my Mum's spent roll ups any

time and watching backs that knew nothing about me and had no interest in me. Maybe this was a mistake. But the house hummed from two roads away and we were drawn to it like bees to honey, money to cash tills, flies to shit. When I took my hand away from the brick wall of the house, the crumbs of masonry on my palm seemed to make the night permanent, as if it wouldn't go away that easily. I was here to stay.

The room was dark and there were shadows of bodies on the wall coming from the streetlight outside the window. We were on the top floor of one of the few three-storey houses in Eastham, and I immediately thought of those kids at a party in Deptford earlier in the year and the fire that killed them. I made sure that I stayed near the door, but needn't have bothered because that seemed to be continually filled with more bodies and you could just about call it an exit. Men looked at me then look away as if they have forgotten something and I had reminded them. And that woman-look appeared on the face of someone too old to be there for fun. Must be spying, I thought to myself, sipping on some warm, cheap white wine. Fishy was nice enough though. He would do, despite the fact that he probably didn't even own a car. He danced about around me as if he was satisfied with who he was with, but his eyes were floaty and hard all at the same time, as if he hadn't really been listening but just making the right noises. I immediately felt stupid at having spoken to him about it all in the first place, and when he took my hand and pulled me into the centre of the room, I felt even more stupid, dancing in front of everyone. They all kept the walls standing, drinks in hand, or surrounded the sound in the corner of the larger furniture-less room. Mounds of them, men and women – just. It seemed like the entire young and black population of Eastham were here – I even recognised some of the older kids from school – but there was no one else I

knew who I could have showed off to next school term. Someone had forgotten to take the family portraits from their hooks on the walls and strange people looked down on us, oblivious to what was going on in my head, of what I held in my hand. His hand. And he had potential, that's all I knew. And that's what I thought about as he led me to the centre grabbed me by the waist and started to rub himself up against me. Louisa walked up behind him and mouthed the question I didn't want to hear – am I ok? I nodded, but hated her for asking. She went back to her corner. To her guy. I was left with mine. His body was hard and I wondered where Isabella was suddenly, as if she should be feeling this too. This feeling. It was like being full up with embarrassment and a longing for something – I didn't know what. I could only imagine. And imagination wouldn't be enough for me this time. I would need more. Maybe I was running before I could walk. My Mum always said I did that. Always too fast, too womanish. Maybe this was what she foresaw, me dancing with an almost-man at a party full of teenagers and twenty-odd year olds and feeling something. The drink had loosened my tongue but not my limbs and he had to show me how to bend into him and work with his body. He didn't seem to mind. When the song was over he left me to go and get some more drink and I was left in the centre of the room, turning full circle to look for Louisa, Isabella or any of the other people I had come with. I was alone.

They came for me then. My thoughts. Thick and hungry like I'd starved them or something. I feel hungry. Don't move. I am tired. Stay longer. It is hot. Take off your clothes. Everyone is looking at me and I am in the centre of the room looking stupid, as usual. She calls me that, stupid. If I didn't hand her the King James in time or come to the table when called. Stupid, just like your mother. When I told Mum, she went at her hammer and tongs, but she still said

it. Then once I saw her sitting at the kitchen table, bible in hand, saying stupid, stupid over and over again and I decided then it couldn't all have been me.

I noticed that all of the corners were taken by couples talking, laughing or dancing so I walked to the window, the speaker blaring just to the left of me. Your ears will be ringing tomorrow, Fishy had said as if I didn't know. But I didn't know. I liked to pretend that I did, but he could see right through me. If I stopped the thoughts rushing I could think straight and tell him I liked him and ask for his phone number. Louisa said that would be the best thing to do in case he tried to phone Grandma's house. But I wanted to give him the flat telephone number so that when Mum got back she would have the shock of her life. *Stop rushing at me and I can think straight* to the tune of The Jones Girls' "Don't Ask My Neighbour". I keep thinking in music. I can't keep thinking facts otherwise I'd go mad. The air coming through the window hit the spot at first but then it grew stale and rancid with the puff being smoked out by the front doorstep. I was sweating. I needed a drink of water. And I was going to pee myself if I was not careful. But somehow the two feelings, thirst and bursting, wouldn't go together. So I couldn't fit them in the same slot in my mind and do something about them. He would find me in the room when he got back from the kitchen at the back of the house, the room with the table strewn with wetness, half empty bottles and used up plastic cups. He wouldn't have to look for me because I would wait for him as I danced and as I thought of what was to come. But even then I knew that it was all over. The fantasy would have been a joke to any of these people if I had discussed it with them, though the girl in the corner with the glasses and the wet look hairdo might be a contender. Maybe even Fishy might be able to make sense of it. But I doubted that anyone in this crumbling house with its dingy walls and unsatisfying low ceiling rooms

could. I felt that school playground lonely feeling that didn't go away unless I found a wall to steady me. There was no free wall space so I stood there, waiting for the room to stop swimming around me and hoping that I didn't look too stupid.

I heard her voice before I saw her and I felt myself running before I even moved. Because she sounded angry, put out, upset and I was dancing and enjoying wine and I was only 14. My mistake, she may not have understood when I said we were going outside I meant outside and beyond. I felt a tug at the back of my head as if someone has pulled at a lump of my hair and turned around to see her clapped hand heading for my face. I duck but she grabbed at me, holding on to my fleur de lis and exaggerating the tiny holes with her big fingers, her awesome grip. I fell backwards and bodies moved away from me then, some exclaiming at my rudeness and sucking teeth. One woman began to tell me off for falling and being somewhere I shouldn't be but all I could think of was: Let me get at her. I started to feel bold and stood up ready for the next clap but it didn't come straight away. The music had been switched off and the eyes around me were a mixture of sadness, glee and disapproval. Some looked plain bored. I wouldn't let my younger sister come to a place like this, I heard a young woman say and I wondered what kind of place she meant. We were only dancing. And all the while Lillian stood watching me while her mouth worked, shouting at me to get out of the room and out of the house.

"You think I born yesterday, uh? I know when outside mean outside. Now get out of in here!"

I didn't move, but said, "I know you wasn't born yesterday and nor was I."

"Who you speaking to?"

Before I could stop myself, before pride lifted itself from me like the bile that had risen from my stomach to my throat, I said "You."

The room spun for more than one reason. The wine had started to kick in and my stomach and head were feeling the aftermath. Lillian's slap had snapped my head backwards and up as it was more of an uppercut than a slap, more fight than mere annoyance. I stood still and thought of a few home truths to tell her but by then another older woman with rollers in her hair and a dry-looking mouth has come into the room and said: Party done. There was a series of loud groans and some people obediently began to troop towards the door. I walked around Lillian and went down the stairs, climbing over people who sat there. The other older woman's voice was getting louder, despite the fact that I was walking away, as she had moved out of the room also and was coming towards me down the stairs, judging me. Lillian had let up on her shouting to let this woman hold sway and then the two began to talk, the other sorry for any problems my appearance at the party had caused. My chin felt sore and my head was dull and vibrating all at the same time and I was sorry that I came. Louisa and Isabelle trooped along behind me and we stood outside the house, waiting for Lillian to stop talking to the woman, waiting for the rest of the night to begin. I felt awkward in their presence, as if I hadn't quite grown enough. Isabella looked annoyed, Louisa amused.

By now the high street was dead quiet and the darkness lent a type of chill to the air even if it felt warm. I wanted to cry but Lillian went on moaning and throwing charges at me that made my head spin, so I stayed silent and watched her.

"Come to my house, eat my food, drink my drink and defy me? But wait! I can't believe it! You would think I was born yesterday! You may think I a fool

but I guyn prove you wrong… ." Lillian walked on with a purpose, as if fire were lighting the soles of her feet and hurrying her back. I asked Louisa what time it was and she said that it was one o'clock. One o'clock. The longest time I had spent out of my bed in my lifetime and my Grandma had to spoil it. I hated her for this, for making me feel this way. And I didn't get a chance to get Fishy's number. That's what you do, get the phone number. Merri told me this once when she was describing her older sister's experiences at clubs and parties. I wasn't allowed to bring Merri home or what Mum called "consort" with her because her family were trash. It suddenly occurred to me that her sister must be all of 19 years old and I am 14 and maybe I am doing just what my Mum had said I would do. I tried to stop myself from thinking but with Lillian droning on it might have been better to be in here, listening to myself than out there, taking her in. Louisa looped her arm in mine as if we were friends now, as if I had made an impact. Isabella looked as if she hated me, but I didn't care. I did what I had to do.

A sole car launched its way across the deserted junction at the head of the high street and the main road and I stuttered in my walk. We were close to home and I suddenly didn't want to be there or go to bed. I started to answer Lillian back and watched her stiffen and start up again, as if she wasn't hearing me right, as if she could shut me up. For some reason I thought of Marva, looking at the dingy houses with crumbling, uneven doorsteps, holding on to Nita for dear life. I hoped she killed Grandma. I didn't know how she would do it but I hoped that she succeeded. I looked at Louisa and she smiled.

I climbed into bed and refused to switch off the lamp by my bed. Isabella complained but Lillian had gone to her bed and couldn't hear her. I wiped the lipstick from my mouth with the back of my hand and picked up the tattered

copy of *Forever* from my bedside. Louisa asked me what I am reading. I answer. "Good book. But too old for you." I disliked the intensity with which she told me this, just as much as I hated Lillian and anyone who got in my way with their opinions. I wished that I had something on Lillian that Marva would want, that would put me in her good books. Then maybe she would take me back to Barbados with her, even though it was too small for me, when she killed Lillian off. I thought this over, but couldn't come up with anything. And for the life of me I couldn't help thinking for all the dancing and the dramatic close, that night was as dull as watching paint dry.

Chapter Eight

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters (Psalms 23:2)

London looked nothing like the pictures of England Marva had seen before. She remembered at one aunt's house on the island being surrounding by frames full of rolling green hills and sparse, rounded trees, with a small house or two spotted amongst them. She had seen pictures of the Tower of London and Scottish castles before and when she was able to listen to her teacher's history lessons at school rather than lose concentration quite quickly, she would hear the stories of Lancelot Capability Brown and Christopher Wren and look at images that suggested great wealth, accomplishment and arrogance. All the reverence that was reserved for overseas by her elders was lost on her and now, over sixty years later, her opinion hadn't changed. London was dirty, just as those returning to the island had said, and everything – the buildings, the trees, the people, had a hard edge to them that suggested conceit. Marva thought carefully about this conceit and decided that the men she had heard about and the images she had seen were false somehow, as if careful fingers in the dark room of the photographer had erased fallibility. Nothing could look that good. She dare not tell anyone her real views. Marva

thought her views were still renegade and set her up against the crowd and at that moment in time she wanted in with Bessie and Evelyn. The bold, dirty-looking, ugly buildings that Marva saw from the window of the cab did not stir her, or the faint smell of mildew and damp heat. She watched but did not exclaim like Nita did. Nita acted like her children would have done if they had been her age now. No matter what she told them they still held onto a vision of abroad that was elaborate in its self-deception and ideas on progress. Her eldest even thought that only white men built roads that were worth travelling because they did more than skirt around an island less than 440km square but covered stretches of the world hardly any man had touched, or went over land that was trodden daily and frequently by hundreds, if not thousands, if not millions of people. Marva saw none of this as a marvel as to her childbirth was more distinctive than adding tarmac to clay and, as they drove through the streets of east London, she felt as if she was seeing the truth and it met all her expectations.

Marva didn't believe in messages. Certainly not the kind she saw on her first night in England. She had arrived at Bessie and Mortimer Major's house with Nita and a few expectations. The room they were ushered into had felt quite warm and the stilted air was oppressive. She had to ask for a book to fan with. She had looked at the small china ornaments from places called Great Yarmouth and Margate in cabinets and on mantelpieces, before saying to Bessie: What you want to do? Carry these places with you 'til you die? And Bessie had looked at Marva as if she had mentioned something she had begun to contemplate but found painful to consider. Marva knew what her beating stick was, then, as she had known since Bessie's minor stroke in the year the

island celebrated ten years of independence. But she wouldn't use it against her old friend too much. Only when it came to the girl, Nita. And so she began:

"They tell me things expensive over here but at least you 'in gotta pay for your health care."

Bessie had looked at Marva with a look that bordered on compassion and faint disgust. Marva saw this as her chance to move in even faster.

"I 'in mind for me, of course. I guyn be fighting fit for some time. It's in the genes. How long did Ma Nita last?" Marva liked to bring her mother into the conversations she had with women like Bessie as it made them think of her in a certain light, one that reflected badly on themselves and better on the daughter of Ma Nita. Ma Nita had been good to all of them when they were young, almost to the detriment of herself, who she thought little of but as a soft cushion for all concerned. All of Marva's friends wanted her as their mother, although Marva hated to admit that the woman annoyed her to distraction (she didn't like doormats). But they couldn't have her and so they built up a slight resentment towards Marva, who used it to beat them with whenever her mother was mentioned.

"The child has asthma and it so expensive to… ."

"Oh, Marva, but you never mentioned this in any of your letters!" The letters had been infrequent, spasmodic even, arriving after Marva felt a pang of guilt having received Bessie's letter months earlier and not responded to it. Even then it took a couple more months for her to get out the Basildon Bond her son had sent her from Toronto and the Parker fountain pen her daughter insisted she used from Berlin and what she said in them seemed to be so removed from her thoughts she often wondered if she had two minds, not one. She complained often at home but not in the letters, pretending that her life was

comfortable, like she imagined the women from Bridgetown who traded out of shop fronts to be; as if Bessie couldn't know how difficult it was.

"I 'in want to burden you." But this was not true. She wanted to tell Bessie her problems and even exaggerate them to get some help, but something told her to hold on until the right time, until she could make an impact.

"Let her stay here with us. Maybe we can get her on one of the trainee nursing programmes later on … ."

And Bessie had been led exactly where Marva had intended her to go without much persuasion. Good for one day's work and perhaps her only success of this journey. Marva felt suddenly tired from her exertions and considered how difficult it would be to get anything from Lillian and to get the landlord off her back. She looked around herself again with a clearer eye, one that took in the English ornaments carefully placed above the conch shells and miniature island shaped barometers from the few trips back home Bessie had taken. Marva stilled her disdain for people who kept keepsakes. They were wishful thinkers, those who were not satisfied with the here and now. She had let go of her wishful thinking all those years ago when Lillian left the island and Marva's children followed her, their different fathers footing the bill. Marva had got used to living within her means, mentally and economically. All because the woman had left with what was rightfully hers. Lillian's father had promised the house in England to the three of them, Bessie, Lillian and Marva. And Lillian had run off with the key to east London and never returned. She felt a burning sensation in her chest just thinking about it and sat down in the broad armchair beside her, thinking of how white and skeletal the furniture was back home compared to this. Everything seemed larger in England – the buildings, the

doorways, the people. Marva wouldn't be able to get used to this place. Home was still home, despite her problems. Besides, Bessie wouldn't take both her and Nita in and Marva would feel ashamed if she tried to force herself on the country, being old with no prospects. She had convinced herself of this on the plane over and had thought that the second week of her stay would be the best time to mention Nita staying on. But now it was settled. Once certain arrangements were made back home she could get the girl to stay with the Major family. Marva had already warned Nita about Mortimer and his wandering hands, however, just in case.

Then, that evening, the message came and she had sat there and watched it like it was the past catching up with her, which wasn't a nice feeling at all. The face at the window was that of a young girl but it had Stanley's broad features and lopsided, blue-black mouth. The child's eyes had caught Marva's and Marva had carefully looked below them to the young girl sitting below the sill stroking Bessie's purring cat. Then she had turned to speak to Evelyn who had begun prying into her affairs pretty early on into her trip, but she could handle that. The whole conversation reminded her of all she disliked about people who kept pets indoors – these people were spreaders of disease, including gossip. Marva hated gossip because she had never mastered how effective it could be and didn't want to. She wanted Nita to stop stroking the cat but couldn't tell her with Bessie there. She would make sure Nita washed her hands thoroughly before going to bed.

But the message in the child's face remained at the window until they got up to leave, and even then Marva couldn't quite believe the audacity of the child. She was sure that Bessie had seen her as well but averted her gaze as soon as the child ducked down, the net curtain falling into place after the breeze

had lifted it again. And Marva wondered why Bessie had the heavy curtains open at all. Was this the way people acted in the dark in this place? Marva was not a proud woman, she thought, but cautious, and this curtain opening business was yet another sign of Bessie losing herself to the ways of the Romans, as her old schoolteacher used to say about the islanders and their reliance on the British. She felt that she should pull Bessie back from the brink.

"Too many people want to be nosey in this day and age. You got to keep them curtains closed." But Bessie was a lost cause, what with her elocution lessons and trips to seaside places she had no right being in. Marva even remembered a letter Bessie had sent her mentioning the fact that she wanted to leave Mortimer and set up home with a white woman she had met with two children. Why she would do this Marva did not know, but it seemed to her to show the renegade in Bessie. But how could she live with another woman? Who would the kitchen belong to, her or her?

"I know, Marva, I know." And Marva felt Bessie looked at her as if she knew the child was there. It was as if they tolerated this kind of behaviour, as if she had done it all before and because she was a persistent offender, was left to her own devices. If the child was an odd one, Marva could use it to her own advantage. They were simple to gauge, these people. They seemed complicated, mad even, but that was when they were at their most vulnerable, and Marva knew how to treat people when they felt vulnerable, courtesy of Ma Nita. She had a plan that would work herself and Nita into the child's affections, who would then niggle at Lillian. Just by looking at her she knew it would be an effort to get the child to talk back, as she led a secret life of sorts, it seemed. But where there was a will, there was a way, and Marva had the will.

Marva remembered when Bessie had written to her about the birth of the child and who the father was and how she felt her skin crawl for days afterwards. She told Bessie not to tell her anything about the child again. Marva had cared for Stanley once and his poor judgement in this situation had been galling. And here the message was for her, plain to see in this face with familiar features in a young girl's shape. Get your money back at all costs, he would have said. Maybe. But Marva didn't believe in messages. Not that sort, anyway. So she dismissed it as soon as she realised what it was. She didn't believe in messages like that dictating what she should do. She was not a superstitious person. She hated those who were, despite Ma Nita's influence. Never run with the crowd, she thought, they'll only pull you down.

"You ready for bed, Marva?" Bessie had said, and Marva had dutifully followed her up the narrow stairs to the king size bed that filled the room it was held in. Like everything else it was extra, more than it needed to be and this, Marva felt, was what living in England had become for people like Bessie. Living big and talking fast. At home, Marva struggled with day-to-day living expenses and life was small and petty and bereft of extravagances. Unless you called the little sweet breads she cooked for sale extravagances. She had sold her goods to tourists also and wondered what the places were like they had come from: England, America, Germany. She would visit them all one day, she had told herself even after Lillian left with what was the last of her hope. But as each year passed and each bill grew steeper and more urgent, the hired furniture told her she would stay put no matter what. It was an insurance claim that had brought in the money for this trip. A good Christian woman had run her car into the jalopy Marva was riding in that doubled up as a cab, and she had yet to shake the ache in her hips and thighs that she sustained from the

collision. The woman's church even supplied a donation towards her rehabilitation after her short stay in hospital, and although she secretly pitied them their support of a god and a living Christ, Marva had been grateful to them. Now, standing by the oversized bed and watching Bessie tidy nothing in particular as if just their presence had messed up the room, Marva asked: You still believe in god, Bessie, I mean really believe. What a question, Bessie had responded, as if there was no other way to be. Marva kept quiet and knew she had said too much. She knew that Bessie attended church but did not know if she truly believed or it was something she did because she felt that she had to, just like Lillian did and so many other women, like Ma Nita. For with god on their side they could do anything. Ma Nita had come to believe this. All her superstitious beliefs and inklings amounted to nothing when it came to fitting in with those around her and passing on her knowledge to people who listened. Religion held everything and Marva knew that the converted could swindle the last farthing from an ailing aunt with a crucifix in one hand, or shout hallelujah on Sunday and curse on Monday. Ma Nita had attempted to convert her, but she had had none of it. Marva's destiny had been marked out in day one of her life and there was nothing or nobody who could stop its march.

The next time Marva saw the child, she was taken aback by how solemn she was. Nita played on the swings because she was not used to them and they seemed strange to her, and the girl watched her with scorn in her eyes. She wore a tight skirt with flat-heeled pumps and tried to sway her hips as if she was a big woman. She held a clear plastic bag with trainers and tracksuit bottoms and a t-shirt inside and Marva wondered where she was going. But Marva felt her game plan was stumped before it had begun. The child was fast

if only in her own mind, too fast to listen to anything an old woman had to say to her and too knowing. Marva told her a tale about the devil and the deep blue sea to soften her up and to implicate Lillian. The child was polite and courteous, but too full of pride to listen to Marva, she thought. And there was something that was still about her, something that confirmed to Marva that the child had secrets. Marva was mindful of the secret of her birth and decided to tell her what she probably already knew. When she did, there was no shock or array of emotions, just dismissal. And as the child left Marva by the flower garden, so Marva decided to shift the game plan away from the complicated child and onto the grandmother. Lillian. She would have to be confronted and soon. The thought of the confrontation tired Marva, but her landlord's threats were more urgent now and she had to do something. The money for the compensation would have been enough to pay off her debts on the house but there was more to pay on other things and she was sure she could secure some cash from Lillian. So she came, granddaughter in tow, to get something from the guilty – at all costs. The child had walked off to go somewhere and Marva thought how the womanish ways that rimmed the wetness of her eyes didn't quite match up with the tight-hipped skirt and the childish plastic shoes. Even the teenage girls in Bridgetown dressed more sophisticated than that. Something was missing.

The newspaper was laid out on the floor leading from the front door to the back. The coal man was coming, just to keep Bessie's stocks replenished for the coming autumn. She would put in central heating the following year as the cost of coal and paraffin was becoming prohibitive and they did not heat the whole house.

"What's the matter with the Ellington child?" Marva expected Bessie not to know what she meant, but was surprised by her response.

"She's a strange one. Doesn't say much but does well at school and all the rest of it. She just isn't all there."

"What you mean by that?"

Bessie had a habit of rubbing her hands together when she had a bit of juicy news to tell. She hadn't lost the habit after all the years the women had known each other and despite her efforts at refinement.

"What! I never tell you? I must of tell you! You never know?" Bessie slipped uneasily into a creolised way of speaking but for Marva the dipping in was nice to hear.

"What!"

"She snatched a baby once. When she was about ten I think it was. Took it from a pram outside the Co-op on the high street and the mother had to run screaming and shouting after her before she gave it back. Apparently, the baby was wearing a yellow jumpsuit and the mother was able to see it poking out from under her arm as she ran away. Millicent beat her black and blue and according to Mrs Knight, who used to live next door to them in the Gardens, the girl never left the house for weeks after that. Strange girl. Strange mother. The lot of them need locking up, especially that Lillian."

Marva didn't want to get into another discussion about Lillian because she had already decided what she would do with her. Marva would just drop a bombshell into their conversation, the part about Lillian leaving and not thinking about Marva after she had gone. That's what she would say. Because they had always said that they would remember each other when they wore the same dusty blue pleated apron dress and dust-reddened white socks to St

Luke's Girls and St John the Baptist in another parish. Marva had always been quieter than Lillian. She held her counsel more and was overly cautious around adults whereas Lillian didn't care what anyone thought of her – or so she said. And that was why Marva knew the guilt trip should work. Lillian was like a coconut shell on the outside, hardened by life, but she was as sweet and soft as the buttery milk on the inside. Marva remembered Bessie telling her that Lillian used to take the child to church with her despite the child's parentage and this made Marva think that Lillian might have a soft spot for her. Using the child would be a fall back plan if the conversation didn't work, but it would. Marva knew it would.

And there would be another fallback plan if all else failed, one that would endure the use of herbs she hadn't used since her daughter had that argument with the taxi driver from town and he threatened to kill her. Marva saw to it that he couldn't carry out his threat. There was a time to beg, Marva thought, and a time to die.

That night, Marva got out of bed as she heard voices outside her window. They seemed amplified by the quiet night and the stillness was startled into an echo. Marva knew it was Lillian before she could actually see her. The voice was the same, if not the mannerisms – slightly stooped back, arm behind the back to support it, roundness around the belly and upper arms. Three girls followed behind her and Marva recognised Stanley's features in the girl's face as she answered back out of a red mouth. Were they coming back from the party? But Bessie had got back an hour or two ago. Marva waited for Lillian to speak again, but she didn't as they made their way up the still Avenue. Marva watched until she lost sight of them and suddenly thought how broken up the darkness was, as if a thousand lights lighted their path. So this was

London, where you could see where you were going whatever time of day, unlike back home. There was no such thing as true darkness as it was arrested in an array of light beams that shone through the night, just as it had done as the beginnings of Highway 6 had been lit up when it was built all those years ago, and Marva's young children stood beside her to watch the drilling start. It start yet, mummy? Her youngest son had been too young to understand the ramifications of the new roads and the hundreds of hotels shooting up all over the island. It start, she had said, and watched her child cheer for what was to come.

Chapter Nine

... He is my refuge and my fortress: (Psalms 91:2)

Mr Major was strange. He ignored me in Grandma's presence, as he did at the first party, but would always wink at me at other times. One time I had been sitting in Mrs Major's front room waiting for her to come back from the Indo Pak butchers off the high street. He had come to me and placed his arms over the sides of the chair I was sitting in and rested his chin in my lap. I wanted to kick him off but wondered what Bessie would say if I hurt her husband. He mumbled things to me then, things that I heard, forgot but told fragments of to Louisa that evening, as if it were a prize.

