

that he would have to wrest from her the strength needed to sustain him. Slamming the door, he cried, his voice cracked and strangled, 'What you and him was doing in here? Tell me! I'll not have you bringing nastiness round here. Tell me!'

She did not start. Perhaps she had been aware of him all along and had expected his outburst. Or perhaps his demented eye and the desperation rising from him like a musk filled her with pity instead of fear. Whatever, her benign smile held and her eyes remained abstracted until his hand reached out to fling her back on the cot. Then, frowning, she stood up, wobbling a little on the broken shoe and holding the political button as if it was a new power which would steady and protect her. With a cruel flick of her arm she struck aside his hand and, in a voice as cruel, halted him. 'But you best move and don't come holding on to me, you nasty, pissy old man. That's all you is, despite yuh big house and fancy furnitures and yuh newspapers from America. You ain't people, Mr Watford, you ain't people!' And with a look and a lift of her head which made her condemnation final, she placed the hat atop her braids, and turning aside picked up the valise which had always lain, packed, beside the cot — as if even on the first day she had known that this night would come and had been prepared against it . . .

Mr Watford did not see her leave, for a pain squeezed his heart dry and the driven blood was a bright, blinding cataract over his eyes. But his inner eye was suddenly clear. For the first time it gazed mutely upon the waste and pretense which had spanned his years. Flung there against the door by the girl's small blow, his body slowly crumpled under the weariness he had long denied. He sensed that dark but unsubstantial figure which roamed the nights searching for him wind him in its chill embrace. He struggled against it, his hands clutching the air with the spastic eloquence of a drowning man. He moaned — and the anguished sound reached beyond the room to fill the house. It escaped to the yard and his doves swelled their throats, moaning with him.

AUSTIN CLARKE

I Hanging On, Praise God!

'Gawd bless my eyesight! Clemintine!'

'Pinky! The Lord have his mercy, child, I seeing right?'

'Yesss! How long you here in Canada?'

'Child, I here now two years running 'pon three. But I didn't know *you* was up here, too! What the hell bring you in this godforsaken place though?'

'I come up 'pon the Scheme. The Domestic Scheme. First little break in my whole life. And I glad for it. But I hanging on, meanwhile.'

'You damn right to hang on. 'Cause you know as well as I do that there ain' no particular bed o' roses back where we come from. You could live donkey years back in Barbados, and 'cepting you have godfather or iffing you been to Queens College, or maybe you learn little needlework, you ain' getting *nowhere*. But how you making out?'

'Child, now and then. Today, I up, tomorrow, I down.'

'Well, since I meet up with you, you might as well come and see where I lives. You ain' in no hurry, though? 'Cause you don't look like no Canadian what always rushing, running, turning their blood to water, they in so much o' hurry!'

'To tell you the truth, I come downtown to buy two-three item for the Missy, and . . .'

'How you and she gets along?'

'Betwixt me and you, I don't care much for working for these people. They *too* smart! They counting ever' grain o' rice, and watching ever' slice o' bake pork you put 'pon that table. But they want to go to the Islands, and then they would see *how* smart they is!'

'I list'ning.'

'Well, this lady I works for . . . up in that place, Forest Hill Village, where all the rich-able Jews does live . . . Clemintine, you never see so much o' money in your born days! But they *tight!*'

'You ain' lie, darling.'

'Child, as I standing up here with you in this subway place, I ain' lying. I tell you . . . well, since I been working off my tail for her, three years! She ain' give me one blind cent more than the two hundred dollars a month, what I start out with! All kind o' Jamaican gal, who you know can't touch me for the way I does set table with knife and fork . . . they getting all up in the three hundreds, and . . .'

'You kidding!'

'Child, you gotta open your two eye wide, wide wide, in this country, yuh! If not, these people jook them out! And I complainin' to her 'bout how the hot stove giving me pains right up in my shoulder blade, all 'cross my back, in me stomach-bone, when the nights come. I catching more cold than what John read 'bout. Can't get a decent night's sleep, I so damn stiff all over my body from standing up at the hot stove, the ironing board . . . scrubbing the damn floor . . . kitchen floor, bedroom floor, living-room, pantry. You see me here? Well, I don't know how I keeping the little fat God give me on these bones! All these years, and only two hundred dollars a month.'

'You look good, though.'

'Nobody mind you. You pulling my legs.'

'We getting off at the next stop.'

'You living 'pon Bloor Street?'

'Three months now. I can't take on the Missy quarters, soul. Nine o'clock I goes up