"And he said 'yuh got any sugar for me?' His breath stank like dirt."

"Dirty old man. You should have kicked him where the sun don't shine. Never mind. Next time you'll know. Did she see him on your lap?"

"No, but she came back just in time because he'd started to groan and ... ."

"Yuk, an old man groaning. Must have turned your stomach. It would mine." Louisa had turned the bedroom round so that the bunk beds faced the window and mine was against the furthest wall. The closet was now beside their beds and Louisa had started to unpack and put everything in boxes so that

more of their clothes could fit in there, even though they were leaving in a couple of days.

"Have you ever read that book *Lolita*?" I asked without thinking. Louisa didn't seem the reading type to me. She had better things to do, the kinds of things that made me jealous of her.

"That's the one about that dirty older guy and the young girl, isn't it? There was always room to be surprised. "I've read bits of it but not all of it. Just think, Mr Major may have romantic thoughts about you."

"I don't think so. I don't think he knows what romance is. He's just a pure pervert. The kind you don't write about."

"Maybe. Or maybe you think that because you don't like to think any of us have any feelings other than what's surface."

Louisa looked at me and I didn't know where to put myself. I felt embarrassed for myself and a little angry for being caught out by a fly by night like her.

"Maybe you're the only person with deep feelings in this place. Ever felt that way?"

"No."

"Surprise me."

"No, I don't think that way. I don't see why you think that I should."

Louisa changed the subject.

"You seen this?" Louisa held up a bent photograph of a younger Lillian with an even younger looking Stanley. "This must have been taken after they got here. Look at her shoes. Stilettos like this are in, girl." I looked at the smile on Lillian's face and counted the fingers that are touching between the two in the photograph before I said "They'll never get back to this."

"Who says they were like this in the first place. Pictures can lie. Who's the boy who lives across the back there?" Louisa pointed to one of the houses that back onto the Avenue at the park end.

"Oh, I think you mean Profitt. He's Mrs Baker's son. Her husband ran off with a school dinner lady."

"He's cute."

"You're unavailable." I tested my American sitcom talk on her and thought it worked.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him. Here, take this and show Lillian. She can show it to that old friend of hers you were talking about."

I took the photograph and stuffed it in a pocket. I had no intention of showing it to Lillian but might show it to Marva, just to let her see how they were together, despite what Louisa says. Maybe that would make her more angry and spark off something, anything to get this summer going. Whatever Marva had come to do, she should do it quickly and let all hell break loose.

Outside, the wind carried litter like young children in its arms and swiftly dropped it to the floor to let it walk. The Muslim neighbour's baby cried out in its sleep, I guessed, and darkness took on a meaning of its own making. I heard my thoughts racing, falling over each other to get to an end that only bruised darkness knew. The day had gone quite well considering; Lillian wasn't speaking to me and Stanley hadn't been seen since breakfast. I did wonder what they both did with their days since they retired. It was as if they never worked. But I did remember the old lunchbox that Stanley used to take to his job on the railways. It was slate grey and slightly rusty around the hinges with a mini padlock at the centre. He was an inspector, or something – train timetables, absent drivers and a bit of customer care. I couldn't imagine

Stanley caring about anyone or anything. In fact, I couldn't imagine him doing anything but please himself all day and stuff everyone else. Mum once said that his gruffness was all a bluff, that, essentially, he was a weak man who needed to be told what to do. And that made me wonder about them together now, Mum and Stanley, Millicent the innocent and weak Stanley. Two negatives made a positive. But they couldn't have stayed together because of Lillian and they wouldn't stay together because of what I felt now just thinking about it. Shame. And how innocent was Mum anyway. She was no schoolgirl at the time. She had to be at least in her late twenties. And how would it have gone on, their relationship, with Lillian there, looking over their shoulders? How did it start?

I took an apple from the dining room table having left the cousins to their lightweight bickering and looked for Grandma in the garden and the back of the house. She was not there. Despite the fact I had been told to stay away from the front door, I went through it in the hope that I found her on her way back from church choir practice, perhaps laughing a little to herself, perhaps a little sad and not too glad to see me. But still, a little softened, so that if I asked her questions she answered them instead of giving me that look that said I shouldn't ask in the first place, that said I was stepping out of line.

But these secrets weren't meant to be spoken, were they? If she gave in and told me what they all meant, what it was all about, what did it make them then? No-longer-secrets-that-everyone-knows-about-now? Because I might as well be everyone to them. Letting it all out would be like setting fire to a house without a nearby hosepipe – a definite disaster. I would still ask her, though, because even though I made out that I didn't care, I was getting more and more interested. Because, if Stanley wasn't my grandfather, but was my father, then

who was my grandfather? Whose blood do I have coursing through my veins? What is his name and what did he look like? Ben was the only clue I had. No medals for guessing that he was either white or very fair-skinned because my Mum was very brown-skinned, as the grown-ups called it, compared to me. What did he do and was he a better man that Stanley – I supposed he couldn't be otherwise Grandma wouldn't have given him up for Stanley, would she?

It's funny how I found out about Stanley and the whole thing about him and Mum. Funny-tragic, I supposed. I read about it. Twice. Not only in Mum's diary that she kept hidden behind her sanitary products inside her chest of drawers in the new place, but in a great big book, the size of a Roman tablet, that Stanley kept under his side of the bed. I guessed that it was in his writing because I had never seen it before (this was before the time of the letters) and just to think that he could write such long passages made me think more of him rather than less. I sat there, in my useless polka dot blue and white dress (no man would find me attractive in this) and found myself immersed in the life of Stanley, as a bored, violent young man, waiting for something to happen to a more mature, hopeful one, sensing that England would be the best thing for his family. He never once called Millicent his daughter in the writing (but called uncle Prince his son), and hinted at her origin, calling her The Different One, before launching fully into a sentence that would stop me in my tracks – She's not mine, of course. That's all that it said, in between the description of her petulance and downright rudeness that he had often to put down with a belting when she was younger and had grown into a begrudging admiration for her. He never mentioned the word love, or talked about her in nothing less than crass terms, but I decided that he had loved her all the same. Otherwise, why sleep with her?

To be exact, the entry read:

29th November 1980

I don't know what to do about you, Lillian. You never listen to me, you never have you never will. When I tell you that that girl was up to no good with that boy from school you never listen you just leave her to it. I had to beat it out of Millicent, just because you wouldn't do anything about it. She was always rude to me and put me down. And you couldn't speak to her because she would sulk so much. She's not mine, of course, so what could I do about it. You should have backed me up more, made me feel more of a man, though you could never take my manness away from me.

Another one, more recent, read:

6th July 1981

Millicent was one of many and you know that. No matter that you don't take care of my washing and ironing any more, they still come for me. Look at Grace. And she'll be in your house before you know it. One more humiliation for you to put up with, but you'll stay through it all. You too stupid to do otherwise. I had enough of this cat and mouse game this time, though. Women. They love me to look after them be a man for them and I do more for them than I can do for you. You're history. My history, but the past none the less. We have to see where we go from here on in.

I still couldn't find anything to feel about him, even now. Maybe I should try to think of him differently, more evenly so that the writing that he did fitted into place. Now, he seemed like a man who drank and ate his life away as if nothing else need happen. But maybe there was something else before all of this. Maybe he was someone else. At least, I thought, he was not like Mr Major, a lech. But how do I know. He wouldn't do that to me because I'm his

daughter. I suppose if he did more than just scare off my few girlfriends I could at least see him in that way, but I couldn't. One redeeming feature. Try and think up some others, Ella, and get to the root of the man, like those kids in *To Kill a Mockingbird* find out about the character that previously scared them. Make him mean something, Ella.

Then I thought about Grace and the letters. And then I remembered that I had the keys.

Chapter Ten

… eyes have they, but they see not: (Psalm 115:5)

The bus didn't arrive at the stop straight away so, scared of seeing Grandma, I walked to the Greengate. The shops were closing and the people who had previously gathered at the busy high street now trooped home, buggies, shopping trolleys and shoulders ladened with bags of groceries, clothes and household items. The main road was strewn with them and I hated to walk it. I knew, even though I had never lived in the country but only visited it, that I would love its space and solitude. Here, the clatter of windows shutting, disembowelled yells and ska music from flying cars added to the mass of people in a way that I didn't like but was used to. The houses and flats on the main road that made up its bulk were redeemed by the late burst of sunshine seeping through the cloud and the chatter was east end and furtive when I approached, as if I needed to know what they were saying. I walked on by, careful not to catch my foot on a trolley or to accidentally touch nipper with the back of my hand as it would only cause an argument and arguments could turn

nasty the way things were going around here. Yet, despite the underlying tension and the growing number of NF signs sprouting up away from the high street and towards the city, I didn't feel afraid. Even when it was match day and Mum said that I had to stay close to the house, it didn't worry me if I got caught in the incoming stream from Eastham station to the grounds off the main road. I was safe as far as I was concerned.

I jumped on the bus at the Greengate – I only had enough money for two fares, so would need to walk back part way also. Looking out of the bus window, observing the traffic and the people walking the streets I felt lonelier than I had ever felt in my life. I recognised a few faces, but they were caked in their own world of fantasies and horrors, if they had faces at all. Sometimes I saw a blank, pink screen where there should be eyes, a nose and thin lips. As the cloud started to gather and the rain started to fall, their features became even more elusive or obscure, as if there were some great master painting the invisible on a moving canvas. I couldn't wait to get home, because I thought that it was guilt that was doing this to me. And when I thought of home I thought of the Gardens and Mum's music coming through the bedroom wall being a soothing sound rather than the irritant it had become. London seemed full of these things that just didn't add up, that looked like things they shouldn't do and didn't have features at all. There was just a blankness to it all that I couldn't recognise or admit to. I couldn't tell whether I was seeing or being seen.

"Hi Pi-Ella!" I knew it was Merri but had tried to avoid her glance when she got on the bus. And she used that silly name those boffins use to describe me. I'm not one of them. Could never be. But I'm close. She used that silly

hand signal they use to greet each other and I smiled at her as her features were all in place and she came along just in time.

"Where ya going?" She said, showing interest but not too much in case she looked too needy. Merri was always like that and it was something I didn't like about her. Because if she was needy, she should just say so. But she always liked playing the hard nut, as if she could ever be. She and her friends went through a phase where they would write Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know on the board before the teacher came into the room, but they couldn't be that dangerous because they knew too much and as everyone knew those type of people burnt themselves out well before making anything of themselves. I watched a programme about high school dropouts on BBC2 about the self-same thing.

"To a friend's house. To pick up some letters. Where are you going?"

"Oh, nowhere. I saw you looking out of the window so jumped on." Merri's family had money. Not loads but enough to go back home to Guyana every year and sometimes twice. Apparently her mother had a fight with a man on the street and managed to get criminal damages due to her injuries. Merri never told me this, but I heard Grandma talking about it one day. My family still thought that her family was trash because the men were into dodgy dealings that made them even more money. I hated that about her, that she had so much money, mostly because she hated that about herself. She always acted as if she was poor, or something, just to fit in. She was a pseudo-soulhead, pseudo because she hadn't quite got the hang of how to be a real one, or wasn't quite ready to take that leap. She wore her brother's Gabicci and woollen slacks now and a Kangol on her wet-looked head. She handed me a tiny plastic bag with some red lipsticks and eyeliner in it. Try it on, she said and

I did, using the little mirror inside the bag. Her hair was as shocked as mine had been the day before and she wore all black. Even her fingernails were black stubs. She took the lipstick from me after I had finished and I just remembered that her brother had died just before summer of a heart condition. I said that I was sorry to hear about David because I was. He had been a friendly sort, if a bit quiet. She took the bag from me and looked into it for longer than was necessary. We got to my stop.

"Are you coming?" I looked at her perfectly oval face and its smooth chestnut brown skin. Unlike the new mixed race girl on the Avenue, her features were not all bunched together in the middle of her face like an afterthought, but were spread evenly and impressively. Two dark brown almond eyes with a look of child-like longing gave way to a short nose with a round top and firm, wide, adult pinkish lips.

"Yes."

She'll looked a sight in Hackney, I thought at first, but the road leading to the market was full of weirdoes, black and white, so we all fitted in our own ways. I thought it was something to do with the rubbish piling up on the roadside and littering the site of the market. Anyone could fit in there because Hackney was a great leveller. The paper wrappers from food at the new MacDonalds, fish and chip papers, what we call dunkees, and what the uninitiated call condoms, and crisp wrappers all mingled to bring us to their depths. I could almost see at street level, now, as they covered my feet with their stench. I could almost belong. The thought surprised me, but I was with Merri, the queen of filth and surprises, so nothing should shock me now.

Grace's flat, dark and nearly empty except for the storage boxes and the bed, smelled of a mixture of iodine and disinfectant. Grace had obviously decided to take the boxes and bed last. I knew that she would be at the flat tomorrow and that would be her last day there as I overheard Stanley talking about it to Lillian in the morning. They were angry at each other. You could tell by the way the conversation never really got going. They were forcing talk and neither one of them liked it. I thought they should be grateful that they never had to live in a dive like this, with peeling, ugly-flowered wallpaper that hung in clusters of purple and green-brown damp patches around the light bulb in the ceiling. There were some teabags and pocket sugars left on a sideboard surrounded by old mug-shaped stains. Merri licked a finger and ran it along them, licking it again after. I told Merri about my Mum's diaries and the big notebook under Stanley's bed and she said they wanted them to be read otherwise they wouldn't have hidden them.

"Do you remember what's in them?" She looked interested, as if I had just introduced her to a new puzzle game.

"No, I only got to glance through them once. There is that little revelation about Stanley being my father and not my grandfather, of course, but that's just a little… ."

"What! Your grandfather is actually your father? Then who's your granddad?"

"I don't know yet. Just trying to find out. I don't want anyone to know that we've been here so less noise please." We searched through the boxes for the letters, and as we searched I talked, about Grace, Marva, Lillian, the cousins and uncle Prince in a way that I hadn't spoken to anyone before. Merri was an easy listener, little interruptions and plenty of encouraging noises, and a

sure, fast panic started to get hold of my chest just as I was letting out the last sentence. Should I have said so much? I tried my best to leave out me, but she asked, What do you feel about all of this? As if she were a school teacher, or an aunty come to call and say nice things. I didn't like her for it because I knew that she was better than me. I would never have thought to ask that question of anybody. So I lied to beat her, to let her know I was better than all of them put together. I said that I didn't care.

"Then why this? Why are you looking through Grace's things? You must care. Wow, look at these earrings!" She props the earrings against her ears and puts a rumpled girdle she found under a chair cushion on top of her head. She prances about for a few seconds, then thinks better of it. Not so dangerous.

"It's just something to do, to kill time. I don't care any more about them than they do about me."

"That's what I always tell Bernard about my family. But he says that I shouldn't dismiss them totally. They meant something to somebody at some time." Bernard was a little nerd with a lisp who hung around her during school. I disliked him because he once licked my face for a bet and I never got over the shame. Not of the licking, but of the fact that I was the butt of a joke delivered by a nerd.

"Is this them?" Merri held up several envelopes that I recognised and a couple of airmail ones that I didn't.

"They'll do." I thanked her and she played at dodging me for a bit before we left. She ran to the back of the flat to the back room. When she opened the door there was a rush of cool air as there was a gaping hole in the roof. The room opened up to a darkening sky and if you looked really closely, you could

see stars beginning to peep through the dusk. Merri started to cackle and make whooshing noises whilst spinning round. I really did like Merri, you know, but she could start to get on your last nerve.

"Hey, what's that smell?" We were by the doorway, waiting for people outside to walk past before we left.

"Petrol, I think. But I can't think why it's here and nowhere else in the house."

"Wouldn't think that the National Front would stretch to around here."

"What?"

"They could have been threatening her, forcing her to leave."

"I never thought of that."

"There's gonna be a march. Are you going? It will run along the high street and the main road."

"I don't think the NF would want me on one of their marches. Not my idea of fun."

"No, silly, the Anti-Nazi league will be there. My mum says everyone should fight for their rights. Her mother is a famous feminist in Guyana. My great grandmother's Jewish. I just love the music of protest. Like that Billy Bragg. What music do you like? Top of the Pops stuff, I'm sure.

"You wouldn't know the stuff I like."

"Go on, give it a try."

"Mmmm, R&B artists like Jean Carne and The Jones Girls. And some reggae, Dennis Brown and Freddie MacGregor."

"Of course, you know I'm a soulhead among other things. And of course you know I know all of the people you mentioned." I hated the way she made you feel three feet tall even when you were trying to put her down. When she

hung around the rest of the soulheads at school she managed to be as bold and brash as the other black girls and almost as free. Only free enough to make sure she didn't get into any trouble or her mum would kill her. So no sassing teachers or getting into fist fights. I wondered then if her family's crime was as awful as ours and hesitated before reiterating that I didn't want anyone to know after that summer what I had said to her.

"Ok. Well, I'll see you around, then."

"Aren't you coming back?"

"Naw. Got bigger fish to fry. Gotta check out some off licences to get some bargains for my party on Saturday. Do you want to come?"

We left just as it was getting darker, and by the time I reached the main road again and walked down it, the streetlights were coming on. Blackwell Avenue was feigning sleep when I stepped onto it. No cars passed through its tree-lined path, nor did people gather at a gate to talk amongst themselves. It was barren in a golden-red kind of way as night-time fell. I noticed that there was no light on in the house and could only guess that Grandma had taken the cousins to an evening service with her. I would have to lie my way out of not being at home later. I walked away from the house, back towards the main road and the bellow of traffic. I passed Indo Pak butchers with its blue and white awning and the empty shop to let that was supposed to be a black hair salon. The fish and chip shop caught my eye but I had no change so I crossed the road to the amusement arcade close to Barclays Bank, just to see what the group gathered there were doing.

A small group of young men stood outside the arcade, two of them standing on the front step. Most of them were Asian and a few were black. The two on the step were one of each. The young Asian man stood taller than the

black man and spoke using a mixture of English and Punjabi to talk to the small crowd. Sometimes he spat as he talked and jabbed at the air with a raised hand, his fringe lifted by a slight breeze. Several of the men listened intently, hands in pockets and nodding when he used the word avenge, which he did often. The others shuffled and talked and jabbed back, making light of the man's words and laughing amongst themselves.

"You see, they can't kill all of us. If we stand up to these bastards our mothers and sisters will be safe to walk the streets, *acha*!"

A rastafarian man and woman walked by and stopped. I watched them watching, and thought how strange it was to see them here. They would be a common sight in a place like Hackney, but they stood out here. I watched the woman mostly as she wore a long olive green coat over a chequered dub skirt, her hair worn like a bundle behind her head. The sky blue scarf that wrapped it hadn't begun to unravel yet she started to re-wrap it, talking of the cold. When he spoke I recognised the man as Profitt who lived on the avenue behind Blackwell. I'd been told not to play with his younger brothers and sisters because his mother is not supposed to be "a good person". I remember Lillian saying Profitt was an exception to the parent's rule and had joined the Navy and I wondered what the people there thought of his locks that sprouted from his head like accusing fingers.

The young Asian man continued to speak about the safety of women while the black man with him shook Profitt's arm and briefly held him close. They murmured deep and long, chasing each other's words until they ran into one another. The rest of the crowd had fallen into a hush as a car full of youngish white men stopped before the traffic lights, eyes on the arcade. We all turned to them and they drove off just as the amber light flickered, their brief

presence leaving a Bunsen Burner lit under our feet. The young men shuffled noisily, expectantly. Some called for protection from the police while others laughed and started arranging another meet date. The man shushed them and it was only when I looked closer that I recognise him also. His hair was shorter and neater but it was Baljit's brother, Dev. He looked over at Profitt and the woman who blankly looked back. He repeated himself but a murmur had become a shout and guffaw, and several men started to speak at once. I recognised some of the others as the older kids who had now left school and wondered if this was where Dev knew them from, as he had been a former pupil also. Baljit's father had told Lillian that he had got into an argument with a policeman and they had since made frequent visits to the house that had unnerved his wife. So he had packed Dev off to Hounslow to stay with his uncle until things calmed down. I wondered if Dev was allowed back now and remembered him joining in with his sister's dance show they presented to me last summer. Mum had gone to the chemist to buy some liniment for Stanley's sore back and I had popped into Baljit's to give her back a book we were sharing, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. Baljit and her younger sister had pulled me into their bedroom to show me a dance they had made up, and they had enjoyed swinging around each other and miming to a song playing on their cassette recorder. Baljit sang along sometimes and Dev had come in to tell her she sounded nothing like Asha Bhusle whose voice on the tape sounded like running water. He joined in the dance with them, raising his arms and singing loudly. I wondered then if he knew I was in the room because he hadn't acknowledged my presence. Nor did he when he left and it was only afterwards when I told Mum about it that I thought that his dance may have been for me. I had gone home to tell Mum about the Asian and black boys at

school, how they talked amongst their own groups in corners. That's what I called it but I supposed someone else might say they were more silent than loud, their conversations carried on in gestures rather than broadcast to outsiders. Then, when white kids would enter the arena or were close by, words would be carefully chosen and generously guarded, unless there had been an earlier incident in the hall, playing fields or a classroom, then the corners would be alive with violent innuendo and play fighting. My battles seemed nothing like theirs. They played to a stage. I talked to myself.

I imagined Profitt's mum, who sometimes shouted hello to Lillian from her back window and wore her hair curlers on the high street, got scared for her son just as Baljit's Mum got scared for Dev. The group broke up now, with the black men walking away towards the Town Hall and the Asians going into the arcade, some talking about carrying a *kirpan* and using it or watching the latest Jackie Chan movie on video that night. I looked again towards the Town Hall and saw Profitt's back retreating and the bus I would get if I were going to Grace's old flat approaching.

I held on tightly to the letters in my pocket.

Chapter Eleven

The righteous see it, and are glad: and the innocent laugh them to scorn. (Job 22:19)

Dev's house was in darkness when I got there but he answered the door as soon as I knocked as if expecting somebody. He looked like a Sikh god but without the beard and the turban and the whiteness. I asked him for the book I lent to his sister just before the summer break and he suggested that I looked in her room. He didn't switch on the lights and I didn't like to ask him to, so I headed up the stairs in the semi-darkness. All the room doors were open upstairs and the curtains were not drawn yet so furniture could be seen clearly against the backdrop of the dark, highlighted night. Everything in its place and a place for everything. That saying reminded me of Baljit's house every time I heard it. There were no loose socks spilling out of clothes hampers, no books strewn across desk tables or renegade shoes tipping into the doorway. Her mum was a control freak. Either that, or her dad made her do it, but I couldn't imagine Mr Jopal doing anything of the sort. The rooms were warm and cosy, and I walked into a couple of them, noting the neat tucked in corners of the blankets and the item free dressing tables, before I got to the room Baljit shared with her two sisters.

The light from a streetlight tipped into the room like an apology because it would be just as cosy in darkness. I sat on the bottom bunkbed and studied the room; the bare, brown wood chest of drawers with a missing handle sits underneath the window sill whilst the equally brown wardrobes hold up the walls on either side of the room. The single bed sits away from them both, taking up a corner of the room that would be best suited to an armchair or a desk, and the bunkbeds rest beside it, obscuring the light switch. Clear, not a thing out of place but a hairbrush with strands of hair still in it lying on the single bed. Should I have looked in the drawers?

"Did you find it?"

"No. I'll come back when she gets home. When is she coming back?" Or maybe she thinks she's at home now, in the Gujarat district, watching the people go by.

"In a couple of weeks." His voice was warm, excited. I felt suddenly excited at being in the house alone with him and looked in the wall mirror. I looked ordinary. And like a child. Bigger than most girls in every way, but still a girl.

I came down the stairs two at a time and walked into the front room. The red flock wallpaper shimmered despite the lack of light and the candles around the goddess Shiva were lit at the little altar his mum had put up on the beige mantelpiece. He walked up behind me, and I turned to look at him with an appealing look, one to belie my fourteen years and to suggest I was at least four years older than that, I hoped. His look of surprise then disgust reached his fingertips as he pointed to the front door.

"You know your way out."

I knew he was watching me, but I didn't turn around.

Seasons change and things happen for a reason. I felt the change in me like I'd never felt anything before in my life. It started at my toes and reaches my scalp in record time, sending me senseless into situations and approaches I had never dreamt of before. Frankie had a phrase for it – "sluttish behaviour". No matter the Badger (that's what Baljit called her brother, Badger). The next time I would get what I wanted.

Dalston held court like no other place I'd been to. Women and girls seemed to walk on the balls of their feet despite the heavy bags being carried by a mixture of slim and fat arms, their breath coming thick and full like bubbling hot broth. Boys and men crashed through the plate of glass I formed around me like perfectly angled ball bearings and I answered to their attack. No smell of sulphurous tear gas or ashy mounds of burnt-out metal were visible here like they were in Brixton, but dampened fire rested in countless pockets like delicate eggshells. Ready to break. I could tell, as I carried them in my pockets too. It was so different to Eastham, where any perceived threat was from the outside in and not coming from within.

Mr Oguntoye's European and African Food Store stood at the corner of a main junction, just by Mr Cohen's furniture store and near to Stanley's favourite pub. I decided to buy a Twix chocolate bar and a packet of Golden Wonder cheese and onion crisps. They tasted good if you took a bite of one, then the other.

The European and African Food Store sold dried fish and meat beside confectioneries and toilet roll. Unlike Indo-Pak, where most of it was packaged, the spices on sale here were in clear plastic bags with cardboard tags telling the buyer what was in each bag. I smelled the salt fish bundles – I didn't have

enough money to buy a pack and so wouldn't attempt to make fish cakes the way Grandma showed me. I took in the smell of lemon grass and dried fish before daring to say hello to the man who sat at the till with the look of yesterdays in his eyes.

I knew it was Mr Oguntoye the Second because he had no scar from his cheek to his chin and wore no gold. The other Mr Oguntoye, the one Stanley had an argument with that almost caused his death, was the Second's twin but did not go to church and play with his children like the First. I knew this because Grace had told me. Mr Oguntoye the Second wore plaid or plain cotton shirts and smelled of musky sweat while the First wore Old Spice, Gabicchi's and gold chokers. Mr Oguntoye the Second was easy to talk to but today looked distracted and alarmed to hear me speak to him. He replied, but kept his head down as he chopped the ends of white yams, his eyeballs fixed like black marbles. I decided his stare was penetrable and pressed for his attention.

"Where's Ola?" I looked around for his daughter who was around my age.

"At school where you should be. Nobody's brain takes a holiday. Why do you English children need such a long break." He finished chopping the yam and pointed to a leaflet on his wall. The name of the Saturday school was not readable as another leaflet lapped the first, but I could see that it ran from 9am to 2pm during the summer break.

"It is mostly African children there. We have taken over this part of the borough – there are a few West Indians there too." Mr Oguntoye the Second looked slightly alarmed by this fact and again asked me why I was not in school.

"My Mum's never sent me to school during the summer break. I guess she feels I get enough learning during term time. How much does it all cost, anyway?"

"Your mother needs to know that term time, or whatever you call it, is not enough." He pulled a small, brown twig-like stick from the side of the till and put it in his mouth, "Our children's education is a twenty-four hour, 365 day ritual that starts at the mother's breast." He points to a picture at the side of the till of an oldish woman with a royal blue scarf on her head. "My mother", he announced proudly, and then told me her dress and her gelee were significant to her wealth. "She has clawed back what Ojukwu had taken from us, not just the Ibos," he pointed to an old magazine cover he had pinned to the wall above the till. Under the headline 'Time' there is a drawing of a full-faced, bright-eyed man with the banner "Biafra's Agony" strapped across his head. Mr Oguntoye the Second leaned forward and tapped the picture on the wall before him with the stick from his mouth. "All this for rubies. When we are above all that. All that suffering for what?" He looked at me then as if I should answer his question and I shrugged my shoulders. Mr Oguntoye shrugged his shoulders back and said even his own children did not know their own history, so why should I know it. His eyes settled on mine then slid to my fingers that were clinging to the chocolate bar. You'll make it melt, he said, and passed me a brown paper bag to put it and the crisp in. Then he said,

"Even my own brother does not seem to remember the hardships of then. He looks back with a gilded eye as if *iku* was meant to be when I know better. I had friends among those people who left this world for nothing but rubies. Our friends, our family are worth more than that." Mr Oguntoye seemed to be speaking to himself, so I said a quiet bye that was drowned by rolling

crimson thunder and left the shop. The wind had picked up and now threw litter about the air like shrapnel.

"Who send you here, or should I even bother to ask," Grace sat on the doorstep, her lap covered with blankets and pillows in black plastic bin liners. There was no smile around her lips and she didn't seem the funny, easy-going adult I knew her to be.

"Nobody." But that was a lie. After I had got in late the day before, Grandma summoned me to the kitchen and asked me where I had been. I told her the truth, to the flat, but told her it was to give Grace back her keys that she had given me for safekeeping. Grandma accepted this, then told me to go back the next day, giving me the fare. Make sure she take them this time, she had said. Curfew over.

"Stanley said to give you this". I handed Grace a letter Stanley had asked me to pass on to her, and she laughed nervously. She tore open the envelope and read. What, nothing else, she said, after she finished, tipping the ripped envelope this way and that. I had never suspected that Stanley ritually sent or gave her money, but from her gesture that is just what she was looking for. "She must of stop the flow," Grace muttered, and I handed her the envelope that she had dropped. "How I getting out of here if she stop the flow. I need that money."

"What money?"

"What he done promise me. What he said he could get for me." She was saying more than she should, but I hoped that that wouldn't stop her.

"All of a sudden everyone thinks my family's got money. They haven't. Otherwise we wouldn't have had to move out of our old house and into the flat

on the Avenue." A chance to get her to say more just by making me sound sorry for myself.

"And who you think is paying for the flat you'll be living in?"

"The council."

Grace laughs. "Bwoy, them keep it quiet, eeh! So quiet even the child 'in even know about it. Sit down here by me, now. I got something to tell you." I sat down like the child I was before Grace.

"You hear about your Grandma inheritance?" I shook my head. "Well it come from your Grandmother's father swindling some white man and coming out the better for it. She thinks that it's just hers and hers alone, but she gotta remember that she was married to Stanley and he has some rights too.

"I knew Stanley long before you come on the scene, or maybe you were just a baby then, but Lillian did own a couple of houses down the back there by the market. She sell them long time now and only own the house and the flat on Blackwell now. But before. Before the woman was starting up she own little empire.

"Stanley never work nowhere. He just run around collecting the rents and she did all the bookkeeping. Sitting at home on she fat arse. All his friends could see what she was up to but he wouldn't listen until it was too late.

"Then she just up and sell the houses here and another one they had just renovated to go live in up in Seven Kings. What, you never wonder why she never move from the east end to somewhere better? And why would she hang around that woman she sell the house to on Blackwell Avenue? She 'in stupid, you know. One thing, she 'in stupid. But she had to, just the same as she had to lie and cheat and steal to keep that man running for her for so many years.

"Your grandmother is what we call a skettle and your mother in no better, if you don't mind me saying so. They take a man under false pretences and use 'im like he some kind of chattel. That 'in right, man. Them too feisty. They getting their comeuppance, though, mark my words.

"What you have to remember, and I always tell my children this when I send money back home for them and call them long distance, is that money can rule a man. So when you come in contact with it, you got to be careful of it. Don't treat it too nicely but don't discard it either. It's more than likely it come about by some shenanigans and as Denis Brown say, you know it's a curse. But if you handle it right …

"All I want is a place for me and my children so that we can settle down. There's no settling down in Spanish Town, only hardship upon hardship. Everything start at the beginning of a circle and end right back at the beginning of the circle. There's no real end to it all out there – that's why I'm here.

"Some might say that I using him as well but I know that's not true. He can come and live with us and get away from that old trout. Then you won't have to carry come bring me any more because him be with me.

"Don't tell your Grandma anything about these letters, you hear? I know Stanley tell you before but I telling you again. She wouldn't understand and she's too corrupt to see anything innocent in it. Let her think she still rule the roost for now. She got a rude awakening coming." Grace said this last sentence almost under her breath, but just loud enough for me to hear. I waited for more, more lies and deceits than I would think Grace capable of, until now. For one thing, Grace was not in England when I was a baby. She came just five years ago (she had even shown me the stamp in her passport to prove it). And Stanley did work. He wasn't an errand boy for Lillian any more than she

has been for him. I couldn't imagine Stanley just doing something because Lillian told him to. That would go against everything he seemed to stand for. There was something about Grace and her tale-telling that was compelling, though, and I listened enrapt by her eagerness and downright lying. If anyone could misquote history, it was surely Grace with her made up anecdotes and silly sayings. She was enjoyable to be around but could be confusing if you didn't listen carefully and know fact from fiction. And besides, what did I know about what Stanley stood for?

I told Grace about Marva and Nita. "They're staying at Bessie Major's house."

"That woman still patting she hair from dawg?" I wondered what Grace was talking about. "She better burn what comes out of the comb before Lillian get hold of it, man". She laughed to herself, then coughed violently into her hand. I let her know what was on my mind.

"If they've come for something Grandma owes them, will there be any left?"

Grace looked at me through liquid eyes and gave out a worried grimace.

"You know Stanley got me in here 'cause he think Lillian been poisoning me? That's the only reason she let me in the house in the first place, he reckon, 'cause she was looking to do me harm. And she did always offer to mek me tea. But you see how bad behaviour like that does run in the family. 'Cause that's how they get the money in the first place. By poisoning some man's cattle, then pretending to cure it. It make you wonder about these people, you know. Surely they would know the difference between a cause and a cure."

"How did the story go again?"

"Her father fed this white man's cattle with something to unsettle their stomach and the man think they fit to die. So he go round every place looking for a cure and Lillian's father provide it for him. Or so the man thought, but all he did was wait for the effect of the bad feed to wear off. The man reward him with enough money for him to add to his building fund and the rest, as they say, is history. Another time he win a house in a card game, the same house you sleep in, and leave it to three young girls, including Lillian. But she take the lot. That's why I say never trust anyone unless you have it in writing."

"So you have it in writing that Stanley will help you out?" I knew that she hadn't but felt spiteful for that moment, as if I could hit out at her for no particular reason.

Grace nodded towards the parallel street and the market beyond. The sky was purple since the thunder came and went. "You see those people outside? Men walking the street with empty hands in empty pockets and boys watching their father's tongue long-out for the next best thing, the thing that will make everything go right for them. You see them?" I nodded, and tried to picture what she had seen. "Your grandfather was like those boys once, looking to his father for the next best thing, but what him get instead? Years of believing in a woman like Lillian who can just about spell her own name. That's hard, man, to know you can't help. Like with me and me kids…

"He shoulda love the one he was with, though I wouldn't have meet him if he had. God wouldn't have see him go without. All those lies. No white man is going to pay that amount of money for something that would have cleared up anyway."

"But if it's lies where did the money come from, then? Where is it now?"

"By the oldest trick in the book. Ask your mother". Grace sat up taller, as if stretching to see something, and smoothed the pink blanket over her lap. I rested my head there and listened to the growl of her stomach. She hummed some tune I didn't recognise but kept repeating what seemed like the first two lines. I closed my eyes but soon got up as Grace returned to the inside of the flat. She left without pulling a Stanley face and making me roll around with laughter, which was her usual trick. I left barely saying goodbye.

I altered my step on the way back to the Avenue. No boys or men saw my glass because I was too fast for them, my stride too sure. I decided to walk at least one bus length of the journey to save money, money that I might need another day and that could have been wasted in Mr Oguntoye the Second's shop on sweets. The rasta and the woman with him came to mind, her hair wrapped in a bright blue scarf that made her look like daylight itself. What do you call a female rasta, I thought, pulling my light cardigan around me as a chilling breeze set in. It carried the discarded paper rubbish at my feet a few yards along and picked my knees up another centimetre, marking time. I wondered if the rastaman lied to her, told her one thing but meant another. And did she ask him to repeat himself if he was telling that lie, like Grandma did when Stanley pretended he was sending me to the tobacconist on Atkins Street rather than to see Grace. The walk was hard on my thighs, and I thought of Grace's children walking the two miles to school and back again. We used to walk five, she had told me. But hadn't she said the family now lived in the same house she had been brought up in (and the boys were supposed to attend the same school she went to)? I thought of the distance and the photograph of the two boys who, if Grace was in England five years ago, must now be teenagers.

I kept walking while still re-telling the conversation I had just had with Grace on the longest part of the journey home. Begging. That's all Grace was doing. Begging for the next penny, just like Mum did to Grandma. It just seemed as if some always had and the others are always trying to get it, at whatever cost. If Grandma had liked me I would be wearing better clothes. I would have a leather jacket like Merri had, and my hair would be straightened. I would have at least two pencil skirts instead of the one, a dub skirt and own another pair of winkle pickers. Then maybe the boys would notice me. As it was, I had nothing to show for myself, nothing to entice them with. But then, maybe, I could get by on what little I had.

I felt bad that I left Grace alone to wait for the removal men, but it was getting late and she seemed to be getting more irritable the more she talked. It was funny the way that she lulled herself into a false sense of security with all that lying. What was it you call someone who's always lying – a hypochondriac? I couldn't remember, but it seemed to me that she wouldn't be able to survive without it. It was as if it was part of her now and she couldn't let go. I wondered if Stanley had ordered the removal van to come or if he was letting her sit there and stew. His letter indicated that he was growing tired of the "cat and mouse" game he was playing and that he wanted out. If that meant leaving her in the flat, he didn't say, but I could tell from Grace's reaction to it that he was pulling backwards, not taking her forward with him.

Back on the Avenue, I saw Stanley standing awkwardly with one foot on the step of the Major's house and the other on the ground, his arms resting behind his back as he talked to Marva. She laughed sometimes, held her hands to her mouth in shock or spoke very quietly at others, leaving me to wonder what they were talking about. Did he know her from back home too?

He leaned into her, forward as if listening intently and she stood back a little, letting the laughter flow between them quickly and easily. I knew they loved each other once, I said to myself before I walked on, shaking the breeze from my bare shoulders. Grandma Lillian didn't notice that I wore one of Mum's halter neck tops today and I smiled to myself, letting the little deceit fill me up with so much glee mixed with hatred that I wanted to burst.

I went back to my room and read the letters. They were from Stanley to Grace, mostly, and the two airmailed ones were from her sons. After wading my way through the misspellings and clichés about love, wanting, needing and hoping, I decided that Stanley was human after all, despite what he pretended to be. One read:

(no date)

Don't take any notis of she and she gossip. We are all we need to care about. When I look at you I know I am right in what I'm doing. Love hurts and it will hurt her even more than me and you. I can only afford this much this time but wait til I see you on Saturday after you finish work at the café. I'll have more for you then.

The next one read:

2nd August 1981

She's more tenasous than I thought she would be, she wants me to stay I want to go and theres all this stuff about Millicent in between. I don't think I should leave her just yet not until we're sure.

I read through them again, looking for any sign of me in them, but there was none. By his last letter, dated only two weeks previously, he was obviously starting to back away from Grace and in no uncertain terms. The letters from her sons, but really written by her sister in Montego Bay, were light relief to

begin with, until the begging for money in the last two paragraphs. In the second letter from her, she started begging in the first sentence, claiming that there was nothing to eat on Sunday again and that the boys needed new shoes for Sunday best. Their father was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Twelve

I said in my haste, All men are liars. (Psalms 116:11)

Stanley fingered the tiny tumbler with a number 13 blue sailing boat etched on its outer surface. He had received the tumbler and others as gifts from British Railways on his retirement and placed them in the glass-panelled section of his radiogramme as evidence of his work years. Lillian very rarely dusted them, so as his fingers touched their rims, a thin film of dust raised itself above them. Stanley watched, uninterested. The dust formed a grey skin on his fingertips and he smelled his hands. The odour of lanolin and bay rum tingled, causing him to blink.

The tumblers were of another time and place in the way that the envelope of cash in his pocket signalled yet another compartment of life, one that he was moving on to. He had come to this country to work and that had not pleased him; at home, in Barbados, he had done odd jobs, nothing much to tax him, things he could do without breaking too much of a sweat (if anything needed more input, he got one of his friends to do it for him). But the days on the island stretched in a way that life in England could never, even if it wanted to. Long sunny mornings shaded by a banyan tree were overtaken by crowded

slots on the tube line to work, black coffee breath to show wakefulness and solid doorstep sandwiches signalling a break in the rush or torpor of the day. Dawn 'til dusk had been the break back home, with the evenings taking in the bulk of activity; women, rum and dominoes. Here, in England, everything was work. Even Lillian expected more of him once he got here, but he refused to do much, insisting that the job on the railways was as much as he could bear. They needed the money from the job to live off and to help pay for other property – another one of Lillian's ideas. And the tumblers sat, as if maliciously reflecting what were now older, mildly arthritic knuckle bones for Stanley to ponder. A waste of years, he thought to himself, but had more than once thought how useless the days would have been to him here with no need for trees for shade. Maybe the work was a necessary evil, a break in what had become other than convivial proceedings. And now he was ready to reap his reward, to sit back and watch his retirement years roll before him like an endless red carpet. Endless because he had no intention of dying. Not without a fight. He would last as long as he wanted to last, get his diaries typed up and make sure they were read. There lay his immortality, that thing his mind craved but his body was already giving up the ghost for. The women, the fights, the boring tedium of work, written with a dash of the comic touch, all in one volume. That would put the cat amongst the pigeons, especially when it came to Steve Archer at work who would get the sore edge of his nib due to his unforgivable jibes about ageing and what he seemed to think was the loss of will that went with it. And, of course, another casualty would be Lillian. Stanley knew that Steve Archer was about the same age as him, but because he had given up on women and drink as pleasurable indices to ease him into each new day and seemed to think life had a limit, he became self-righteous in a noisy,

cantankerous kind of way that caused them both to raise their voices more than once. Stanley disliked his hectoring manner as the man seemed a natural at it, making Stanley look a fraud. Stanley's loudness always seemed tempered with a proviso – that he came out on top. But that could not always be guaranteed, especially with men like Archer about. This worried him, more so as he came closer to retirement, that he had no guarantees in life and that others could appropriate his authority in ways he had no control over. He felt like a teenager again, when all others' looks and deeds seemed to be hurled against him and he had to combat them with a deft tongue and quick action. He was now crawling back into himself, edging back into a mortality that would be denied him one day, and sooner rather than later. But, all things considered, Stanley decided that time would tell a different story for him than it had done for his even louder counterpart and others like him, despite what the tumblers mirrored.

He did not miss the early mornings, though, and had come to enjoy his morning lie ins, despite Lillian and her roving vacuum cleaner. And the girls seemed to make the most noise before ten. Despite all this, and long before he had rinsed the 6 o'clock shift from his conscious, he had become used to the unfocused mornings after an evening of drinking and the semi-lucid state this left him in; his weekends had been abruptly brought back into focus by the weekday early shift but now his blurred senses had left him without order or comprehension of time. His muddled mornings gave way to plodding days and uncompromising evenings where drink had overtaken his need for women to the point where he had hit Grace because she had got in the way of his drunken ritual – the first time he had hit a woman and he hoped it would be his last. Women had always found him charming and eager to please. This new

fugginess had almost taken those attributes away from him. He would fight it, but not give up what had become his life blood. His evenings spent playing dominoes and drinking felt like being back Home. He doubted that he would ever see the island again.

He was dressed up today in a black double-breasted corduroy blazer that sported wristbands of black leather, with matching trousers. Millicent called it his mourning suit when he wore it to church the day he heard Mrs Hunter had died in Brooklyn of pneumonia. Millicent had followed him to the evangelical church at Upper Clapton and had chosen the time to let him know that she was pregnant. Stanley had listened to her without speaking, the smell of leather disturbing his thoughts. He had the distinct feeling that the pause he had felt in his life for so many years had come to an end. Not only news of an ex-lover's death and a bothersome pregnancy had brought him to this point, he thought, but a need to re-gather his lust for that which seemed inconceivable, out of reach. Maybe that had propelled him in the past, made his thoughts urgent and demanding to the point of heightened awareness. He could focus, then, make the short term in his life last a second in thought so that there was a speed to existence that had no boundaries. He knew the process well but it was elusive. In the time it took him to think of an end and realise the unintelligibility of his own thoughts, he had struck Millicent with a backhand so powerful her moving body had shaken the pew they sat on. She had bolted like a scared lamb, her hair a flying black cloud behind her, and Stanley recovered the power of the imagination for another fleeting second. Nothing he thought of matched the reality that followed. Millicent had the child, a girl, and lived with them for the longest time without speaking to him. Lillian circled around them like a kicked animal before the divorce, then took its finality to be a point to her, a way to get

back and even, despite the fact that he stayed on in the house and continued to still the urgency of misplaced thoughts, their darkness ever palpable, with drink.

He noticed that Millicent rarely stood in the same room with him alone. The child, however, was left to her own devices, and he felt he couldn't help but become a disgruntled old man in her presence. His tongue gripped the roof of his mouth like a vice each time she was near and he called into question his sanity each time she spoke. The urge to raise his fist to her seemed greater than the need to speak with her and he was surprised by a moment of candour that had gripped him that summer. He was going to tell her that he was her father that morning when she took a letter to Grace. The urgency had returned for him to speak about beginnings and what he had become. It seemed to Stanley that this would be important for the child to hear, to listen to him. To consider him. She was a silent one (and more insolent by the day) but she could hear what he had to say and pick herself up just like the other women had, Millicent and Lillian. He had no thought for the girl apart from that and, he had decided, he need not think about her again once he told her. It was something that nagged at him from time to time, like a picture of her as a small child replaying in his mind that caused him to pause enough to almost tell her that summer. The urge had come with a taste, the taste of walnut cake baked by Mrs Corrs on their arrival on the Avenue, and passed over a sturdy black fence by her fat-dimpled arms. Stanley had never forgotten that first taste of England in its own backyard, the cake light and crumbly to the touch and the walnuts melting in the mouth once chewed a little. He had thought then that he could like this England, and had told the boy to stop snivelling when he complained of feeling ill once he had eaten his slice. They soon found out that Prince was allergic to nuts, even though Lillian could have sworn she had given

him shelled nuts from Mr Nurse's field before. Prince's wrecked body on their first few days in England and the sweet taste of walnut cake would stay with him, together like the two ends of a lighted match. Lillian once attempted the same cake with the same recipe and it came out ok. But never again did she try or even answer him when he asked her to make it again. As if he was asking for too much and could just as well do without. That disinterest from Lillian had made him think of Ella; she too could be enlivened by a taste or thought or feeling that he could engage her with, just for once. And, although he didn't need this from her, she would admire him for it.

It would all come to an end by finding Grace standing at the mouth of the market one day, remonstrating with a street trader. He had told her she was his without a thought for his position in the house, for his future with Lillian, as it had now surely become part of his past. He thought then that his plans must move forward a month or so, forged just before his illness the summer before when Lillian had left for a break on the island and left him in the hands of a bellicose Millicent and truculent Ella (he was sure that the child had spat in his tea once before handing it to him). He had been convinced that Millicent was trying to poison him that summer in a way that Lillian would never have thought to do, with an unshorn malice and plain old arsenic. His paranoia had settled on him like a bad smell emitting from him, but did not wash away with his morning ablutions. Then he saw Grace and his motive was settled; she would be his saviour from the clutches of Lillian. There was a problem – money. But that could be solved quite easily as Lillian had an account that he had access to and access it he would. He had long decided that at least half of her money was his and that he deserved payment for all those years at work. Set up home together, they would, and let all hell break loose.

Stanley had a love of Jamaican women that surpassed his adoration of white women. It seemed in white women there was a certain sense of an uncomplicated morass, a downright simplicity that cut through the usual acrimony that most black women dished out and that simply depressed itself into the ritual of daily loving and running for buses, drinking spirits and eating toast. Jamaican women, unlike the small island women he knew, were not always trying to think bigger and better, they just were. This insistent need to top the crown, and do it noiselessly mind you, was knocked to the side by the Jamaican woman who let you know who she was and what she wanted and expected it of you to get it for her. Small island women believed in their own advocacy, which was depressing to Stanley. Jamaican women might have done, but didn't let on. This moved him immeasurably, to a point whereby he would beg borrow or steal to fulfil that need in a woman who wanted him for himself. Lillian had expected him to come fully packed with extras. That was her mistake.

Stanley carefully rubbed some oil of cloves on his wisdom teeth before leaving the house. His gums were inflamed by his grinding them down and he recalled the fact that Mrs Hunter had told him he had ground his teeth when they made love together. He didn't hear it but she had said it was like listening to corn being crushed. She had been his first lover. She was forty-six, he fourteen. He smiled now, thinking about her slightly sagging body but firm waist which was square like a young boys, like his own. He had grown considerably in her bare-backed presence, in stature as a young man and as a lover, he thought. Any previous experience with the opposite sex was a quick kiss on the cheek, a scrabbling hand under a pretty blouse or over white cotton knickers.

Mrs Hunter had taught him how to do it right, he believed, and he used those lessons to get him a woman with money. Mrs Hunter had left the island with her husband before he had a chance to tell him of his new conviction of himself. That he was a young man with prospects already. She would have laughed at him, besides. She thought him funny, like small island women find black men, and struck him as ordinary in a way that Lillian became ordinary if more exciting in the beginning. When she was brave. Then that business with Marva and Bessie shook her up and she got all her fire stuck behind her eyes instead of letting it out, making things simple. A different kind of simple than that you get with white women, but still workable if you know what you're working with. With Lillian now you didn't know what was coming next.

He licked his teeth again and knew the presence of Mr Oguntoye the First would exacerbate the physical problem he now had. Stanley was not careful to close the front door quietly behind him; Lillian was still sleeping off the effects of a long, late night call from Millicent. She was still not ironing his clothes and he was glad that his good suit has been long enough in the wardrobe to escape this little rebuttal from her. She had always been proud of his dress sense and how he presented himself, but now she seemed to know about Grace and she was playing the injured party, for what it was worth. Stanley looked for his now defunct wedding ring; he would pawn it today because he would need some ready cash after today's transaction. Just to tide himself over before he went back for more. The ring hadn't been worn for the last twelve years yet still reflected what was lost to him and Lillian in the early years, when the child came. Ella. A thorn he couldn't excuse away but whose presence was more of an irritation rather than the canker it could have become. The divorce had been inevitable after the event; he wouldn't have expected

anything less. Lillian's neediness was a bonus, though, as it meant she would not get rid of him totally from her life, and that meant access to an account he could pilfer from, that she seemed to have no recollection of, and today's predicament – getting to the new flat in time. He thought of everything else but the done deal and its ramifications – a place for Grace and Himself.

Himself. A great affectation from a man who had cared for him when he was young after his parents died in a fire. Himself. Self-assured, knowledgeable and a giant of a man, like a god. Stanley was much too suspicious to see himself as any type of god, simply because he couldn't believe a god would drink so much, not because it was beyond him if he gave up drinking. Modesty had never been his strong point and it was his basic instinct to take rather than be a placid receiver that had taken him to Mrs Hunter and Lillian's bed in the first place. Himself seemed to suit him, despite his doubts. His own man. A man with a knowledge of the streets and women like they were one and the same thing; once travelled they were remembered. He had looked at himself in the hall mirror before he left the house and said Himself to himself. It felt good and read even better.

For he had written about Himself as an icon of black manhood in his book of books. The Tales of Himself, he called it, and he kept it under his bed in the hope that Lillian would read it and admire him his energy, wit and facility for remembrance. That it included matters such as sleeping with other women, including Millicent, when he was married to Lillian didn't bother him for he knew that would unsettle her, but not rock her to her foundations. He had already done the undoable to her and still he slept in her bed. Despite a niggling, distracted sense of his own safety being breached by still sleeping with her, he knew that she was capable of understanding many things, not least of all lust.

Stanley took the buses to Hackney, he hoped, for the last time. The infrequency of them told him that he should be driving a car, a Ford Capri, maybe, like Mr Major's son-in-law. He lets that thought collapse on itself un-ridden. He clasped the small blue savings book and the envelope with it to his chest as he stepped lively to the next stop. His head was down as he need not look at the houses surrounding him or for the break in the road that told him to turn the corner, he knew it so well. The bus was on its way and he must not be late.

Mr Oguntoye the First was what Stanley called Rider's Hill Tough. Rider's Hill housed a run down rum shop with a rickety wooden and cloth chair outside its premises just outside Bridgetown. The owner would sit on the chair, munching on ginnips and cussing until the next customer rolled up. Then she would stand centurion-like behind the counter, eyes wild with boredom, mouth running with the cursing of the streets. It always amused visitors that the small soft mound that was raised east of the rum shop door could be called a hill. Men without land or prospects congregated there after a day in Bridgetown pestering hawkers for loose change and riding shotgun behind government buses on rickety bicycles. It was here that Stanley got the gash across his cheek and the superficial stab wound to his chest, wounds Lillian had patched up with camomile, warm water and cotton bandages. Stanley had been one of the lucky ones – one of his drinking friends, Early, reached his grave before his twenty-sixth birthday. Small and long sharpened blades without handles were the stuff of urgent reprisals, and eased young men into war-like confrontations that at once energised and startled them. The Hill became notorious. Only when a disgruntled customer burned the rum shop to the ground did the terror

of seeing death approach from a rusty blade become a brief after-thought to the dispersed men. Stanley's Kingston friends that he met in Hackney waterholes recounted similar stories, their eyes widened by the remorseless life of their colour-full thoughts. Stanley regretted telling Mr Oguntoye the Second of his past life, as he insisted that the murder-lust seen in his brother rested in his experience in war and not innocent drunken mayhem. Nigerians are peaceful people, the African man once said, until their men are forced into pit-filled corners. Stanley had told Mr Oguntoye the Second to speak in English.

They had kindled a certain kind of friendship after Mr Oguntoye the Second's twin attempted to strangle Stanley after he had been accused of being a poncy woman because of his well-kept clothes and manicured nails. Stanley's head had struck one of the counters holding breakfast cereal, so he had not felt the kicks to the ribs and blows to the already scarred chest that could have cost him his life. Both Grace and the shop owner managed to pull Mr Oguntoye the First off an unconscious Stanley, Grace's nails snapping in his Aran jumper. Stanley filed charges against Mr Oguntoye the First but they were soon dropped. The man's brother had convinced him that black men should try to resolve differences between them as the law in their new homeland would be pitted against them. We are the hunted, not the hunter, he had said, to which Stanley had replied: And what does that make my children? Mr Oguntoye the Second had not responded.

Stanley reached the northern part of Hackney that backed onto Tottenham by mid-morning. He found Mr Oguntoye the First outside garages in a road just off the high street. Stanley stroked the kitchen knife he kept in his pocket for reassurance, then approached the man who then sat on some boxes and appeared to relax. Stanley held on to the knife's handle.

"You get the keys?" Stanley watched the man play with his gold signet ring as he nodded to the reggae playing on a hand-held tape machine.

"What keys?" Mr Oguntoye the First's voice was thick but measured. Unlike his brother he sounded like he was trying to be an urban American with a bit of Kingston, Jamaica thrown in. Hence the rings, the clothes and the calculated air of danger that made Stanley want to laugh out loud.

"Look, man, I 'in here to play no games. I ask you for something I pay for, I should get it."

"Your payment schedule has not been completed." The man's face was round and shiny as if balsam has been rubbed on it. His steady eyes watched Stanley's hands in his pockets.

"And I tell you I would get the rest of the money to you today." Stanley threw a brown envelope at Mr Oguntoye the First. "Now, where's the keys?"

Mr Oguntoye the First took the envelope and sat in his car to count the contents. Minnie Riperton sang her soul on the radio and the man hummed tunelessly with her. Stanley checked the time on his watch. He was aware that Grace has given him an ultimatum and that he must meet with her to set the record straight this afternoon. He was also aware that he could be cheated out of the money that was never his in the first place – that he had stolen. He had not let Mr Oguntoye the First or Second know this, of course, and the former became the only man he could do business with by default – he had the necessary contacts to secure him accommodation at short notice. Stanley nodded, hoping that he had at last secured the path that was rightfully his.

"It's all here. You must of killed your wife!"

"You must a marry forty!"

Mr Oguntoye the First twisted the envelope around in his broad hand. Stanley noted the day-white polo shirt and felt like asking the man who did that for him; who sprinkled water on wrinkled shirts, manicured tough hands, shaved even tougher hair. He doubted that he did it. Stanley unexpectedly pictured himself looking better than good as he looked at the younger man and hoped that age has nothing to do with his thoughts. Grooming took a tender, loving hand to administer care and he already had it, even if it had faltered. He stood before a younger and richer man in a shirt he had worn for two days and corduroy pants that faded at the knee, but he knew his worth now. Now that he had taken the last of what was not his and sunk it into a lover's dream, threatening to burn the dreamscape as it was.

Stanley thought of Grace. If she had got the picture sooner he would not have had to use the petrol game more than once, but something had to move her. She threatened to squat in the flat once she realised what he was up to (to place the money on a rank outsider at Chepstow), and only the offer of staying on the Avenue a short while when he found her somewhere else to live placated her. In that time she had become fond of Lillian in a curious, cruel way. Their conversations were laced with a roughness that reminded Stanley of the way his mother used to speak to her sister at times, as if there was no love lost between them and vitriol was the only answer. Part of him was lost having brought Grace to the house; it was as if he expected Lillian to do something this time, say something to stop him insulting her in this way. She never did, except her usual base talk that she kept out of the church but used like a running joke in the house. For a brief moment he regretted telling Grace about the new flat and the prospect of sharing it with her. Maybe he needed time on his own, be a bachelor again. But he was old now, and needed the kind of attention only a

nurse could give. Grace was that comfort that he had long known was beyond Lillian and despite it all, his staleness, creaking bones and loosening teeth, he wanted her more than anyone or anything. If only it could all be postponed, though.

"When I get to forty wives, I'll let you know." Mr Oguntoye the First looked at Stanley, seeming to re-assess the Caribbean once the money was in his hands.

"I'll tell you when I reach one."

They marched. The high street seemed full of them; men and women, mostly young, caused a tidal wave in the afternoon traffic. Many of them were white but there were some black faces that he recognised from the area and some that he didn't. He walked alongside them, touching his temple as he tried to keep his thoughts together amongst the noisy slogan-shouting and tooting horns. They looked like a sea of bobbing seals from the bus and amongst them he was challenged to find a space of his own, so he bobbed too. He looked closely at placards held by slit-mouthed white women and wondered why they were not at home feeding their husbands. Or maybe their husbands were these men here, their fists pummelling the air to the rhythm of their chanting, voices crushing the silence that rushed in him like a seamless dream. He wondered what the Anti-Nazi League, as some of them professed to be, knew about racism that needed to be shouted about. His ambivalence was becoming damaged by the crowd's urgency but he held onto it for dear life. These people can't tell me a thing I don't already know – he tapped at his temple – look out for number one and number one will look out for you. The only problems I've had have been from women, he mused, deciding to place his years on the railways

in a safe place away from contradiction. That way he didn't have to let the combatant noise be part of his being, his existence, and this could allow Stanley the security of nonchalance in all of its facets.

The noise from up ahead became louder, more insurgent, as, it seemed, another group of protesters came face to face with the placard-waving crowd. They were white men, skinheads and rabble-rousers no doubt, and he began to count the number of times he tapped his fingers to his temples. The boy from across the Avenue was one of the first to combat them and he noticed his head tear from side to side as he dodged blows – and met some too. He walked by the side of the chattering women, enlivened suddenly and reminded for a moment of a show of his best stuff, his steel.

Until the crowd was almost at the Town Hall and he noticed Ella, looking like a rag doll and with an equally rag dollish child with her, run from amongst them and onto the Avenue. A white woman shouted abuse from her shop doorway and caused him to spin around until he lost sense of his direction and walked against the swell. He waited for a gap to form in the lines of people before he half-galloped through and onto the Avenue.

He thought that she looked like a whirling dervish, touching each surface in the kitchen with a flick of the damp kitchen towel. He thought, but he didn't say, preferring instead to watch her for the moment. Soon his long legs told on him as she seemed to spot them out of the corner of her eyes.

"What you want?"

"Nothing."

"Them children is going up to Scotland in a couple of days. You guyn take them out or something while they're here?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. So I didn't build up their hopes. Well, at least they got a father… ."

"What would they want from the likes of me? Huh? You right, they got a father. Let him take them wherever he taking them and leave me be. I never ask him here or them girls no more than I ask for you. But you still here. What your whiteman got to say about that?"

"I 'in know what whiteman you talking about and so I 'in ask him nothing."

"You 'in know what I talking about? For thirty-five years you 'in know what or who I am talking about and I just about fed up of it. If you had let me feel like a man… ."

"Wait a minute. You's either a man or not and I can't be held responsible for… ."

"Hold on. You now telling me that I should look elsewhere for the insult that you call my daughter?"

"No more than I should look elsewhere for the many insults you deal me each day. I'm tired a this, man! You in break breath since you come in here shouting the odds!"

"And you know what? I 'in finish yet." He touched his temple and told himself she was ready to be hurt. Not a niggling, bitty hurt, the kind that creased brows but did nothing to the heart. Like Ella hurt. But she needed a crushing blow, something that would eat at the heart of someone like Lillian. To his mind, only money could do that.

Stanley watched Lillian wipe over the remaining surfaces, muttering to Stanley just loud enough to be heard. She touched a finger to her lips, thinking, and saliva filled his mouth. In that moment she looked young again and touched a feeling in him that he had lost while still back Home. Her back arched just so and he shifted his loins with his cupped hand as they became uncomfortable. The soreness stayed with him for a while and he moved away from the door as he suddenly worried that she might notice. With the erection came thoughts of Grace, who should still be waiting for him. He reached the door just as the wetness reached his pants.

The storage men had not been. The bed still took its place in the large bedroom overlooking the back garden. Grace had been looking for her letters in the boxes and Stanley had encouraged her to come to the bed and lie down with him. He had become tired of threatening her early on in the petrol episode because he had become fearful of her malice that, he suspected, could cut both ways; she could cause him a lot of problems or be resourceful to him. He lay beside her, listening to her talk about her sons and life back home. They wondered together whatever made them leave and Stanley cupped both hands over his privates to tell her the best part for him and the worst for her. He had taken the money, yes, but only a little of it, one thousand pounds, would be coming to her. He had placed a deposit on the flat and paid the first month's rent. After that, she was on her own. He would find his own way, and for some reason Stanley thought of Marva who he knew was staying on the Avenue. The woman beside him doesn't hit him, as he thought she might, but sighed a sigh he couldn't decipher. It seemed too light to be distraught and too heavy to be

letting go. Perhaps she lay in wait, he thought, touching her warm inside part with a twitching finger.

Chapter Thirteen

I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. (Psalms 119:99)

"Come on. Come on!" The second instruction, said in a bark, was enough to propel me forward, but I lost my footing and ended up on the ground. I didn't see the rise in the road amongst all these feet. Several hands lifted me to my feet but I was too embarrassed to thank the people they belonged to. Merri looked at me as if she was not seeing me at all but something else much more interesting. "Are you an idiot or what?"

"Or what."

We laughed, but this was a serious business. Ahead of us the marchers had stopped as if there was nowhere else they could march to. I asked Merri what was going on but she shrugged her shoulders and started off down their flank, as if asking for trouble. I didn't want to go to the front of the crowd and suddenly remembered the red make up I was wearing. I took off my jacket and wrapped it around my waist. My dress strap fell off one shoulder but I did not replace it – it

would just fall off again. The marchers started moving and we started running to the front, Merri's placard, nicked from the side of the road, flapping against the wind. I had been surprised to see her at the march when I got back to Eastham, even though she had mentioned it; I had thought that she was staying in Hackney for whatever reason. But she had found me, just about to walk the back streets home, and pulled me into this with no thought of what I wanted to do. Was that to do with that knee-jerk reaction Miss Haversham said that Merri had one day in history class when we were discussing the ancient Egyptians and Merri had said they were black? I didn't know and I didn't care. All I knew was that I wanted to get something out of this so that I could write it in my long defunct diary – time to bring it back to life again. I thought about Mum and Stanley keeping diaries but disqualified this as a reason not to do so; they talked about old time things and things that interested them. I would write about my own experiences and that feeling I kept getting lately, like it was dark already when it was light or things were hard when they were soft. That's the only way I knew how to describe it. Everything was topsy-turvy and I couldn't seem to get it the right way up again. I felt guilty now that I had spoken to Merri about Mum and Grandma and everything else. They wouldn't appreciate it. And they wouldn't like me to be in the midst of this march, getting my hands dirty with other people's problems because that's how they would see it. Other people's problems. A woman to the left of me started singing "We Shall Overcome" and others joined in and I saw her. Standing by the side of the road and staring like it was a spectacle or something.

I motioned to her and she moved forward through the policemen standing at the Avenue. We were near the front now and there was nowhere to move to, just take small steps and wait for that tight feeling to subside. Nita told me that she

liked my hair and proceeded to take a comb out of her little pouch bag to comb it. I let her only because there was nothing else to do but step and comb. Then there was a surge of movement in the crowd and we were thrown forward, my hands on a woman's back, steadying me. I could see Profitt from where I stood and the group of men in front of him and the white, wide mouths shouting the kind of slogans I heard from kids' mouths at school when they thought they were being funny. Sometimes we laughed, sometimes we didn't. Someone let go a fist to the right of Profitt and he didn't see it coming. The blow glanced off him but he moved back because of it, causing the crowd to get belligerent and loud again, rushing forward against the policemen in the middle. I held Nita's hand and pulled Merri back towards me: "I'm getting out of here. You can stay here 'til doomsday if you want."

"That's the problem with you, you know," Merri shouted at my retreating back, black curly hair flying in the wind, "No passion!"

Passion? What the hell did that mean? I asked a policeman to let us through and he obliged, so we slipped into the quietness of the Avenue. Cars passed through the main road at the foot of the Avenue but there was no other traffic. An occasional roar lifted from the crowd to remind us of where we had been, then silence, then traffic sounds. They had all moved on and the buses were running through again. I asked Nita if she knew what Merri meant and she shrugged her shoulders before saying, "Maybe she thinks you have no soul."

No soul? I swung the carrier bag I was holding around my body as I listened to her and thought of the story of Lot's wife in the bible. I had heard it

several times from the vicar and once from my Grandma when I had asked her what it meant. She had just repeated it, as if she didn't know what it meant either. It suddenly came to me that I didn't understand a lot of things and that all of these things would come clear to me when I'm older – with passions and a soul. How old I didn't know but for now I would have to be satisfied by, at some time in the future, looking back at this moment – what did Miss Scott call it? – belatedly. I didn't know why it was Lot's wife that came to me then, but it could have been because I didn't feel like looking back at the marchers, as if they had done me a disservice. They had opened my eyes to things I had no power over, even more for me to regret being a child for. I needed to grow up, and quick. And who said that their marching made any difference. There were still the same people on the streets doing their daily harassing and bullying. No march will ever change that; I know that for a fact. Because when Sir tells off the bullies in class and they get detention, they're back the next day, even more nasty and upsetting to those of us they pick on.

The rhythmic, heavy feel of the bag was keeping me focussed or my head would run away with itself and thoughts of thick bullies. Nita stood beside me chewing gum. I asked her for some and she took a bit from her mouth. I chewed on it gratefully, not thinking twice. We stood there in silence for a long time, enough time to tell me that I liked her and that I still felt sorry for Marva and what Grandma did to her. I would help them get her back if I had to. So I told Nita about the letters from Stanley to Grace.

"Can I read them?" She asked as if she was a detective or something. I didn't dare tell her, long or short, how boring they were.

"I'll go get them." I didn't go far, to the flat and my new room. They were lying on the bed that was unmade in the centre of the second bedroom, and we looked at them there. Nita looked through them quickly at first, then started at the beginning again, taking her time.

"Listen to this… 'I have songs in me that have never been sung by anyone, at any time, at any place, anywhere. I'll let them all know, when I'm ready… .' He must be talking about Lillian." There is a sense of inevitability about it, the way that it all had to be about Grandma. I almost felt sorry for her, but remembered that she hated me. I asked Nita what she was looking for and she said clues. Clues to what, I said, and she said: Her state of mind.

"You'll get more of an idea of that from his diary, I would think. She doesn't keep one, not that I know of anyway. You'll have to come and read it as I won't be able to get it out of the house."

"Ok."

We left the letters where we found them and walk over to the house. Grandma had taken the cousins out for the evening and the house was quiet. We bounced upstairs, two at a time, and got to the front bedroom just as he was coming out with a suitcase and a large bag.

"You 'in see me, right?"

"Right." Stanley looked at me as if I should know something, which I did as I had read his letters to Grace. They were going to move in together and he was going to leave Lillian. He pushed past us before looking again at Nita. I know you from someplace? He asked and Nita shook her head. He gave a short laugh and walked down the stairs slowly as if his bags were heavy. We watched him go out the front door, then moved onto the bedroom. I checked his wardrobe – most of

his clothes were still there. I looked under the bed on his side. The diary was gone.

It seemed to me that adults had a certain way about themselves that made them different to us. They loved to play a game with life, as if they're the only ones watching themselves at it. I didn't like the way Stanley's back went out the front door, as if he didn't have anything to say to me, as if he was a block to all I could know. I didn't like the way he laughed at us as if we were just kids and knew nothing when we knew everything there was to know. Except for the basics.

His letters were either waffling and long or short and instructional; there was no telling which way they would be. And every time I took one to Grace I thought of how long it had taken him to write it when he could just as well phone her or see her that evening, which he often did. The message was in the writing, its actual act, and it seemed to me Stanley didn't want to be forgotten or to forget. Otherwise, why would he write everything down? I knew when I wrote my diary that I did it to please myself and to remember the days that have gone by, making sure they meant something. But his letter writing meant something more and it's about being old. Being not there any more some time soon. It's about being remembered.

We searched the main bedroom for any sign of any letters to anyone else and come across a couple to and from Lillian in her knickers drawer. The letters were short and to the point and said things like: We are not to blame. We took it on ourselves to take what was ours and make it into something new. She has no right to make you feel bad about yourself. But that's how a woman like her would react; she has no shame. Nita laughed out loud when she read this and pocketed

the letter as if there was no more to be said about it. She was taking it and that was final. And I wondered what a man like Stanley knew about women that kept him in this house and in Lillian's life. Or, even more to the point, what did he have on her?

We walked back to the high street, the marchers long gone. We stood there as if waiting for something to happen and hear a roar go up from the direction of the town hall where speeches were being made. I wanted to go and have a look, but Nita wants to show Marva the letters "... so we can start the ball rolling." I didn't know what she meant, but followed behind half expecting her to tell me. She didn't.

The evening was cool and spatters of rain started to break through the low cloud. Marva was by the front door when we got to Mrs Major's house and Nita showed her the letters straight away, waving them at her as is she had a prize. Marva's face closed then, as if there had been a collapse inside of her that she couldn't let show. Her face had lost that slow look that older people have and her eyes darted around as if there was something more to be read in my face, something more to get from me. That collapse in Marva was a sign to me that she needed my help, despite the fact that she picked herself up pretty quickly. The lines in her hands disappeared as she slapped the letters as if by magic and I imagine her as a young woman, receiving one of Stanley's letters.

"Did he ever write to you?"

"Sometimes. I have the letters here to verify his handwriting."

Verify. I ask her what it meant and wondered why she had to prove anything. I looked at Nita who was re-plaiting the ends of her hair, and thought again of what she had said to me today, that perhaps I didn't have any soul. I

should have asked her what she meant, I thought to myself, and then maybe the thought wouldn't press on me like it did.

They stood at the door, waiting for me to leave. I didn't want to go in anyway.

Chapter Fourteen

I opened my mouth and panted... (Psalms 119:131)

It went on for days, but I was good at sneaking and didn't get caught. I unearthed a bunch more letters and a bracelet, all tied together with a red ribbon that seemed to please Marva the most. But as the days went on and the pickings lessened, I began to feel uneasy about what I was doing to Grandma. She used to take me to church with her, after all. And Marva had this look on her face that was stuck between pitiful and triumphant, as if I should be crying for her or something. I could see the resentment in her, the fact that she was growing to dislike me and I knew why. Because she wouldn't do the same to her family. And I wondered why I was doing it to mine.

I saw Merri on the high street one day, helping her mum with her shopping and sulking along beside her. I told her, as her mum went into the white butchers, that I was beginning to regret what I was doing.

"Then don't do it."

"But I've given them so much already. And they keep saying that it's evidence. For what? Are they thinking of taking Lillian to court, do you think?"

"Probably. If I were you I would try to keep out of it from now on. Even if your grandmother's stingy and doesn't give you things, it doesn't mean she shouldn't have anything herself. And one day she might soften up and give you something. So don't go throwing it away."

I left Merri to carry her mum's shopping knowing that I would stop that day. And for once I looked forward to seeing the look on Marva's face. Nothing could mean that much to somebody and I was not stupid.

My interest in bees goes way back – to when Uncle Prince took his family to America. I was playing hop-scotch using smooth stones in the roughly concreted back garden when a bee stung me on my upper arm. I screamed, and I remembered Louisa standing at the back doorway eating a jam sandwich. The words that came out of my mother's mouth were swollen with forgetting now; her mouth moved but nothing came out as I remember. All I recalled was Louisa's chewing, silent mouth and how much she looked like Grandma. And the sting, so sharp that I gulped too much air and burped.

No, the people around me meant less to me at the time than the actual bee. It had flown off lazily, ashamed, I thought, and I felt guilty at getting in its way. Uncle Prince placed a cloth of warm water and Dettol on my newly stung arm after squeezing out the sticky residue that came from the sting. As he did this, he told me a story of a little girl who lived in a place called Brooklyn who one day sat on her father's porch telling lies to her best friend. The girl enjoyed lying so much that she dreamt what she would falsify from one day to the next. The week before she had pretended her father had won betting on the Kentucky Derby and that they were moving to Brooklyn Heights; the day before she said she had found a

diamond on the end of a dead man's pinky and showed her friend her own finger in a matchbox with a false bottom. But this day she was beginning to falter, halting and looking around as she spoke. "What's the matter?" her friend asked. "Last night a bee came into my room and stung me. Before it floated out of the window it told me it knew the lies were my truth and that it would never leave me. Now I can't forget it."

Uncle Prince ended the story as he finished with the bandages and I only remembered it in its entirety because he wrote it down for me. Grandma told me that bees didn't fly at night as if to spite me, but I had long decided that they could and should; it was the best time to catch humans unaware. And despite the fact that I knew their main job was collecting pollen and making honey in apiaries, I could see them more clearly as secret holders of humans' pain. Looking back, it seemed to me that uncle Prince was in pain that day as he had made a decision that would alter the rest of his life, and he didn't know whether it was for better or worse. His once casual interest in the Dutch family had grown into something bigger than himself, so much so that he didn't identify with his own parents anymore. So his letter said to Lillian dated 13th February 1973, airmailed from New York. Lillian must have kept it because it meant something to her, his deceit.

Louisa walked quickly like an older girl. Places to go, people to see, she had said that morning and I had smelled Dax hair oil as she bent over to spit in Isabella's cornflakes.

"Yuck! You dirty...." Isabella had swung round to hit Louisa.

"That'll teach you."

"Teach me what?"

"If you tell tales on me."

"About what?"

"Just wait and see."

The Avenue was alive with music as we stepped out onto it. It was the day of the Town Show and the park gates were open to a paying public. The music sat in the air like hot wax stifling the air. Its tinny noise was light but irritating and Louisa walked towards it as if her life depended on it. Before we got to the park gates, Isabella spun her around.

"Don't you ever do that to me again."

"What."

"Spit in my food like a dirty white boy from Kentucky." Isabella's eyes widened with fire. She seemed the most awake I had seen her be and popped out of her sister's shadow like a jack-in-the-box. The two sisters stared at each other, Isabella losing interest first. "Just know that."

"Take care, little sister. You may bite off more than you can chew." I noticed that Louisa sweated profusely from the top of her head to her forehead and she wiped it away now with the back of her hand, but we stay coolish.

"Don't worry, big sister. I'm behind you all the way."

Louisa didn't like the threat but moved on anyway, using my programme to get into the show free. Isabella paid for herself and me, and we trotted along behind the stalking older girl like wary hunters. The arched trees overhead swung in moods too tetchy to be anything to do with summer's breezes. I hunched my shoulders and hugged my waist; Isabella did the same. Her eyes were quiet now, not telling me anything about what she's thinking. Then, she answered a question without knowing it.

"Doesn't she? Doesn't she just get on your last nerve? Yes she does." She walked so fast she almost caught up with Louisa. I didn't want them to fight in the park – uncle Prince might take them home early and they had become a welcome distraction from Marva and Nita – so I pointed Isabella in the direction of the flower enclosure. It was locked up but we could see the red fuchsia and peach summer roses bursting from the fences, the huddled Sweet William catching light blue and the hyacinths guarding the pond corners like swaying sentinels.

"The Parky's picked out all the weeds. In the winter he doesn't bother."

"So what!" Isabella seemed angry with me and she looked towards the path we had been taking when following Louisa.

"What did you do that for? Now we've lost her!" Something about Isabella's manner told me this was more than mild interest and what had happened that morning was more than a childish prank. It was as if they were each other's life-blood, feeding off the other's resentment, yet there was more. Something like hatred came from Isabella now, and Louisa hadn't been able to face it.

"Which way did she go?" Isabella's breath smelled of coffee (Grandma had let her drink some that morning) and her hands sat solidly on her hips accusing me without her saying a word.

"Let's go this way. She might've headed off to the amusements."

The park wasn't quite as full as I would have expected it to be, but it was still early. It moved, though, like a colourful hedgerow, all manner of people making up its leaves. Time moved with this shifting colour and we had taken in much of the entertainment by the beginning of the afternoon: the coconut shy stalls with daddies holding small children on their shoulders to throw the ball; the air pistol range fighting for custom with the Weigh Your Weight; the Hackney Imps (with

even a little black boy this year) making shapes with their tiny motorcycles and the War of the Roses being waged by grown men in dark tights and cloth tabards. Women in old fogey costumes with large skirts in muted colours made noises to encourage the crowd around the fenced off battle and passed sweets out to children and their parents, but they missed Isabella and me. Isabella gave me a knowing look and, without saying anything, bought us a 99 each from a nearby ice cream van. We licked together, laughed at each other's messiness and linked arms. Isabella's were long and bony, but I was taller than I thought as I could look her straight in the eye.

With the afternoon smelling of pink candy floss and fresh roasted peanuts, we went in search for Louisa. Isabella had calmed to a hoarse whisper, her body language no longer sharp and angled. At last I could murmur swear words with someone who enjoyed them as much as I did – Nita seemed much too prudish and Merri would tell me off. They rolled off Isabella's tongue like wet sugar lumps and had none of the spite and venom connected with the words when I said them. They just sounded cool. She sang me a rhyme some kids had taught her at school:

> Ucky and Mucky were playing in a ditch
> Ucky and Mucky – a great big son-of-a
> Bitching at the window, landed on a rock
> Along came a bumble bee and stung him on his …
> Cocktail! Ginger Ale! Fifty cents a glass.
> If you do not like it you can kiss my hairy …
> Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lie
> Take me to the motor and fuck me 'til I die.
> Oh yeah! My tits sway from left to right
> My boobs sway from tree to tree
> Tell me baby what do you see
> Your mama, your papa
> Your greasy granny like orphan Annie
> Like Frankenstein's got a big behind
> Like Cleopatra - that little snatcher

Like little boys – ships ahoy!

The mixture of castor oil, Vaseline and coconut oil that Grandma Lillian had plastered our scalps with the night before (she had run out of Dax after doing Louisa's hair) had left her swinging mane lifeless and heavy, if shiny. I let a hand fall on her shoulder and asked her a question that seems simple enough, innocent even.

"Do you like your sister?"

"Sometimes. When she's not trying to get one over on dad or she's not horny…"

"How many boyfriends has she had?"

"Not many that you could call boyfriends. More like men she comes across. No boys allowed. Do you know how old the current guy is? Twenty-five years old. Now, what's a seventeen year old doing with a man old enough to be her father?"

"Well…."

"I know. You think it's love, don't you. Just as she does. But my moms says she can't know anything about that 'til she's lived a bit. Don't you think she needs to grow up a little? It'll come to us all sooner or later, so why not wait?" Isabella knotted her brow and seemed to go into herself as if her own words made some sense to her. She hunched her shoulders and dugs her long fingers into her skirt pockets, all angles again, and walked off, head down. I wished I hadn't asked any questions but sensed it didn't matter that I had; whatever was going on between the two of them was a long time in brewing and was moving to a sudden climax.

We found Louisa by spotting her red t shirt in the bushes. She was with a man. He was holding her tight to him, his back to us and Louisa looked over his

shoulder with a distant, uninterested look in her eyes. I stayed where I was, by the row of chrysanthemums to the left of the flower enclosure while Isabella stalks towards them and the bushes they stood in between. I could only see his yellow sweatshirt and loxed hair and immediately thought of Profitt. But I couldn't see his face and his back seemed too broad, too sturdy to be Profitt's. Maybe the punch that he took on the day of the march had shrunk him in my eyes, but I still couldn't be sure. I felt interested in what Louisa was doing in a very detached way, as if it really wasn't happening and that it couldn't happen to me, even if I tried. I thought of the party we had gone to and the boy who smelled of fish. He was now something that happened that would not quite happen again. Like what uncle Prince said in his letter to Grandma, we should stick to what we read in books and get our interests in life from them. Acting them out can only lead to disaster.

The man's laughter was strong and vital like a heavy rainfall. I took the time to listen to the two girls argue without listening at all; I added my own words to the scenario, my own accusations, until Isabella emerged before me like a mirage (I become so involved with my own plotting that I forgot where I was). In my version, Isabella beats Louisa to a pulp with a pogo stick and cursed her. In the real version she was tear stricken and solemn, her words coming out in a low rush that made her face look small and lonely.

"Come on. Let's go. Slapper. That's what you call them, right? Just leave the slapper to it."

I didn't say anything and wondered about the boyfriend in the motel back in the States but no image came to mind. It was as if Louisa's presence here made him a nothing, a nobody. For the first time, I wondered if she was lying about him

and the others. Isabella was like a pot on the boil, forever steaming, so I did not mention my thoughts to her.

We sat on the high front door step at Grandma's and watched the people slowly leaving and going into the park. I thought of the Calypsonian singers that I was missing and sang 'Yellow Bird' in my head. In previous years I had often wondered if one of them could be my father. Isabella watched me intently, as if unsure whether to tell me what was on her mind. But she started before I had time to finish Yellow Bird's robotic sound in my head.

"It started when we were twelve years old. Well, I was anyway. Dad was on one of his trips to see the relatives of the Dutch family we're going to see tomorrow and mom was baking bread for his return. The house smelled new and fresh and I didn't want to leave it. Ever. But Louisa persuaded me to go to the shops with her; she wanted to pick up a book of gospel songs for piano practice. We walked through the local park and the first thing that I noticed was the pigeons were friendly. One even landed on my head. I fed it with a stale biscuit I had in my pocket and Louisa laughed at how silly I looked. We walked through back streets to get to the store and the next thing that was strange was the smile on Mr Yin's face at the drug store. We'd stopped there for some ice cream and he's seemed so happy to see us. He's usually a miserable old crank. Then we bought the gospel music sheets from the discount bookstore off the mall and made our way back. There was a man standing on a street corner – oldish, plain, but not dirty looking or anything. He was black like us but lighter-skinned, almost pale. He pulled down his pants and showed us what he had – and Louisa did the same. Just tore down her panties and let it all out".

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I didn't join her. I felt angry at seeing him and her like that in broad daylight. We walked home together and I could tell that she was proud of what she had just done because she wouldn't stop talking about it. So proud I had to warn her not to tell moms. But I've never understood her since that day. I'll never understand her. So anything you see her do comes down to that day, I reckon. She scared that man so much he ran off as if he had a bee up his ass."

We laughed and cupped our hands over our mouths as if hiding our glee.

"What do you think it's like with a man?"

"All wet and glucky, according to Louisa."

"How come?"

"I don't know. I'm the last person to know." Isabella sounded as if a pea had got stuck under her mattress and she could feel it through the fluff and goo. "Best ask the expert. And that certainly ain't me."

Chapter Fifteen

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. (Song of Solomon 1:2)

Grandma cleaned house like a warrior in soft clothing. She started from the top of the house, working her way down to the bottom – and the kitchen for last. Bed sheets were changed every two weeks (unless a drop of blood sullied them) and blankets were aired over the upstairs banister. (When Grace had stayed, Lillian left her room alone, I thought – but the dress!). In the summer, great vases of hibiscus, chrysanthemums and carnations were placed in each room after almost everything had been dusted, sprayed, polished, ragged, soaked, scrubbed and vacuumed. I said almost everything because Grandma left all of Stanley's things dirty – the stack of records and the radiogramme in the front room hadn't been cleaned for eons and the little ornaments inside it were covered with a thickish film of dust. I had seen her cleaning from the flat opposite, the curtains drawn back to help air the room, her back bent to a task a younger woman would complain about. I could watch her forever and not see the frailty in her hands, just the efficiency of her step. I left the flat to join her, picked up Grandma's large,

glass, brightly-coloured fish and dusted its open, gulping mouth. I put on my little girl manner, the one Grandma liked me to be,

"Grandma, why did we go to the party when that woman could have been there?"

"Don't worry yourself about whys and whens. I know what I'm doing."

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes, I've seen her with that young girl that does look like she when she was that age."

"What does she want from you, Grandma?"

"Nothing I can give. But maybe times change and she 'in interested in what she can get, more in what she lost."

The people of Eastham walked like marching Trojans that day. The sun was hotter than it had ever been and that dirty heat that sat on shoulders like a stifling cape came and went, came and went. The rain that came down was genuinely cold and the day bore no likeness to the day before or the day before that. Still the people left their houses with no jacket, no long sleeved top, no cap to catch the wet. Still the people bore their skin as if the sun were licking each open pore. Still I had not seen her coming; my attention had been caught by a neighbour, Mrs. Frampton, cleaning the bonnet of her husband's wood-effect Morris Minor. She had worked slowly, rhythmically, as if a sudden move would spoil it all. Her light brown, grey-flecked hair caught what little sunlight there was. There had been no breeze to move it. But I had waited, nonetheless, just to see it lift and let me know which way the wind blew. I wanted to light up one of the cigar butts that Stanley had left in an ashtray on the windowsill (he seemed to be getting

bolder with smoking in the house) but didn't want the smell to linger. I still remembered Mrs Frampton and her yellow duster-cum-rag cleaning the brown, already shining, bonnet, more than the clothes Marva wore or the way she looked at me. She had watched me leaning out of the front window rather than ring the doorbell, interrupting Mrs Frampton's solid movements as she turned to see who the new woman could be. They had spoken – briefly – and Marva had pointed at Lillian's door, then the flat across the road. They had talked some more, Mrs Frampton's open, easy-speak light enough to lift to the upper window from time to time, but I hadn't been able to follow their conversation. Mrs Frampton's hair lifted at last, but it was too late by then. I had to see what was going to happen between Marva and Lillian and get downstairs quickly before being detected.

Marva was in the small porch by the time I got downstairs and it was some time until Grandma let her pass. I did not hear what they said as I slipped past and hid behind the sofa in the front room. The place for guests, but Marva was no ordinary guest that you try to impress and shower with goodies. This was no ordinary visit.

Next door's cat meowed noisily outside our back window (Isabella had fed it the day before) and my knees ached after a while. I moved just in time to find a comfortable position, just below the middle embroidered chair back on the sofa, before they come into the room. And Marva was spilling for a fight. She came into the room with her hands on her hips. Grandma's lips moved as she sucked on a sweet, but Marva's mouth stayed still, silent, tight.

"This is all that it was, Marva, just bricks and mortar. I kept it as clean as I could and maintained it. But it's never been home. I never choose it. It was never really mine. But I make it what it is. Nobody could of done better. Not even you.

"But I 'in let you in here to make excuses. You said some things on the doorstep that need clearing up and I don't see why… ."

"I 'in here to listen to all a that, Lillian. I ask you a question a while ago and I just want the answer. I too old to go over everything that happen between us. And I too tired. You ever think you would see me again?"

"No".

"That's all I needed to know".

Marva placed her hands behind her and I could see her knot her fingers as if about to make a wish. She sounded weary and seemed to lean on her own weight. Her hair was clipped back into a messy bun, some escaping, and she patted it from time to time. She wore slippers. They looked at each other for a short while before Marva spoke again.

"No court in the land will listen to that rubbish you just tell me. This house was partly mine and Bessie's and we can prove it."

"How can you prove it when the man that said it was is dead? And I 'in giving up that easy. This is my home now. I 'in moving from it to let you or anyone else get any part of it. How you guyn pay for a court case. And you not even resident here so… ."

"I'll worry about the technicalities, Lillian, I don't need you to tell me what I am not. You guyn lose this house and Himself by the looks of it."

"What you mean?"

"Everything you guyn lose. Just as I had to stay at home and watch you win, I guyn watch you lose. And I guyn laugh 'til the piss run down me leg watching you fall down."

Marva turned to leave. Grandma stopped sucking and sighed long and hard. The room became larger once Marva left it as if she had bloated herself like a toad and taken up all the available space. I did not hear the front door close, it was done so quietly. Grandma stood as if she was recovering from a physical blow, swaying slightly and she repeated Marva's name under her breath. She re-arranges the perfectly placed chair backs and walked over to the radiogramme. With her back to me I crept out of my hiding place and made as if I'd just come through the door. Grandma was looking through the 45s in their portable case.

"I wonder if it's here".

"Which one is it? I know what's in here, Grandma! I can get it for you." I loved Stanley's old records. I was the only person who played them, as far as I knew, and I took great pleasure in blowing the dust from the stylus and singing along to some old soul and lovers (the only reggae he had).

"What is it Grandma?" I leafed through the records and pulled out a Marvin Gaye and Tammy Terrell about the world being a great big onion. Is it this one, I said and turned around to find myself in an empty room.

Chapter Sixteen

He suffered no man to do them wrong: yea, he reproved kings for their sakes, (1 Chronicles 16:21)

"What were you doing in that crowd the other day?" Stanley wore a shiner. It was a big one that covered his right cheek and right eye. I looked behind me to check that the door was open in case he took his belt off to beat me. Grandma had gone out to the bank "to check on things" and the cousins were packing.

"I was coming back from the shop and got caught up in the march. I managed to get through to the Avenue after a struggle."

"Just keep yourself outta trouble, you hear?"

"Yes. Do you want me to take any more letters to Grace?"

"There's no more Grace".

"Why not?"

"'Cause I say so. And what I say goes." He looked at himself in the front room mirror and winced, touching his eye. "You keep away from she, you hear?"

"Yes". Stanley turned around to look at me.

"You always sneaking around listening to other people conversation. You must of hear something about the woman who come from Barbados staying down the road."

"Marva?"

"That's the one. I want you to take something to she for me. But don't stop and read it on the way."

His usual saying to stop me from being nosy, but he knew that I always was. If I didn't read them before handing them over, I read the letters afterwards somehow. I took the letter and thought to myself that I was glad that I had kind of gone off the idea of boys. Or men. Louisa soon put paid to that. She could have been thinking up a shopping list, standing there with his arm around her. There was nothing there, and I guessed that uncle Prince was right – that it all wasn't worth the paper it was written on. I had stuck the copy of *Forever* under my bed in the new room for another time.

Stanley looked pitiful, as if it was an effort to keep his head up. His hair was picky and rough and his clothes looked even more crumpled. I wondered aloud if he slept in the house last night. He looked at me as if he was about to beat me, then his eyes softened.

"Mind your own." I pushed past him with the letter in my hand and hoped that I didn't actually have to see Marva. She must have given up on me by now, I hoped, but there was no way I could go back now.

I made a mental note to get back to the house in time to see the cousins leave for Scotland. I walked towards the top of the road with what felt like lead balloons behind my back, pushing me forward against my own will, making me a part of this. I went over Marva's conversation with Lillian in my head and was sure that this was too big for me to handle, too much for me to get involved with.

So my attention switched to Grace and what Stanley said about her not being in the picture anymore. What happened about him moving in with her? And where was she?

I had approached the porch with its two plastic chairs on the paving. Nita had looked up and waved. To me, her head seemed much bigger than her body, like an animated balloon. Marva kept her head down until Nita nudged her and pointed in my direction. She stood up, then, with the help of Nita, looking at me. It had seemed odd to me afterwards that she hadn't done this the other way round – looked up then stood up. I ignored what could have been a slight and handed her the letter. She didn't let me get off that easily.

"You look like him. Your father. The way you does knot your brow like so." She imitated me and I thought I'd never look like that, all old and lined around the mouth, in a million years.

"He was a man once," she said, as if she wasn't stating the obvious, and I wanted to get out of there before she revealed to me who he was even though I knew. It was as if someone else's say-so would make it too real for me and I wanted it all held back, hidden again, as if it had never happened. I felt ashamed of my Mum and of me and didn't want anyone to know about it. But I had told Merri and that had let the cat out of the bag.

"Sit down. Nita, bring out another chair. You 'in like me, an old lady who can't stand up or sit down at will. My mother would a call it bone rot but them at the hospital does tell me it something else." She had looked at Nita as if she should know whatever it was she had and what the doctors called it. Nita had shrugged her bony shoulders with an effort I had seen in her slow walk. I disliked her suddenly, in the way that I disliked Isabella that morning when she laughed and joked with her sister. It seemed to me then that Nita should have

been the one I had confided in, not Merri, but despite her air of impenetrability, she would only have let on to Marva and made things ten times worse. I hated her for the simple reason that she was no good to me as a friend, and as I watched her struggle to put a third seat on the porch, I decided to drop the bombshell that would get me out of this. I decided to speak my mind.

"Oh, no thanks. I can't stop. That letter is straight from the horse's mouth. No more spying for me. I've got bigger fish to fry." I walked without looking back and wondered why Stanley decided to write to her in the first place. All it was about was his aching bunions and sore heart. He did the same thing to all of them, made them pity him then went in for the kill. What two old people would want with each other I didn't know and didn't bother to ask.

"Here, take this for Lillian. She has a sweet tooth". Nita walked quickly behind me and handed me a coconut bread that was still warm in the foil. "Tell her it's from Bessie".

Uncle Prince came to the house at seven and told his children to hurry up – the train they had to catch was leaving in an hour. Lillian had asked him where they would stay when they got back to London after Scotland but uncle Prince had been evasive and rude, so she left the matter. Somehow I knew this would be the last time I would see my cousins before I grew into adulthood. It wasn't only the cost of flying across the Atlantic that made me so sure of myself, or the fact that uncle Prince seemed more determined than even his letter to get the hell out of here, but it was the remnants of the story of the Dutch family that mapped his mind more clearly than anything else. Home had never been here, in Eastham, and it slowly dawned on me that Lillian had been a mother to Prince in name only. She was never truly a mother to him in his mind. He

tolerated her, just as he tolerated winter weather and ashy skin at the end of a work day; an inconvenience but a fact. A fact that bore little relation to what was symbolic to him (symbolism – wasn't that what Miss Scott said was at the core of reading Shakespeare?). Lillian's life held no fascination or adventure, longing or expressiveness for her son – and neither did she. Maybe I should have taken him aside and told him who my father was. But then again the story seemed sordid and surreal, not an open and revealing discovery of the kind he liked. But maybe I could have told him and let him know how I felt about it instead of a stranger like Merri who'll probably blab it around the school now. Maybe there was someone who would understand it all and make perfect sense of it. But then again, he may know already who my dad was and hadn't breathed a word of it to me, just like the others. I agreed with myself, yes, he was like all the others.

The thought re-occurred to me that I should find out who Millicent's father was as it plainly was not Stanley. But what if it was someone else that I knew or knew of and this caused no end of problems? What if it was better to let sleeping dogs lie, as Grandma liked to say. Or should I ask uncle Prince?

I didn't ask uncle Prince – he seemed preoccupied with his arrangements and his daughters' luggage. I wondered when he had stopped telling me stories and why he told them in the first place. It seemed to me that they were useless, fantastical things that couldn't bear any resemblance to what was going on in my life. If the truth was so unbearable, and it was, what good could a story do?

"Prince, you done yet? This train guyn leave without you, yes?" Grandma and I had kissed each of the cousins and passed them bags with sweetbreads, bakes and muffins to eat on their journey.

"Don't let the bed man bite". Louisa had squeezed me tight before getting into the car uncle Prince had hired. Her eyes were downcast and moist, as if she was sorry to leave. I had noticed some young men, Profitt among them, sitting on a wall on the opposite side of the Avenue and saw her wave to them (after making sure uncle Prince wasn't looking).

"If he does bite, squeeze your eyes tight and he'll disappear. Other than that you can scream!" I laughed with Isabella but felt sad that she was leaving. She had become the more approachable and generous of the two sisters and she knew all the words to the Barry Manilow tunes played on the radio.

"Look after yourself". I had said without knowing what it meant as my mind was elsewhere on other things, other places. Like how to get to Grace without being told to wash the dishes, mop the floor or hang out the washing.

"We'll see you when we see you. Take care". Uncle Prince barely gave me a backwards glance before getting into the driver's seat. Grandma banged on the window and held his hand for a few seconds, but he had let go suddenly.

"Got to go, ma". He would probably write our names as afterthoughts in his own history book, I thought as the car stretched away from the kerb. Profitt stood from his sitting position and brushed his pants. He looked over at me then and smiled. I smiled back.

"Where's Stanley?" Grandma had been asking me the same question since she got back from the bank.

"I don't know. I've told you three times, I don't know."

"Don't answer me back like that, young lady!" I ran inside before she could slap me on the mouth.

I later left the house without telling her I was going. Her agitated state had begun to make me nervous and I could imagine what was in store for

Stanley when he got back from the pub in Hackney – if he ever came back. I remembered once having to fetch him as Grandma was feeling unwell and needed to be taken to the hospital. Before going in to get him for me, one of his drinking pals had stood outside the pub asking me if I was one of his ladies. I was barely thirteen years old at the time but thought little of it until the summer that Grace came to stay and Grandma seemed to cave in, little by little, like a gravel-filled, sweet-sucking hole. I took the letters because he needed me to and I wanted to. My Mum hardly let me out of the house and my excursions for Stanley taught me more about London than I had ever seen on a school trip to the Tower of London. I thought of my duplicity and how it affected Lillian with what little I knew of my conscience. The vicar had said that one must be aware of one's conscience at all times, in whichever situation, and let god be your guide. As soon as a letter had been handed to me I had felt distinctly godless and immoral, but did it anyway.

The buses seemed to move slower than usual and I was thrown by how wet the weather had become. The streets appeared to look different, darker, less friendly, and people were running rather than walking. I got off the bus at what I thought was the right stop only to realise that the colour of the building I stopped at was not the right one for my familiar landmark. I walked on in the rain, my hair, shoulders and toes soaked by the time I reached the address I was looking for. But the place that I saw was a black hole with soot for window frames and a dark cavity for room space. The brickwork around what were windows was black from a newly spent fire and glass and bits of wood littered the small porch. A woman looked out from the adjacent house and I asked her what had happened. She had told me that they had all been awoken by the fire

two nights previously and that Grace had been badly burned. She was in St. Hughes' burns unit in Central London.

I thought about visiting her straight away, then decided against it. I had been away from the Avenue for too long. I cried on the way home and ate some bon bons to console myself. By the time I got back to Grandma's, the front door was open and there was a warm plate of food on the table for me. She hadn't asked me where I had been, as per usual. I hadn't told her. The sweetbread from Bessie sat on the kitchen table, half-eaten.

Chapter Seventeen

Now after this it came to pass, that David smote the Philistines, and subdued them, (1 Chronicles 18:1)

The high odour of Lily of the Valley filled the floral-papered passageway and before I got to the bathroom I theatrically gagged. Grandma had overdone it this time and splashed it all over too liberally. I absentmindedly placed my blood-stained knickers into the brown wash bowl to soak. The water drank the stain into a cloud as I turned to leave. Grandma Lillian stood in the doorway to the bathroom.

"What you doing?"

"Soaking my panties."

"Where are the sheets?"

"On the bed. I'm gonna take them off in a minute."

"And you guyn leave a pair of your soil knickers in the bathroom when there's a man living here?

We hadn't seen Stanley for two days. I looked blankly at her.

"Wash them out and put them in the washing machine with the rest of the dark clothes. You just like your mother – think everyone want to see what you got under your skirt."

The last comment stung me almost to tears. I did as I was told and sat on the stairs between the upper landings for the longest time. I hated her sometimes. The only good thing was that she didn't expect me to go to church with her any longer. I had said I'd grown out of fairy stories and she had looked at me as if she wanted to slap me but couldn't. At that moment I believed I was free from her in more ways than one. She would never slap me again; I was too old for that, she said, too grown. I didn't believe her, but the compulsion was there to stop. And I would never feel again that there was some closeness between us. If you can call holding a bible and being told off in front of big people as if it was a game closeness. Even when she left the Avenue, I very rarely thought of her and didn't even remember that I had a Grandma. With the taking away of church and slaps, she was dead to me, as if that was all to her and nothing more. But at that moment, on those steps, I saw another alternative – a way to get back at Grandma. I would fake my death.

Death had become a subject close to my heart over the last two days after Grace had gone. The journey to see Grace had been uneventful but charged with a friction that I hadn't experienced before. I had felt that in this woman lay all the answers – my grandparents' names on my father's side, my grandfather's name on my mother's side, what exactly happened between Stanley and Millicent and why was Mrs Major so unforthcoming these days. He would have told her all of that and more besides. Part of her softness was her strength but the other part, the steel, had been her downfall; I had become convinced that Stanley had set fire to the flat because she had kept asking him for money. This was borne out by another diary entry (the diary had mysteriously re-appeared after the fire) which read in part: She want it all but she isn't going to get it. I not leaving Lillian full stop. This was only a short term

thing, something to tide me over when I think of what to do, but now she is more than a nuisance. When I had laid my head on Grace's lap at the beginning of summer I knew that I had reached a place that had become alien to me. I hardly ever went anywhere near my Mum; she was too quick to chastise and curse me. And Grandma was hardly any better, just plain cold. I hovered around Grace because she was the only one who showed me any affection and I could kick myself for it because I don't need any of them any more, anyhow. She was dead now and I'm alive and I could go on without her around. Why did she die? I'll never know. Yet another thing to chalk up to experience that has no bottom or top or sides. Something I don't understand. I'm angry with her for going like that and wish that I could pinch her so that she knew that it hurt. But she had gone and her family photographs would have gone up in smoke with her. I wonder who will visit her grave. It won't be me.

Lillian had been ill over the last few days, throwing up everything that passed her lips and running to the toilet at every opportunity. At first I thought she was dying and wondered how I would get hold of Stanley to let him know. But the stomach cramps subsided and she began to look herself again after a visit from the emergency doctor and my swift visit to the chemist. She threw away the other half of the sweetbread, cursing it under her breath as it went in the bin. And I wondered if she had been meant to die and Marva had placed something in the mixture that made her so ill. I wanted to fish the half bread out of the bin and feed it to the cat to see if she would have a reaction to it, but she probably didn't have a sweet tooth. How would I know? Unless I ate it myself.

I was going to fake my death because Grandma deserved it. It needed Nita to hand her a letter and Stanley to stay away so that she could suffer in silence. Then I'd come back all happy and chirpy and wonder why she was

crying. I cried when I went to the hospital and they said Grace had died soon before. I hadn't known her surname and in those minutes that they searched for her I could have seen her alive. I cried and the nurse put her arm around my shoulder. She smelled of BO. I moved away from her and ran down the corridor and out of the ward onto the street. Only two buses to get home and back to Grandma and the silent house. No cousins, no Stanley. Just me and her. No contest.

I wrote the letter but missed out the killer line that I wanted to put in yet something stopped me. The killer line was: And you never loved me anyway. But I left that bit out. I just said: Sorry that it had to end this way. I am going away forever and won't be coming back, like Grace. Tell mum I hope she had a good time. She won't remember me anyway. See you in the next life. Ella. I even considered taking out the bit about the next life but Grandma would like that bit and it would make her cry more. I left it in and went in search of Nita.

On my way up the Avenue, I saw Grandma outside Mrs Major's porch. Her head was angled back, her mouth was open and her shoulders were shaking as if she was laughing her head off. I hoped that she didn't get to see the letter before I put it in the envelope. It had taken me several drafts to get it right and she could have read any one of them. And she could be laughing about it with them, just to make me look bad. I hated her sometimes.

They stopped laughing when they saw me. It was Grandma, Mrs Major and Marva all together in one clump. Laughing. Something else should happen here. There should be some shouting, beating on people, some letting go. But instead they stood there laughing with each other as if Grandma hadn't threatened to kill me if I spoke to Marva, as if Bessie hadn't tried to tell me things that I shouldn't hear. I hated so intensely that I could feel my skin flush,

and as Marva laughed and wrapped her arms around herself as if she was very pleased, I knew that something had happened, something I knew nothing about. But they had stopped laughing now and looked at me with daggers in their eyes, I thought. I felt odd, as if I was not in my own body and someone else was looking at them looking at me. I tried to say something but nothing came out.

"Wait, you don't even say hello?"

"What manners you bringing up this one with, Lillian?"

"She turn fool now, she can't speak." They all laughed again and I saw malice in everything that they did; the hand that was cupping the garden shears, the foot that was resting on the porch step. They were playing games with each other and I knew it.

"What you doing here, Ella?" Lillian, all sweetness and light. I said I was going to the library, not to Mrs Major's at all and she visibly relaxed. Go on your way then, she said before assessing me with a quick glance. She didn't find anything to make her say anything more, and I moved on, grateful to have Marva's face to the back of me rather than facing me head on, as if there were more secrets to tell. I hated her for it, what she made me do. Now I only had myself to blame because she was too old to do anything to. Like get her beaten up by someone who owed me a favour (though no one I knew owed me anything of the sort). I could still see her laughing with Lillian, head thrown forward as if the ground were her friend, picking at the leaves on the shears as if they were vital. I missed Merri but hated her as well, because she'd only tell everyone my business once we're back at school. Maybe Isabella would have been the right one to tell all of this, but she would have told Louisa who would have spat in *my* cornflakes.

"Ella," Grandma said, "Go." And I walked away from her towards the high street away from her home, a place that could never be my home. At that moment I felt as if I knew nothing about people, as if I was some chancer in life who just so happened to be able to negotiate human relationships at the best of times, and even then only with some luck. Go, Grandma had said to me, as if I was a child or something. And it seemed as if they were laughing at me and in spite of myself, I began to cry. I walked back on myself and confronted them.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Ella? What you doing here when I tell you to go?"

"Because if you are I just want you to know that I've had enough of your secrets and conversations that I shouldn't be hearing. I don't want to hear anymore about who Stanley is and why I should care. I've had enough of the lot of you and if I had my way I would... I would shoot you!"

Bessie laughed hard – which reminded me of Grace as she would have laughed – and Marva looked bewildered. I left them before Grandma could get close enough to renege on her word and slap me.

A curse – that's what she sometimes called me. My mother. And I answered to the name without knowing what it said about me or her. When I thought about it without her around to get at my thoughts I knew that I couldn't wait to see her again. I hated myself for needing her around me, still being Mum. Lying on Grace's lap, I knew that what Stanley craved was what we all yearn for at some time in our lives and from the gentleness of the Grace's of this world. I thought of her smooth, brown skin puckered by steel flames and wondered if she had attempted to jump out of the window like some of those young people had in the Deptford fire. If I could only have spoken to Grace,

then my questions could have been answered without stirring the emotions of the other women in my life who would react, I suspect, quite angrily to any queries I might manage to get out. Mum was too brittle for that kind of talk, I thought to myself, too emotional. Then I thought of Grace and her death again and my head started to hurt.

I walked in the direction of the library, all the while looking out for Merri. I even walked up to her front door which I knew because I had delivered some Good News newspapers one summer for Grandma and she had been sitting on the front step, killing ants. She had said on our journey to Hackney those few days back that she was having a party tonight and I wanted to go. I didn't know how to look at parties. I didn't know how to be at parties, but I would go. Then Grandma would definitely not know where to find me.

I sneaked the letter back into the house once the women were away from the Major's porch and placed it on Grandma's dressing table. Then I left for the rest of the day, making my bed up in the flat across the way and buying fish and chips from Drakes Drum. That will give her time to think badly of what she had done. Laughing at me. And making the others do so as well. I looked at myself in the full-length mirror in Mum's new bedroom and noticed that my breasts were getting bigger. Before the mirror, my body took on a shape of its own with two spindly legs, scraped at the knees, knobbly hands and a pigeon chest to top it all. At least it helped to push out what little I had and put it to good use. I changed into a pair of peddle-pushers and an old boob tube of my Mum's and sprinkled glitter on my shoulders. I didn't want to die like Grace, in a grotty flat with no life to live, just Stanley (she must have been desperate). Even the books couldn't guarantee me that I wouldn't. I looked out the bedroom window and saw Profitt walking down the Avenue towards the high street. My

hips were getting wider, I thought to myself, these peddle-pushers never used to be so tight. My bottom was rounder and heavier and now my chest was getting bigger. I'm ripe, as Grandma's cousin had said to me last summer, even though I wasn't then, and Grandma had told him to get out of the house. I didn't get her; one minute she protected, the next she didn't care. I just didn't get her.

I went in search of Merri.

Chapter Eighteen

She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. (Prov. 31:26)

A throwback. Lillian had laughed the moment she thought about the idea and even harder the day she thought he was sold on it, on the day he asked her to marry him. The child had been born several weeks earlier and she had told him Millicent was his and lighter skinned because of one of Lillian's relatives way back. Marry me, he had asked in an oddly affectionate way and she had laughed. Then when the rumours started about some white traveller passing through St. George and catching Lillian's eye, he still married her. At the time Lillian believed she had charmed Stanley in some way, despite the money and the obvious reasons for him to persist. And she went ahead with it in spite of herself, despite the fact that he had nothing to bring to the marriage except a measure of confidence that was enviable. He had always said he would get her back for it, the deceit, and he had, big time. But still she clung on as if he was a lifeline to something, some might say, people like Bessie and that Marva. But they would know no man like that could be a lifeline to me, she thought as she sat at her dressing table and polished the invisible dust from the cold cream

jars. They would know me just as well as I knew myself. I kept him on because I didn't want to lose.

Lillian thought of the walnut or almond cake – whatever it was – that Stanley had tasted the day they had arrived in Britain and that his taste for this cake never seemed to diminish; it was as if he was placing something on his palate that could never be equalled, as if it meant something more than mere flour and eggs. When Prince started up with his talk of the Dutch and travelling abroad, Lillian had thought he was going through a similar experience; devouring what he could of what was different and somehow unattainable before it totally escaped him and because it tasted good. Lillian made sure that she didn't share anymore of the cake with Stanley that the neighbour made and only attempted to make it herself once; the only thing he needed on his palate was her alone. And she was a fine dish, with money to spare for his gambling and other fancies (that's what she sometimes called the other women, fancies, as if they were delicacies) and much more. If only he had bothered to know more about her he would know that he didn't need the others. It was all in her and more. She was all that he needed, she knew. But it had always been a problem convincing him of that, even back then when they were young and Marva had caught his eye. They carried on for a few months behind her back but Lillian won through, despite it all.

Now time had run out for Stanley and his fancies and it started to when he brought one of them into the house. Even more than not wanting to lose, Lillian didn't like to lose face and she knew that the Bessie's of this world would know the woman was his. Lillian wondered how he had got the gumption to do it to her like that, to bring her into the house like she was nothing, just like the time Millicent brought Ella into the house as if the baby couldn't mean anything

more than just being a baby. They had all played her like a fool, as they said on the telly, and it was now payback time. Lillian thought of the fact that she was watching far too much television and listened to far too much secular radio and that she was beginning to sound like an American disc jockey. If she played her cards right, she would have a disc jockey's type of money too.

She was leaving. Before Millicent got back from the island, before Stanley returned from his extended drinking bout. The child would have to fend for herself. She had read the letter left on the side of her dressing table (like her father, a boring letter writer) and ignored its contents. This was no longer her concern. She was moving onto a new life with better prospects for her and for her health, mental and physical. She was moving to Seven Kings and knew no one would look for her there, even though they knew she had bought a house there once and had rented it out. They would ask: What happened to Lillian, but stand their ground and not be swayed by her disappearance to even think to look for her, despite the money. They were too lazy in their thinking for that, and in their manner. Both Stanley and Millicent. And Marva wouldn't have a clue where to start even if she tried. She was moving to Seven Kings and let no one stop her.

She would miss the child, funnily enough. Always listening in to conversations that didn't concern her and loving it being out on the street, like her father. In an old exercise book the girl had begun to write in she had said that she thought Stanley had caused Grace's death and Lillian had almost ripped the page out. The girl had already given away their letters, what more did she want to do to them! For even though she was leaving him, Lillian didn't wish Stanley any ill will. Just desserts, perhaps, but that was all in the game he chose to play. The child had complicated matters from the beginning when she

was born, and had caused a few problems now but Lillian half expected to have this ironed out by the time that she left. She would give Marva some money, and Bessie – not half as much as they expected – and leave the Avenue for a new life.

Why had she stayed so long? Because she had been bloody-minded about the house belonging to her and no one else was going to have it. Even the lodgers that they had in the early days before Lillian went to work, like Black Betty and Even Steven had short term contracts because she couldn't bear the thought of them being there any longer than necessary. She had fought for that house and it was hers. Not even a daughter of hers was going to get her hands on it. It was hers, from her father, and he had been joking when he suggested that the other two had a share in it. He had not been a sentimental man, so Lillian knew he couldn't have meant what he had told them. Probably drunk at the time and lonely (mother had just died). Lillian would have to fork out for it now but not in the future. Her path ahead of her was blemish free as far as she was concerned. Except the child kept coming to mind and the fact that she didn't know who her real father and grandfather were (Lillian didn't know who the grandfather was; he had said that his name was Ted). But maybe she should just leave it to her daughter to tell Ella. Or maybe there was no need for her to know at all. Then all shame could be tied up in the little knot it should remain within, outside of a body and beyond criticism. Then it could fester there in a place where most things died, Lillian thought, in the dark like a small, underfed child, listless already. Lillian didn't want to look back again, only forward to what might be, despite the diabetes feeding off her and making her feel slightly confused. She was not confused about this decision; she had made

it long ago, when she first came to this island. She would be on her own, without children, without husband and she would thrive.

But the child. There was something aching there where there should be nothing. Lillian had left it that way long ago, to feel nothing for the girl and yet know everything about her; when she went to school and how often she had detention, which toothpaste she liked and why she was chastised the night before. And now the nothing and the knowing had got caught up in each other and there was something else that she had to do. The estate agent would need all of the keys to the house and she had secretly taken both Stanley's and the girl's from their pockets. She had left a bit of money in the flat across the way where the girl would probably sleep tonight anyway and, despite herself, had placed food in the cupboards. Someone was coming to empty the house of its furniture that day and everything she needed had been packed up secretly and taken out of the house over the course of a few weeks. The rest would be put in storage. The child had mentioned missing this and that, which had been placed here and there but Lillian had ignored her, the best thing to do with a girl who was as nosey as that one. And when the removal van came, she had decided to tell the girl that she was leaving and that there was nothing more to say. The girl might even cry but that wouldn't stir Lillian. Lillian had done with talking. They had all trampled on her and now they got their just desserts.

Lillian held her hands on her stomach and sighed. Its growth had always been a problem to her as any sign of girth distressed her. It grew just as the skin on her neck sagged and her fingers began to stiffen. She thought about the children who had lain in her womb and visibly shook with her distaste for the memory. She would never be able to do that again but would never want to. The skin on her stomach had ruches across it where it had relaxed irrevocably,

and she called them her pleats. She let her hands run over them until she felt sick of the feeling, then let a hand fall between her legs where what was left was threadbare and coarse. She smiled to herself. The new house had a better dressing table with a better mirror and a new life for her to live and she could feel free again if not regain her youth. That was the last thing she wanted to do, go back that far. But here and now would soon be over, then there would be the future.

Lillian looked at the letter from the girl again and noticed how neat the handwriting appeared. She remembered telling the girl that she had gone to a private school back on the island, but hadn't dared let on that she barely did any work there and could scarcely write her own name by the time she had left. No matter, that had never been a problem for her. There was always someone else to read property deeds or contracts and the like, and when she had on the rare occasion administered medicine, she had made sure she recognised the names of the patients and let them read the bottle. She didn't have the patience to be ashamed and couldn't be bothered to do anything about it; she was too old now, that was her excuse. And it really wasn't that bad – she had read the girl's letter, hadn't she? Stanley was convinced that she didn't read well to spite him and that one day she would take the book from under the bed and go through it, page by page. But she had no intention of doing so, even if she could read it in the laborious manner that she read most things. His life was unimportant to her and his attitude to it even less so. It seemed to Lillian that the type of people who needed to write down what they did every day were the type of people who needed to rationalise everything they did as if it meant something. Lillian had long felt that life didn't mean anything but to take your chances and run with them. She didn't need anybody telling her the time.

She dressed having had a bath only half an hour earlier. The smell of coal tar soap still lingered and Lillian promised herself to use more Lux and Camay in the new place. She had been clearing out Stanley's things which were dusty and sweaty and felt unclean after even touching them. He had begun to have that affect on her. With his walnut cake and scribblings he thought that he could take on everyone and everything, but look what a burnt piece of ash he turned out to be. No good to anyone, let alone Lillian. She knew about the money he had taken from one of her accounts and had stopped it as soon as she could. That was another sign, that she was doing the right thing in leaving him. The children had been a disappointment, wanting more but needing less as time wore on, but always denying her in some way as if they disliked her. She disliked them for the most part, despite the fact that they were her own. Her husband's mistress and a man who wanted a white woman for a mother. Neither of them were any good and she was glad that her body was her own now, no feeling of hungry fingers asking for more from her coming around her waist. She felt whole and bigger and better, somehow, as if shedding them would be the making of her. Even now, so long after the fact.

Lillian looked at the bible at the corner of the dressing table and sighed. She would leave it in the house and not buy another one. All the pretence had started to get to her and she felt that her need to be part of the community of women who held up a church had collapsed on itself, never to be recovered. She remembered being in the presence of the child one day and repeating the word stupid to herself whilst holding the bible; it occurred to her at the time that she had done it all wrong, made space for all the talking back and scorn where it need not have been. There was room in the world for another slacker and in her new life she would learn how to play bridge and go on excursions to

Blackpool. There was no need to pretend anymore because the threat of being found out would have been lifted from her. No one would know who she was where she was going.

She looked at the photo that had been inside the letter from the child, Stanley holding her hand as they stood together behind a chair in the photographer's studio, and she remembered that even then she hadn't wanted him near her. Lillian ran her fingers along the bangle that she had added links to so that it now wrapped itself nicely around her wrist; Bessie had lost hers when they were still back Home, and Marva had just told her she had left hers in the pawn shop back home. Presents from her father that should never have left their sides but now lacked significance, just as he lacked any worth now. How their lives had branched off into different things, Marva selling newspapers outside the parliamentary building in Bridgetown and living off the money her children sent back for her, Bessie soon retiring from her job as sister on one of the wards at Barking. Lillian had never got to sister and admired Bessie for it. It was never her ambition to climb higher in her profession, though, just to make as much money doing as little as possible. She didn't need a good reading head to read figures in the newspaper, and she found this stock exchange business could be quite lucrative. Nothing like the dust settling on her last years, she thought to herself. She would make it work for her.

Lillian was sorry that Grace had died in the house fire, but got rid of the dress she stole from the closet in the spare room as soon as she read about it. She wanted nothing to do with death. This was her time to live, and outlive those around her. She wondered now why she stole it in the first place, having enough clothes of her own to be getting on with. Then she remembered the looks between the two of them and the slight that they meant. So she meant to

slight them too. How she let him get away with it she would never know. Now, nor did she care.

Lillian smelled the sweet talcum powder on her skin and thought of Stanley again. He had been ever so slightly more conscientious when working, though the morning work was something he couldn't abide. But sometimes, just at times, he would hold her close and tell her the best was yet to come. His breath would be fresh with the smell of mint toothpaste and she would have just brushed her teeth also, ready to go to bed after night duty on the ward and after making breakfast for a usually truculent Stanley. Remembering those times caused her to spread a slight smile across her lips. He had once called her Lily of the Valley and now she would teach him for letting go of that prize that was her.

Chapter Nineteen

She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. (Prov. 31: 16)

I walked the streets like a nobody. Past the Indo Pak butcher, the new arcade where the Asian boys congregate at dusk and through the Co-op to get to the other end of the high street. The short, white security guard who always smelled of stale Marlboroughs and looked rough and unkempt followed me until I left the shop, but I knew that he would, his uniform flapping on his small back.

It was a Saturday and the people of Eastham had put their problem week behind them. Asian clothes shops hawked their new wares on the pavements, big signs showing knocked down prices. The new MacDonald's had groups of young white teenagers outside its door, some with its brown bag in their hands, others just talking, laughing hard, eating. At the fountain opposite the post office, an older man had taken off his shirt and pants and was washing them in the cold water stream that came from the stone fish's mouth. I watched him lay his clothes out to dry with the meticulousness of a new mum with baby clothes and avoided his gaze. I walked on.

The keys were gone and so was she. My grandma had left us (there was no sign of Stanley, just some black bin liners with his clothes in them on the

front porch) and I was numb from the shock of it. The removal van had come and gone and I had watched from the window hoping that it wasn't happen, that they had the wrong house, that it would all stop soon. But even the curtains had been taken down and she must have just thrown everything into boxes to be ready in time.

Profitt stood by the Town Hall Annexe kicking a hardened round of dog shit. I had seen the other young men with him before but did not know their names. Some of them had been the tough kids at school when I had first started and were now more likely to be seen on the street, aimlessly picking at their crying lives, toeing shit. Profitt beckoned to me and I felt sick to my stomach, as if my insides had made a complete turn. I stood in front of him and smiled, tasting coconut bread Lillian had left in the cupboard in the flat for me. Profitt leaned over to me and muttered my name under his breath. Over and over again. The white light picked at his eyelids and made them golden for a brief moment. His dark skin rippled with the new heat that had opened up a changeable day. I watched him with a stupid grin on my face and remembered a couple of nights ago, and smiled inside.

I had eventually found Merri and went to her party.

The front door was ajar when I got there. It was a pale brown, pine coloured door, pale as if it had been sanded down or something. I knocked to be polite but no one would have heard because of the noise coming from inside. The hallway was non-existent but the balloons weren't and the colourful paper ribbons that were wrapped around them. Kids were screaming and running around the small sitting room with uncomfortably large chairs at each wall except where the buffet style meal was laid out on a long table with a

Dangermouse tablecloth draped over it. I almost fell onto the table, it was so close to the front door. My eye had been caught by the sight of large, odd-looking teenagers sitting on huge furniture eating cupcakes and looking trashy. Trashy in the way your mum wouldn't approve. Shirts fell over jeans pockets and dresses were perilously tight or short. It's a joint party with my sister, Merri said, appearing out of the kitchen area at the back, but she's six years younger than me. Wait 'til later. They'll be gone then.

She said that my boobs looked big in my top and my shoulders flashy. I didn't know whether to be touched or upset. I didn't know what she meant by flashy and the way she said it told me it was one of the adult's words coming out of her mouth. That's what I didn't like about Merri, even though she was different, like me, she was open to adult suggestion. We should use our own words, young people's words, to say what we mean. Not end up sounding like our mothers. My head hurt what with the screaming and the pop music at full volume. I listened to Merri talk to one of the other older kids about dreading staying on in the sixth form in a couple of years and seeing the same squirts day in, day out. Then, I swear, she looked at me as if I was one of the little squirts she was thinking about. I had no intention of going as far as the sixth form so ignored her gaze and sat in a seat just vacated by a big half-man called Gary Peters who would be in 4C next term. All the white girls fancied him and some of the black girls too. I didn't. He wasn't my type at all – too thin. I grabbed a juice from the table beside me and waited.

Merri's mum left with the sister after the last brat had gone out of the front door with its guardian. She was a tidy looking women with a serious, scornful face and dark attempts at humour. I thought the first thing Merri would do was switch off the lights but she puts some red tissue-like paper over the

light shades instead and put some kind of frothy disco music on. Then she pulled the table into the kitchen where there were bottles of drink stored at the back of a cupboard. We started loading the drinks onto the table before her mum's car had chugged its first chug and Merri told us we had to finish it all because she didn't want any evidence left behind. I liked the taste of the cider on its own but everyone seemed to be mixing it with lager and blackcurrant – snakebite they called it – so I went with the flow. My headache grew deeper as if embedding itself from my forehead to the nape of my neck and I felt floaty but dreary inside. I took my drink into the room with the Marantz stereo system blaring and watched the older kids Merri had made friends with while I watched with envy. How she did it and why her mum let her I would never know. Older kids were trouble and we weren't old enough to be looking for it, or so it was supposed to be. I thought of Grandma, for some reason, and wondered what she was doing when she was my age. She was probably going to church and reading her bible like the rest of the plebs. What would she think of me now that she thought I was dead. And, in a sense, I was – to her anyway. There was no way she could pursue me this time and I wondered why she did that day in the first place. She didn't care. And the thought of Mum at her neck was not enough to get her interested in me. And then I thought it could have been shame that made her do it. What if something as bad as what happened to Mum happened to me? Maybe she had thought that would have been just that bit too much to take. Looking around the room with the big teenagers denting the furniture and me doing the same, I felt something indescribable for my Grandma that I had never felt before.

This was nothing like the party I had gone to with the cousins. Merri seemed to have invited people she wanted to impress rather than a crowd of

the like-minded and I could see why her mum left her to her own devices; she was complicit in it all. Someone was attempting to dance by the front window, then almost fell out of the front door as he stumbled sideways like a heavy crab. Two of his friends tried to grab him but not before he fell head first onto the step at the door, bloodying his nose. They lifted him, one at each side, and shouted for help. A small crowd gathered and I wondered what I should do. But my feet wouldn't work and my arms felt as heavy as dead weights. I could just about stand and my stomach was churning. I had been back to the kitchen several times to top up my drink, and the music, which had long got on my nerves, was starting to sound attractive so I knew that something was wrong. An older girl who I had seen at school (clever, but liked to pick her nose and flick what was on her finger at teachers), Maggie, handed me a cool flannel. It will stop you from sweating so much, she said, and I didn't know that I was sweating. I followed her into the kitchen and sat on the floor by the back door, where the air could catch my back. Where are your friends? You should have brought them along. You know Marisa, don't you? Her sister's in the sixth form with me. She's that loud one, you know, that way black girls are loud. No offence. I didn't take offence only because I knew that Marisa's sister had beaten her up once. I was feeling too sick to laugh. I couldn't imagine Baljit coming along to something like this. Baljit. She wouldn't even set foot in our house in case she got eaten by my Mum! I wouldn't have expected anyone with half a brain to take my Mum's joke with her to heart. I felt as if I had outgrown Baljit. She was too safe. I was hungry and the cupcakes wouldn't be enough. I stared into my plastic cup and watched the froth from the lager pop.

I began to hate the place I sat in and the sick-smell coming from the front room. I wondered where the back room was to this small house and found that

there wasn't one by the time I stumbled around for a bit. I sat back in one of the oversized chairs, my head swimming, and quietly fell asleep.

"Get up and go. My mum's coming back and I've got to get things cleared up. Some stupid bastards been sick on the pouffe." Merri was standing over me with a J cloth in one hand and a bottle of Dettol in the other. Her breath smelled of mint and her hair was lank as if the gloy glue or whatever she put on it had melted. Tony Merchant stood behind her with one of his sidekicks. She eyed him warily and told him to get out but I thought she was still speaking to me.

"I'm getting." I stood up to regain the headache I had started the evening with and fell back down again. It took me ten minutes in all to get to the front door that was a few paces away. Ten minutes in which I swore I would never drink again.

I puked in the gutter as soon as I got outside. Tony Merchant was behind me laughing, then I heard a thud and a groan and he lumbered towards the end of the road, his sidekick muttering beside him. Someone had hit him but I didn't know who would have done that for me. I sat beside the orange, green and black swill for a while, smelling it and willing my insides quiet. Some of the blackjacks and fruit salad sweets I had chewed on earlier were now in the gutter and I told myself off for going back to them. They went with knee high socks and mediocrity, both of which I had hoped I'd left behind. Someone helped me up from the kerb but I didn't look up at him even though I could smell his stomach-churning aftershave. I knew that I looked a mess and felt sorry for myself in a way I had never felt before. I felt it deeply as if it could eat me up inside. The man brushed some of the tiny plaits I had spent all afternoon doing from my face and I looked up at him then, as if about to argue. I wouldn't have

recognised him if it wasn't for the lox because I had never recorded his looks in the way that girls do with boys they fancy. If the nose is a bit crooked they write it in a notebook. If the eyes are especially wide they tell their girlfriends about this new bit of information as if no one else had noticed it before. I had never looked at Profitt and recorded his looks because I had always thought that he was beyond me, nobody I could even get close to recording. We stood looking at each other for a bit, smelling the puke, then he took me by the hand and walked me down the road away from the house and Merri's hurried cleaning. I followed his red Adidas jogging bottoms with my eyes as anything above this level seemed to make my stomach do somersaults. It was still daylight, but a couple of boys stood outside Merri's house sniffing glue. I silently hoped that Profitt would not take me back to the Avenue as Grandma would see me. I didn't know where he should take me but it would be away somewhere, so that they could all think that I was dead, including Mum who had not even asked to speak to me when she rang home. I felt as if I was dead, as if my body was walking but my mind didn't want to follow it. I was glad I was following a lead. His face was kind of long and mid-brown and he had a small moustache. He was lean like a schoolboy, square shouldered, but he must have been in his twenties, I thought. And as I watched his back ahead of me, trying to match my footsteps with his, I felt that if I saw what was underneath his Brasil t-shirt tonight I would be made full. Full in a way I had no words for but only knew I would find it once I'd had it. Full in a way that nobody, not even Mum, could take away from me. Frankie thoughts were racing around in my head, and for some reason I thought of the royal wedding earlier that summer. All that ceremony just for the purpose of a quick shag. Frankie talk, but it made me giggle.

He had taken me back to the Avenue, but the back way so that we didn't pass Grandma's until the last moment. There were boxes stacked on her porch, but I didn't think anything of it. I had the key to the flat on me so we went in together and left together the next morning. I had expected more from him than to just see his back move away from me and shut me out like that and I called to him so that he would turn around and I would see his face again. He answered me but looked at me as if I could have been anyone, so I said never mind and walked to Grandma's. I couldn't find my key and no one was answering so I sat on the large doorstep, the doorstep I remembered finding hard to climb when I was small, and wept. A hole had opened up inside of me as big as a tunnel and I couldn't close it now. So when I saw Profitt the next day, after finding out that Grandma had gone and that Mum was coming back in the next two days, I smiled. Not because I was full inside, as I had expected to be, but because I wasn't and knew now that I would never be. I had been chasing this feeling as if it were something I could get hold of and manhandle. Now I knew that it was beyond me and, knowing this, I could safely dream again.

Chapter Twenty

Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. (Prov. 31:25)

"I tell ya, I would stab him if I had half the chance!"

"Better not say anything like that around here, Dot, or you're in for the long haul."

"Yeah, I know." Dot was chastened by my words – for a while. I liked Dot in the way that I liked all of the people that I liked, in small doses. She was in my post-depression reorientation group (we need a shorter name but I'm not volunteering to find out what it should be) and, like the rest of us no-hopers, had no idea of what is going on in her life and how to make it better. She was a big woman, with arms the size of my thighs and a goitre the size of a football. She knew how to talk to people, put them down as quick as that, and I often wondered why she needed help. Except she used to talk to herself sometimes, but what was the harm in that? Unless you're shouting, of course, and it's in a church and the congregation have to call the police because you're making a nuisance of yourself. Like what happened to Dot.

"'Ere, did I tell you about that time I left me brother over by the canal and he almost drowned? Silly beggar." We laughed at the thought of her brother almost drowning, as it was he who insisted that she come to the group and take

the tablets. It was him who didn't offer help when it was really needed. Dot couldn't get over the fact that this could all be his fault – the pill taking, having to listen to the patronising group leader, and the shame – apart from the small point that he hadn't been the one to abuse her like her father had. She smelled of sugar but with a staleness that was off putting and enduring. She never wore perfume to cover the smell and I admired her for that because who wants all that fakery bearing you down. I hated wearing perfume. I hated keeping myself clean in case he found me again and wanted me. I didn't want him near me anymore, so I told him: Get out and don't come back. But he kept coming back and I kept telling people I didn't want him there but they didn't listen to me. I'm telling you, one day I'm gonna hurt myself and then they'll be sorry. Not with the little scars that I've got on my body now, the ones that trail along my arms and my feet – just little slits to let the excess water out. But a real murderous happening that will kill me. Then they'll be sorry.

The excess fluid came during and after the pregnancy. I was so young and slim then that I had no idea that I could puff up so much because of the retention. I remembered the sore feet and thighs more than the birth, if that's anything to go by. He had his father's mouth, all teeth and lips. When he smiled he covered his mouth with his hand like an African woman and I told him off each time he did it. I didn't want him to act like no woman, let alone a stranger. If he was gonna act like a woman he should be like me, his mother. Look at all I've given him, and he doesn't act like me. Look at all I am.

He had been there, at the birth, and Millicent. In my mind and to him I called her Millicent but to her face I still called her Mum. She had told me to be brave and that she had never forgotten having me and how hard it was. If it

was that hard, she shouldn't have done it, was my response. She had looked at me as if I was dead to her. I was used to that look and pretended to take no notice. She had laughed a little then walked out of the room and I waited until after the birth, when I saw her next time, to ask why she bothered to come at all. I had been nineteen years old then and her abandonment of me was still fresh in my memory. Even if she hadn't gone and left me with Pinky and Perky, she would have done something else stupid, something that left me feeling stupid and alone. And why did she keep me from people; of the people I knew down the Avenue hardly any of them set foot in the flat. We had hardly been visited at the Gardens either. It was as if she was locking us both away from companionship because of what Stanley had done. I hated her for it without knowing why and took every opportunity, as I got old enough to do it, to put her down because of it. And then the baby came and I hated her even more for not telling me how it would be. No time to myself, no sleep and little help from him; she would know all about it but kept it from me. I wasn't dumb enough to be in the parenting classes at school so knew very little of what was expected of me. But he had five fingers and five toes, you should be grateful, she had said. And I had five fingers and five toes, were you ever happy that you had me? I hadn't even waited for a response. She did not even know who I was.

"I hate the way these black boys walk around as if they own the place. Was a time they knew their place. Know what I mean? No offence." We were sitting in the MacDonald's on the high street after the group had finished their meeting. Small groups of black boys fed their way through the mixed crowd of shoppers, some of them as quiet as stealth, others loud with mocking eyes that made Dot nervous. I smiled weakly and thought of my own son. He would be fourteen years old in June and would probably look at her in the same way. I

watched Dot's sunken eyes build the tears of a lifetime and sat quietly, not wanting to initiate any talk. She would start soon, and I wouldn't be able to get her to stop. But at least she'd be muttering to me and not to them out there, the great happy clan of people who didn't need groups or tablets or lives that bled instead of ticked over quite nicely. They didn't have that murky feeling that never went away, a heady, heavy nestling that stayed on your mind like a yellow blanket holding it all in until one day it all flew out, the blanket uncovering what was hidden inside. With the release came nothing short of a violent reaction, as if harsh, crazed words and a flurry of fists would dispel it all for the longest time. I never hit my son, except the once or twice. On one occasion he ran to the neighbours across the corridor and told them that I was trying to kill him and that I was mad. I took offence at this and beat him even more, but the release didn't come with the letting loose of fists because he had involved others. Now they all knew and I couldn't have my little flights of anger without admonishing looks from them all. What did they know about what I was going through? He didn't know so how would a stranger know? You look at your life and you say to yourself: Can I do this any better? My head hurt to even think about it so I let him stay on in my life as if I needed him but I truly didn't need him. But then again, I had the feeling that I knew how Grandma Lillian must have felt when she heard about Millicent and Stanley – why start all over again when you had a man there already? Why go through all the kissy kissy bit when you know it is going to end up with him climbing on you like you're a piece of machinery and doing his bit, then falling off and snoring the next minute?

Sometimes I thought that everything around me was very mechanical, even people's faces had a rhythm and time clock within them. I watched Dot's hands on her clock turn to twelve and we moved on, lumbering down the high

street like two old women when we are both only just in our thirties, me with my sore feet and her with her heavy weight. I was heavier now, as well, heavier than I had ever been but not as big as Dot. And I was taller than her, so carried it better. I didn't have that sweet smell, but I had to wash myself carefully, under the folds of skin as well as around them. I was quick to sweat so sometimes carried a t shirt around with me in the daytime so that I could change. Once, by the fountain, I took off my top and laid it out as if drying it then put on the blouse I had put in my bag. People stopped and stared, but I didn't care. I was too hot. I let a little water fall on the back of my neck then folded up the sweaty top. It was March and the rain had begun to fall but I felt none of it. I knew that the heat that I felt was a reaction to the tablets that I was taking but didn't bother to tell my doctor to change them. I tried my best not to tell my doctor too much otherwise I would be back in the hospital by now. I had too much to do to go back in the hospital and I disliked the smell the place left on my skin. Like stale breath.

"I could kill for an ice cream. Do you want one? Got enough dosh?" I felt around in my pocket to accommodate Dot and her stomach. I felt slightly scared of the other woman, as if her great weight might fall on me one day if I didn't give in to her, but I knew it was more than this I felt. I had begun to depend on her in a way I had never depended on anyone in my life, not Baljit, not Merri, not Mum. Her incessant talking and brow beating kept me going some days when my silences were not enough. I had had enough of being on my own and relying on my own company. And Dot was there to pick up the pieces, no matter how small.

"Do you want one or not? I'll eat your one if you're just gonna stare at it." I took the ice cream and licked at it gratefully; I had just realised how thirsty I

had become. I watched a couple of black women walk past us and look at Dot and me. The women were smartly dressed and had black shiny hair – office worker types, probably working for the local council. I imagined myself done up in a suit and going off to work, but couldn't quite see it somehow. I had had a handful of jobs since I left school, all short-term, and nothing had felt better than having enough money in my pocket to get what I wanted and to be what I wanted. But that all went to pot once the girls started complaining about me. And when he should have stuck up for me, he let them get rid of me.

Dot carried on talking and I looked at her lips moving as if it was too much to hear what she was actually saying but not too much to try and decipher it from her moving mouth. I caught something about the lady who came around her house to cut her hair and the postman, but left my senses behind when she started on the dog's mess outside number 44 down her road. At least she had a road. All I had was a bit of pavement outside a block of flats that long since needed demolishing. My son complained about bringing his friends back home and I didn't blame him. Profitt had promised to get us out of here when he wanted something from me like sex or money. But usually, when I mentioned leaving this place behind, he would continue watching the television, or told me to shut my mouth. My head didn't hurt as much as it used to when he told me to shut up and the boy being as old as he was helped as I knew he could defend me if things got tough, but I hated to see him half laughing at me like that. As if I was a nobody. A nothing. I could have taken my O Levels if I had wanted to. I could have gone on to A Levels and university if I'd had the chance. I was more than just a head case who had caught him unawares with a son. One of his friends even said I was a good catch, if a bit mouthy. Mouthy. How did I get that way? Even when I was at school and I would talk

back to the teacher I wondered how I got that way. I would rather not say boo to a goose, but still the words would come out despite myself. They called me lippy even then, and once when I had a fight with one of Merri's friends when she claimed that I'd slept with one of the boys at some party, they had called me a head case because of the way I was shouting as I was fighting, as if I was going off my head or something. Even the teachers didn't want to step in. Now my boy was doing the same thing, getting mouthy and hitting out at the least bit of provocation. I couldn't blame him and I didn't take the teacher's side when they told me about it. Everyone needed to let off a bit of steam. Millicent didn't approve. She thought the strap was not good enough for the boy, but I didn't care for her opinion. Anything she said, I did the opposite. And when she said I'm taking on English ways and not doing what I should be doing, I did what I did even more, just to spite her. I wouldn't let her win.

Dot took the back route home and I followed her. I liked going to her house because she always made loads of tea and had lots of biscuits handy. Her kids drove her round the bend and so did that husband of hers, but what's new. The group's supposed to help us to deal with our lives as best we can, given the circumstances. While mine were dire I thought that hers were redeemable. She didn't have to put up with all she did because she had a part time job and could fend for herself. Where was I gonna get trainers and clothes from for the boy if I didn't keep him on board? My money's not enough to feed a gnat let alone the three of us. I'd keep him on until we'd both had enough of each other and the fist flying became too much. I'd keep him on because no one else would have me. And that's a fact, the boy told me so. And despite all that he said that day, I didn't beat him for it. He was eight at the time and should have known better but kids are fresh these days, that's no lie. I hated

him for it, but got over it. There was no way that either one of them could get the better of me. Nor these tablets. I would beat all of them. Just watch me.

Chapter Twenty-One

She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. (Prov. 3:18)

I talked to myself when sleeping. Much in the same way as the voices talked to me when I was awake – urgent, sly, crashing, like a held over cymbal break that went on and on. But when I was sleeping they were more like extensions of dreaming and made sleep light to the touch. I knew I did this because he told me the next morning, when he was brushing his teeth or combing his 'fro. When they talked to me I was not sure that I alone heard them. Maybe Millicent heard them as she seemed so quiet these days, listening in. Maybe Profitt heard when I gave him the last of my clear times, before the fog took over. I fell away, then, a falling away from everything that was right with the world into a place that held no certainty or fact. Maybe Stanley understood when I last visited him in the warden-controlled housing by the new dockland developments. But he would have said, wouldn't he? "Are you my father?" I don't know how it came out, but it did.

"No no no no no no no. That Millicent. Always was a liar."

The bit that said he was my father didn't seem to match with the bit that said I wasn't his granddaughter. I tried to make them make sense. But each time I saw him, which were on a few occasions, I let go of old animosities. I let

myself be free and didn't worry myself that my birth certificate said father unknown.

My voices told me I was mad but in the nicest way. On the best days, they waited until I was in my bed before the worst of the shouting happened. Sometimes, when I was walking the streets because I was too scared to go inside in case the boy wanted me, or pouring old dishwater on to the frayed plants at the hospice, I could hear them louder than at nighttimes. And they told me all sorts of things about the people I encountered. Like that old Mr Sykes who lived down Harry Road. He walked in a jerky fashion, as if a tin can was being clanged against his ear every now and again, banging out his gauche rhythm, and there's talk of there being fragments of shrapnel in his head. War memories must pester his mind like flying, landing bugs. My voices told me that he eats shit for dinner and drinks piss for starters. I saw him eyeing a dog stool soon after and chuckled to myself. But my tongue ran over my teeth and gums as if I tasted it too. I hated myself for that thought and for that feeling – that I was complicit in his failure. Then there was that loud black woman who lived next door to me in the high rise flats whose name I could never remember. She had loud sex and smelled like a dung heap. I was told that she fucked the man down Teller Street with the ukelele hands and lolling head. I heard them at it at that same moment. Through a wall. Don't tell me that I didn't.

But most of the time, the voices told about me. And I don't lie when I say that they scared me. Only last week – or was it sometime last year – I heard them say that they were coming to kill me by climbing roughshod on the scaffolding outside my flat window, claiming a sawn-off shotgun in one hand and holding on for dear life with the other. They shot me in the stomach. I crouch by the side of my bed for the longest time, my breath stale by the time I

returned to my semi-lucid senses. Now that I'm coming out of that crushing swell I could believe that I could have been mistaken and listened to my nurse tell me the worst was all a lie. But then, she could be the liar and the lie something more than the truth. That something could hold my attention longer than the truly spoken word or a held ivory note. It had a timelessness, unlike the sporadic high of ash or nameless lagers. It would linger like a familiar bad smell, pervasive and momentarily touching. But always there in the yellow fugue that I carried around with me. I hated its murkiness and the fact that it knew no limits. My son, David, knew this as I had bared my teeth at him and told him so only the other day. It scared me the way that I treated him, but he was big and bad enough to take it. He told me that himself. And when he took the hat from Mr. Scuthers head and ran down the road screaming and cussing at him, I didn't beat him because he told me a few home truths about myself and my husband. Yes, dear reader, I married Profitt. Only because his parents insisted and Millicent couldn't care less so I made sure that it happened.

I don't know anymore. But when I come out of the swell of it, the heat of the crying that made my head ache and eyes disappear, I don't hear a running commentary but a few words scattered here and there. There's near enough silence. I swear it's that because the neural radio dial is off station, just giving that weird half whistle. I could hear myself think if I tried. But if I had known I would break up like this I would have taken the time to label me, so that I could put all the right pieces back in the right place again.

The mental health nurse that I was seeing (short, cracked lips with tired eyes) said that's what I'm doing most of the time anyway. Hearing myself think. I don't know though. It doesn't seem as if I would curse myself like that or hate myself any more than the next person would. But the nurse kept telling me that

I was not hearing anyone else but me. I went to see a psychotherapist once and he told me the same thing but he told me he wasn't supposed to tell me that I wasn't hearing other people, but that he was just to observe me and ask a few pointed questions. I hated him for that. Speaking to me as if I was just an object. Nothing's sacred, not even your own mind anymore. Just something to observe. He watched my hands and my feet as I sat down, because if they jumped around or did anything unusual he would lock me up. Or get someone else to do it. I didn't let him out of my sight when I was in there with him. If he said he was just going to the photocopier I would follow him, just in case he made *the* phone call. I once followed him to the men's room but walked away again once I realised where he was going. We would meet in the hospital and I would be ashamed to be around all of the mad people at the outpatient's clinic. Even now, when I go to see the nurse, she says that I shouldn't be here and nor should she. Time to move on soon, she says, as if I'm here to hear her problems. I don't mind. I don't really have much more to say to these people. I've told them all I know, all I know could be the cause of the voices. The one thing that I hadn't told this one was the Stanley/Millicent happening. When I told the psychotherapist that time he had raised his eyebrow in a way that made me feel so ashamed I almost fell into the floor. Just one arched up and a look of curiosity. I couldn't look him in the face again. Maybe I explained it wrong. Maybe I made it sound as if Stanley was Millicent's father instead of just a man Grandma had picked up afterwards. I felt like bringing Millicent in the next time, showing him that she couldn't be Stanley's daughter, but how would he know anyway. How would anyone know?

I missed a few appointments after that and they wouldn't have me back even if I tried but I didn't try. Then it was David's eighth birthday party and I

forgot where I was and started swearing and screaming at the kids to shut up. Some of the other mothers tried to quieten me down but I got louder and louder until I felt like my head was going to burst. This was in MacDonald's, of all places, and the staff started to murmur and look at me as if I'd been dragged in off the streets not walked in with all my senses fully intact. David didn't ask for any more parties after that day or bring his friends home to play and I knew why. He wasn't ashamed of me but of it, that great thing that took a hold of me despite myself and made me act outside of myself, march to a different tune. No matter, David was dead to me, anyway. The psychotherapist had told me that I had schizophrenia and that the onset was in childhood judging from what I had said, but I didn't want to believe him nor did I know what I had told him about my childhood to make him reach this conclusion. He was an old trout anyway, with his dingy socks peeping out from under his trousers as he crossed his legs. What did he know.

Profitt didn't hang around for much of it. He had long forgotten our wedding vows, for better for worse and decided that for worse was no good for a man like him. Sometimes I wondered if he even liked me. He got up in the morning with that look on his face, as if he was tired of seeing me lying there beside him and, almost without fail, he said: Well, aren't you getting up? As if I couldn't lie in bed without him for once. Why didn't he get David ready for school? He had time to drop him off in the morning.

He's working on a couple of houses in Hackney at the moment, and regrets that we didn't stay in the area when we had the chance. He always hung around there, like Stanley used to, as if he was a spare part without a place, as if it was his lifeblood. I hated to argue with him when he said that Hackney had the best pubs this side of the river, but when I was working I went

into many pubs and bars and Hackney's didn't even start to match up. It's all wooden panelling, dark, torn curtains and misty eyed drunks – no vibrancy or liveliness. But he liked to sit there, didn't he, feeling sorry for himself and finding the time to down another rather than be at home with me and David.

Sometimes I felt trapped. Not an annoying little feeling, but a colossal break down in lung capacity, headroom and ear space. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't look sideways or the walls were moving to meet me and I couldn't hear anything but the sound of a hammer against metal. Sometimes I thought someone was tapping me out a warning, but I couldn't work it out. Besides, the time for warnings was done. The worst had happened and I couldn't seem to recover from it. All I wanted to do was just get away from here, like Grandma Lillian did, but I didn't have the money to do it. I sometimes wondered what happened to her. She's probably dead and buried with no one to put flowers on her grave except a new friend. Marva left soon after Grandma had, taking Nita with her as if there was nothing to be had around here anymore. Mrs Major let Millicent know that they had been given something for the trouble about the house, but not enough, and they would find her to get the rest. It was an empty threat at the time, but I spent the rest of the years in Millicent's flat avoiding Mrs Major's evil eye. I was grateful to move away with Profitt when the time came and was familiar with the street that he took me to; it was not far from where Grace's sootied-window flat had stood all that time ago. It had new double-glazed windows now and a black couple lived in there, over Grace's shed skin. I hated them because of it, because they knew nothing about her and couldn't care less besides. I hated them for their innocence.

The boy had started to bother me, now. I was getting tired of worrying about him in the way that Grandma had got tired of even thinking about me.

The effort was becoming too much and I preferred to drink another lager and strengthen the yellow haze rather than remain lucid with and for him. He told me, after his birthday party and his first day back at school, that I was an unfit mother. I had laughed when he had said it only because my hands were full at the time and I couldn't slap him. Besides, he was too old for slapping; a good old punch would do him good. He was getting above himself in the way that kids did and Millicent hadn't been beyond striking me if my mouth ran away with itself. That's why I still never call her Millicent to her face although I think of her as just one of those older Caribbean women with old manners and ways but no tact. I hated her but would never tell her so. Yet my own son comes to me and calls me unfit. He stopped short of telling me he hated me but I knew that he did. I had embarrassed him in front of all of his pals, even though I don't even remember what happened. Too much ash made you forget. But I wanted to forget; even today I wanted to forget because it hadn't been enough for me. It hadn't filled me with anything I needed to remember or wanted to. Some people said that I should be grateful; I had a son and a husband, a little family. But I didn't even remember getting married or if in fact I was married. Maybe that's just one of those tricks people sprung on each other when they're down: Don't you remember that we're married? Yes, I said, but that doesn't mean that I have to be your housekeeper, cook, cleaner and whatever else. You can do some things yourself. You just said that we couldn't have been married because you don't remember it. Maybe I'm lying, I said. Maybe I just don't remember. Maybe you need a box in the head to help you remember.

I never took his threats seriously until it actually happened. And then I gave as good as I got. Sometimes. Other times I would feel sorry for myself and curl up in a corner and cry. I didn't leave him because I didn't have to; it

was only a recent thing and he would probably get over it. Or he would have to leave me. It didn't surprise me that he hated me, as I hated myself but couldn't believe some of the words I would hear because of this. Or maybe it was his words I was hearing and I could hear what he was thinking. Maybe when I shouted at the boys in the MacDonald's I could hear him cursing me from wherever he was and it shook me. Maybe, that time, it wasn't my fault.

I don't visit him any more, Stanley. Not since he accused me of reading his letters and letting Grandma see them. He seemed stuck in a groove he couldn't get out of, talking about Lillian and Grace all the time as if they were still alive to him. I didn't know why I started the visits, only that I felt an ounce of pity for the man who once walked like a champion, as the song goes. He didn't seem as if he was in his seventies sometimes; his gait would be sturdy and he would remember even the smallest detail of my childhood that I thought he had glossed over with a hateful eye. At other times he was confused, slow and lumbering and I felt taller than him, stronger, even though I felt confused myself. I only asked him once if it was true. About him and Millicent. And he never told me the right answer. It didn't bother me. What was past was past. And he was the least of my worries.

We moved back to Eastham when Profitt was made redundant from one of his Hackney jobs and it looked like he would be out of work for some time. It was cheaper to rent there and my benefits stretched more, but not enough. He was tired of me, I could tell. Everything told me this and yet I wouldn't let go, couldn't let him leave me again. He was dead to me in some ways – he never made me smile anymore – but he was the reason I woke up every morning for a good while and it was hard to forget that. Maybe I just needed more time.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. (Prov. 3:17)

It seemed that 1986 was a long way away from my experience of life but I remembered it as the last time I was truly reasoned, the year those black boys burnt down a part of Birmingham and the year that I conceived David. The way I remembered it, Profitt had wanted me to have his child, saying my name all the time he was at it. That's the way I remember it. But I've only just come out of a swell so don't quote me. We met again, five years after his long absence, way into my nineteenth year and I was beaming. My last lot of swells had finished a whole year back and I was sensing reality like a natural. No man bowed as if mocking my walking pace and stature, no curse came from the closed mouths of flippant butcher boys. I was clean and running with it. So when I saw him that day on the off-chance I had no idea that he would have the last of my clean space.

You know, bushes have lips. Their leaves are shaded upper and lower. They puckered and preened. I found this out the day that I saw him again inside what had been a disused shop front off a small, beleaguered market (no stall holder seemed to sell much of anything and of that there were not many takers). Now they were rebuilding what was a Jewish-owned barbershop from

an almost nothingness that made it a shell. Remnants of its past were pasted on walls and littered the jacquard matt at the door – split, hairy heads on canvas and paper eyes in curls. Profitt held a hand-saw and wood shavings peppered his shorn hair. He was no longer the man I had dreamt about in my teenage hallucinations. He was dishevelled yet decorous, smelly and unrepentant. He carried his odour like a badge of honour, fanning himself around the room as if he were a prize to behold. He appeared to be smaller than I remembered him but that was not unusual; I had a memory that took only the incidents of my life as impressive rather than the occupants of that event. He said that I looked good and I believed him. Nothing stirred me from the fact that he had touched my crotch once, not even the slightly distasteful thought that it might not be the truth and that what I could have experienced could have been a lie. He had beckoned to me as I walked past the shell and asked me what my name was as he had forgotten it and I had told him Anne as I didn't want him to remember. Not yet. He told me that his parents had moved back home and he was a part of Hackney now with its burnt out, wasted aroma of defiance. He seemed to lap up its cream like an obedient kitten, prizing its unconventional obliqueness in one breath and cursing the littered walkways in the next. And he held its headless corpse up for the mannequin that it was – lifeless, hopelessly corrupt, strangely complete.

We kissed then, bush kisses, despite the shavings and the odour, and 1986 held no surprises for me but his hapless grin on a wide-screen face. Maybe the fact that they were surprises to the new-found me was too much for me to seize as truth – to accept. We argued continuously and my room, pale grey and stark, became a place of unrest and unease. He would show up there in his open Clark shoes, sporting a baggy brown suit and purple shirt with

frayed collars and I would wonder where the old Profitt had gone. Where was the Profitt with the sharp looks and ardent female acolytes. That's how I thought it had been but I only remembered the rumble in the bushes with Louisa (surely it had been him – I never seemed to have the chance to ask him) and the light blue scarf of the elegant rastawoman. I didn't necessarily recall how he looked, more a feeling. I realised why everything about him was a revelation; because I had never known him. For all I knew about his time in the army (which he detested) and his graceless mother was not enough to hold him safe in my memory, quick to evoke. Perhaps that was why the sex incident was, I suspected, conjured. To bring him to mind.

Now he seemed like a has-been. And my has-been. He took what blows I had (as I had developed a fearful temper) but rarely answered with any of his own. Just smiled and carried on watching what was on MTV – cable had come to the area. I would ask him how come he could pay for cable TV when he couldn't get me out of this shit-hole. And he would laugh, mirthless, momentarily ashamed yet resolute in his passion to do nothing about something that was beyond him.

We lived on the edges of our lives, touching each other's skin for reassurance, comfort. He called his work his chattel as he was the master of it and not it of him. In a sanguine moment I could accept this as a brave attempt at making more out of life than there actually was to achieve. But as his drinking and late night haunts seemed to become more important than getting paid, I briefly reflected on his words before setting to work on my own answers. I slammed his right index finger in the front door in a heated argument. He pushed me to a limit I had not become aware of before and found my voices for me. He broke my jaw (accidentally). I stole his best pants. We fell over

ourselves in our hurry to aggravate and wound. He said that he had loved me whole. I didn't know what he meant.

He left on a very rainy November day and I ran barefoot along the street searching for him. I remembered passing people who were open mouthed and as grey as the day, and one woman who actually stopped to put a plastic sheet over me as if I was a runner in a marathon. I carried on running for him. You see, I had his baby inside me and it was bigger than anything I wanted, finer than anything I could achieve. I needed him for me yet knew he was needed for much more. But he wouldn't stay. And I ran screaming into the evening street like an unrelenting, wauling siren. The police picked me up and after all was wept and done I was assigned a psychiatrist and a psychotherapist. A psychotherapist who agreed that part-time work at the local hospice would keep my mind off things – unless I couldn't cope.

Coping. It became a word without a referent after a while. It just stood on its own like a giant plinth on a barren hill. How to… What to do when… Why…? Listen to me. I can hear you, now you hear me. There are no maybe's in this world. Only if you make them so. So if you say I might go to the park on Sunday, or I might make peas and rice on the same day or I may start listening to my own thoughts again and rush my days into one long commentary, you would be wrong in suggesting it, as the mind will take it as a truth and run with it. If I'd known my mind was so powerful I would have never started thinking again. But thinking I had to do just to get through a day at the office where they knew about my voices and never gave up on chances to mention it, mostly slyly or at times to my face. Sometimes I would sit at my desk and just listen to them discuss me outside the office door, as if I was not present or a viable person. They would pick at my foibles and fumble through

my idiosyncrasies as if they knew the beginning, middle and end of my life. Yet they knew next to nothing. And I kept it that way.

It started with a letter and copious gossiping. The type that rested on lips only momentarily before it spread across office space, catchment areas and boroughs like a whore's legs. I only told them I was ill because it was the truth. I had suddenly realised this fact, despite having visited my GP and him telling me I was having a breakdown of sorts. Regardless of my Mum calling me at 4am to check whether I was still alive. I wasn't ill until I realised the fact that dead cousins couldn't speak from the grave. And I told myself that and understood it as the truth – eventually. When I had one too many sick days, I wrote to them with my reasons and they sacked me (my probation period had not been completed so they could). When I moved on to another office job they talked about me, sometimes with their mouths closed. And especially in the pubs and bars of Smithfields or Cheapside. Or maybe that was the lager talking.

I couldn't see myself for the drowning. But my psychotherapist had listened to me talk about coping and nodded now and again, so I knew I was on the right track. Whatever it meant, whatever it stood for, I moved on.

Since Grace died and I saw Stanley cry over Lillian's leaving, nothing stayed solid anymore. It all moved about like frozen peas sliding on a plate. I couldn't grab hold of what was real to make it stand still. I had to let it linger and let it pause so that I could still it then. But sometimes the wait would last for days or weeks, even months. And I would forget what I was waiting for. I hated being like this. I hated the voices and the whispering and the telling. I wanted it all to stop. And now.

I had no money. I hadn't seen my Mum for a few months and Profitt had disappeared. The baby was due. They'd forgotten to assign me a social worker. I would ask her for money if I could. Maybe she'd be as skint as I was. Maybe there just wasn't enough to go around despite what that Thatcher woman said. Maybe there was just one rule for them and another for the likes of us.

After the first suicide attempt, it becomes easier. After the second, a way of life. The third should be death's call, but I haven't got that far. Not yet.

Years ago, when Grandma Lillian left us for her own new beginning, Mum went ballistic and left a welt the size of a large pebble on my skin. It disappeared sooner than I wanted it to as I wanted to suffer over its being there. It didn't dawn on me until I was much older that the welt and the temper went hand in hand with me being there; just the sight of me was enough to send her into an apoplexy that rendered her violently speechless. I looked like my father, there was no disputing that, and as I grew into a strong framed, tall woman took on his stature too. She hated the fact that I resembled so much of what was wrong in her past and would live longer than the original miscreant to tell the tale. This became most clear to me when I had gone shopping with her one day, a day like any other, only the sun was unusually cruel and punishing for London. Blackbirds nattered noisily on crumbling walls and moments of ecstasy burst from traffic-locked cars on busy streets. We walked through Ridley Road market as if hot coals rolled against bare insteps and took refuge in a pub full of loud, older Caribbean men and bedraggled white women.

"You know this place?"

"I seem to remember it". The framed photographs remained, faded now as if someone had wiped a strong detergent across their original sheen. I noticed that the man behind the bar seemed familiar and wondered if he had been there the days I had followed Stanley to his favourite drinking place. The shape of his head and the odd rustle of curls that answered it would have been memorable if I had that kind of memory, as they were unusual, defining. I looked at the photographs again as they seemed to hold me more. And then I remembered Stanley sitting on the stool at the table with the man who was even longer than he was. A younger man stood by our table smoking ash so I couldn't recall much of the smell of the place. Still, I listened for a sound that would take me back to my childhood, to a summer of uncertainty and pain, so that I could recall it all again and maybe this time place it in order so that everything fitted right. Instead, I heard my Mum's voice above the sound of hectoring words from ancient, cracked lips and glancing, boorish laughter:

"You never asked me. How it went. You never asked me what I did out there. You never seemed interested. Are you interested now?"

I looked at her as if she was speaking in tongues.

"Home. You never asked me how it went back home when I went that summer." My Mum gasped as she spoke as if catching her breath. I had noticed her do this over the last few months, and I silently wondered if she was having respiratory problems. Her bruising harshness seemed to be put in check each day; no cutting words to put me in my place in case I ventured out of the role she had assigned for me, no swearing to stop me in my tracks - just a quiet question in a noisy bar. I expected her apparent softening to have some sting, though.

"You said that you didn't want to talk about it at the time."

"Don't tell me what I already know. Tell me what you thought of me."

"What?"

"I need to know that... when Stanley told you... ."

"Told me what?"

"He said that that dry ole woman told you and he did too. I need to know that... ."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You mean you 'in remember."

"Maybe."

"Well, that's alright then. That's all you need to know."

The walk back from the pub to the bus stop seemed oddly quiet. Clanging traffic and clashing tongues were strangely muted and mollycoddled as if fighting to be numbed. I wanted to be numbed, stripped of feeling or artifice so that all that was walking was bone and tissue – the mechanics. Before the thought arose, the detachment from feeling occurred and I felt strangely loose and agile. The weight that I had put on over the last few months held no bars for me as my knees were as silently supportive as they had been in the past and my breath came easier through an oddly constricted throat. Time bore no relevance, so no sooner were we on the bus than we were at home, my home, unpacking groceries and feeling our way in the tiny kitchen, trying not to touch each other. Or maybe I was just trying not to touch her. Her lying, stinking her. The cream, cratered skin across her cheekbones shone with deceit and I almost choked on the laughter within me. Sometime. Sometime I'll let her know that I always knew. Sometime. For now I would think on the fact that I was a danger to her as I could "remember" at any moment. And I was a

walking reminder of her infidelity, her loss of respect, her impossible mourning. For it was a type of mourning; the fight against the reality of the situation, the remorse, the sorrow, all felt but never divulged as this would break a rotten mould, a silent regret. That I personified a regret meant little to me at the best of times but seemed to grow in monumental proportions when I was outside of myself, looking in like a conscientious objector to reality. I looked at her in my kitchen (I had moved to live with Profitt), busying herself in my small space, with my life and my basic foodstuff and I thought that I saw her drowning. It wasn't an idle delusion as I had imagined it before and the duration and force of the thought belied any redundancy. I held the image until it disappeared and momentarily stood dry mouthed, suddenly startled that I might see this woman's death.

"You should sit down, Mum. I can do this. Sit down."

"Well, if you're sure. I've done most of it."

"So they say!" I said it before I meant it but I must have meant to say it years ago. A snide remark that didn't make a dent in her shield of soft armour. I sounded like her. I silently wondered what she was doing with me that day, why talk in that pub and why bother to try and make amends then take away the opportunity as soon as it was given to her to tell the truth. Let sleeping dogs lie, she must have thought and I believed I thought it too.

When she finally left and I didn't see her for another two years after the birth, the space between the fridge freezer and the washing machine burned with her image. I touched it sometimes as it etched its shadowy presence on my formica and twice I surprised it in its sleep. Each time I spoke to it as if it was a living entity, bereft of the power to move away from me, to not hear me.

Each time I told it the story of my life as if it hadn't been there through most of it, as if I had been born alone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lest thou shouldest ponder the path of life, her ways are moveable, that thou canst not know them. (Prov. 5:6)

They say that people start hearing voices when there is a void in their lives and hearing is the only thing that can fill it. I don't know if that is true but I can remember the date and time that they began for me and I wasn't looking to fill anything. I once told this to a visiting writer at the college I had started to attend after school when one of my papers had been well received. She had asked me for the date and time as if it would make a difference to her, as if tracing my default to madness was essential to her. I started hearing voices when I was seventeen years old, I told her, and I now know their names as if they were my own. They are old voices, renowned in their own small world with little sufferance of inability or inaccuracy, which they take as ignorance. They beg to differ at every turn and mistake the sound of crying babies for a wake-up call. I've done all the waking I need to do.

My teacher had called me stupid when I said I didn't want to take my O Levels: You're a stupid girl, Ella, she said and I had wanted to slap her. She had asked me why and I couldn't describe to her the feeling of emptiness I felt in my belly and in my head. A part of me wanted to run away and try and find Lillian, make her listen to me about the letters and Grace. I hadn't meant to hurt

her or to make her leave. And now Mum's crying and Stanley begging to sleep on our sofa was all my fault. I had seen him more than once sitting on the front door step to the house as if it still belonged to him. And that once I had walked up to him and let him know I was there.

"Any more letters?"

"What?"

"Do you have any more letters for me to take to anyone?"

"No. She's gone, 'in she. There's no one else." He had stood up, then and looked so pitiful I felt sorry for him. I took the five pound note I had stolen from my Mum's purse that morning and gave it to him. "Have a beer on me."

"A beer?" He started to laugh, then stopped himself and looked down at me. "You growing taller every day. I remember when you was so small I could fit you under me arm. You remember that? Me carrying you under me arm?"

"No."

"And taking you to play on the swings in the park. Some American woman come up to us and wanted to take your picture, but I wouldn't let she. What she want it for? You never know with these people, you know!" He started to walk away from me and I walked a little way behind. I followed him to the bus stop and waited for him to get on the number 15. I started to walk back once he had gone but instead jumped on the next bus to travel up the main road and followed him. He did go to a pub not far from the main market in Hackney. It was blue walled with cream coloured curlicues on its makeshift pillars and mock-oak doors. Inside it smelled of smoke and something similar to iodine, but I couldn't work out why. I wondered if it was the barley or hops making that smell. I sat by the door, just behind him so that he couldn't see me but close enough for me to hear.

People crowding the bar. Ash littering the table tops. Glasses smeared to dullness. Blinking spotlights in a dark ceiling. Brown furnishings, hard and cold. Large, pink and brown people in huddled brown-framed photographs. On show like hunting trophies to incoming customers, each bearing their smiles like dull headaches. People looked on. False smiles. Hard laughs. The bar people didn't notice me in my school uniform so I was safe. And I listened in for the last time to one of my father's silent worries.

He said nothing much to another tall man. Only that he was tired now, and now was the time for him to be secure in his home, not looking for a new one. The council will see you right, the other man said. Yes, but the council 'in me wife. I had just finished reading a book about a man who loses his wife to cancer and goes on an around the world trip to learn to forget, but he never does. I wondered if Stanley should learn to forget or if he even remembered the same things that other people remember because I didn't recall him taking me to the park. Ever. I felt sorry for him again and regretted listening in, but couldn't move just in case he saw me. I felt like hating him but couldn't find the muster to do it, not in the way I could with Mum. Maybe now that I'm more grown up than before, truly a woman, I could see things more clearly and that's why the O Level thing couldn't happen. I was making my own way now, building my own bridges without them all. And I'd make sure that none of them got in my way.

I told my college lecturer this because she asked. And she asked me what I heard and I told her that I was told not to do a foundation course because I was clever enough to go through without it: But you don't have pass grades in any subjects. Don't listen to that silly voice. We all have a devilish one and a good one to guide us. Don't listen to that one any more. You need this

foundation course, then you can go on to do any number of courses that will eventually lead you to do a degree. That's what you want, isn't it? Yes, I said, but I knew that she didn't understand. I wished I hadn't told her, otherwise she would think that I was mad. But it's probably me just frightening myself, just part of growing into womanhood.

Mum came back that summer with a bee in her bonnet about getting a husband. You need a father figure. Someone you can look up to. I didn't listen to her. I couldn't stand the sight of her now that she was back. She deserted me and barely acknowledged the fact that Grandma had gone and left me in the lurch. You were alright weren't you, after she had gone? I thought she would do something like this. I just had an inkling. She left our belongings in boxes for two whole months just waiting for the bailiffs to come and remove us in case Grandma had sold the flat from under us, but they never came. Stanley hung around like a bad smell for a short while but then moved on to live with a friend a few streets away and eventually into his own place in Beckton. When we would sometimes see him sitting on the steps of the old house, Mum would laugh at his desolate figure and say: See what comes to those who wait? I didn't know what she meant, but I could guess. And I thought about her laughing and what she had said for the longest time, not able to shift it from my thoughts until the end of term and Christmas. And the only reason it shifted at Christmas was because we heard about the cousins then, and the car crash they were involved in. Isabella was killed outright and Louisa was in the intensive care unit. Mum started to pack as if ready to leave me again, mysteriously picking up net curtains to take with her, but the older cousin died within a day of us hearing and the funerals would be held quickly. I thought

about them for a short while, imagining Louisa's long straight stride getting away from us for the last time, and Isabella marking time next to her, as if she were the stooge to the comedian. It lasted for a week, just thinking about them, then it stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Mum cried for that whole week but only because she couldn't have her own way and fly out there. I would have liked to have seen America for a week, she had said, as if I cared. And I don't know how we kept from throttling each other those last few years before Profitt came. Before I started all over again with another foe.

One of the college lecturers arranged for us to go on a trip to Cuba and Mum scraped the money together for me to go. I was grateful but not forgiving. I was seventeen. Once, when travelling through the Cuban interior on horseback, the voices decided to let me know, amongst the vile accusations and recriminations, that I had had a friend in Marva. The main voice, deep and low like a man's and aggressive (Paul, I called him) announced this as if it was important to know this here and now. At first it seemed strange yet true, amongst the soughing bipinnate palm branches and soft plains of Santa Clara, to hear this announcement aloud like the aural equivalent of the proclamations on so many billboards for the common man. I let my horse canter on, mindful of its nature, its sufferance. Paul leapt from me, then, egging me on to gallop and ride away from the others, my guide, encouraging a ruthless energy that I muted just as easily as it started. The rest of the voices followed on, at once barracking and soulful and blind. I led them on, picking my way through my idiosyncrasies as if they were a narrative to be told, my voices my character witnesses. Their witnessing was my testimony to myself but I did not recognise this until much later, when thoughts of Santa Clara brought back the green, sickly sweet smell of Nita that summer by the swings, a deodorised odour that

was overpowering and intensely devoid of richness. Nita was Marva's mouthpiece when it came to relaying information to a child like me who was thought to be sly, reproachable and unwittingly dull. I didn't care. I received a few letters from her after that summer, short, dreary things that seemed to be begging for money more than anything else. She argued her case quite well – she had no money, so out of grace and guilt, I should send her money. I didn't have enough to do any such thing and secretly felt annoyed by her neediness. I was glad when the letters abruptly stopped (after all, I hadn't replied to the last two) and hoped that she had found another rock to leech onto. But there was something more than the pleading that I disliked about the letters. It was the air of finality that Nita gave to things that I didn't like, as if we were old and soon dead. She wrote like an old woman.

I often wondered what happened to Stanley's diary and it was only by chance that day in the pub that he mentioned that he had burnt his papers. It was as if he only wanted her to read them. And now she was gone there was no point. Being on the plains in Santa Clara has taught me one thing and that was never to rely on anyone to work out anything about you; your thoughts, your feelings, your attitude to life. Because all the while that I was hearing things and barely able to speak, everything else went on as normal. Barely an "Are you alright" passed anyone's lips and I probably came across as sullen, contrite, a loner.

There was a boy in the group, large head, long arms and an air of invincibility. I slept with him for the hell of it then regretted it afterwards when he told the whole group about it, lecturers and all.

"Had your fill last night then, did you?"

"Get in there, girl! I say now!"

"What did you sleep with him for? He walks like an orang-utan!"

I didn't listen to them. I didn't care, no more than they did. It was all a game, finding out what the other did the night before then letting everyone else in on it. But to me being with him and being let down by him were one and the same thing; something that went with the territory of dealing with human beings. And I didn't like it one bit. There should be a rule book somewhere, somewhere in a big library with a tall ceiling and locked cupboards; only gloved hands could touch this book and in this book would be the answer. The answer to what I didn't know and didn't think long enough to find out.

My thoughts are so different to only a couple of years ago now. I'm less inclined to think about myself as if I mean something. I don't mean anything at all. The last time I meant something was that summer when I confronted them all and they just looked at me, dumbfounded. Then I had had my say. Though I didn't say much, looking back, at least I said something. Now I just let what happens happen. I didn't fight for my say anymore. I just let the others talk while I listened. Whatever was said was said, and I let them know that I could hear them, but don't truly listen. Too many of us have mouths to speak with and too much was being said. I wished I was mute like Helen Keller but I would need to be able to hear just to know what people were saying about me. The usual teenage speak goes on at the college but I didn't say much to them because I didn't really feel they wanted to hear me. And I kept thinking too much, thinking about thinking even. I just couldn't get my head to stop. I'd forgotten what peace was like.

A stuttered light from an old Philips TV set occasionally startled the ward walls, turned cerulean by dusk. The wonky sideboard the TV sat on was bare

apart from the box; no ashtray suggested a visitor or a worn habit, no lipstick pencil timed the day's indulgences, nor did watermarks scald their presence. Brown skinned, hunched men with startled eyes and even darker, solemn women watched the blazing box or played dominoes with none of the brashness and bravado that Stanley and his mates used at the Shillings pub on Kingsland high street. I had followed him there on a couple of occasions, mindful of my own recklessness yet powered by the thought that I could find out something I needed to know. He had sat by the door surrounded by them, indolent old men with harsh mouths and tongues undeterred by drink. He saw me there that day, and ran towards me as if ready to beat me. I ran away from him, my legs heavy and sweaty by the time I reached the junction and the bus stop. What he was seemed dead to me even then and what he became consolidated the feeling. What a surprising chemical reaction had induced, no reset of free thinking or language could dislodge. My mind was made up for me without any pre-ordained knowledge that could have warned me. I was dead to him, for the most part, I guessed, and liked it that way.

I shared a room with nine other women – bulimics, the clinically depressed, the psychotic murderers of dreams. The white women tendered their shock behind the same glass panel as us, their anger tethered by lithium and the remembrance of awful acts committed in the face of insanity. One of the women wore the smile and glance of hatred similar to that summer's leaflet distributor. I saw that woman again at the anti-racist march at which Profitt got hit that summer, standing with some fat women who shouted at the marchers as they went by. The crowd suddenly swelled and became loud and male, yet I pushed through to the other side, misplaced. I wondered about the march in Deptford in June. All the black kids had been talking about it before we broke

up for the summer and I knew their excitement was mine, their belonging belonged to me too. Just the thought of it, if not my participation, furnished me with enough in-spite-ofs to tussle through that crowd of aggression and make myself known. The smell of saliva and sweat had followed me back to the Avenue where Stanley chastised me for my part in what had happened at the head of the Avenue, as if the Avenue didn't matter to its cause. Our awful acts of self-pity, blame, paranoia, violence and anger seemed petty compared to this show of aggression, yet was marked by its refrain and persistence. I left the ward with the thoughts of a holiday booked in Cuba clearly in my thoughts and with the promise that unlike those other women, the persistence would not remain in me. To question this, as it seemed to be the questions in my life that always enlightened, would see me through.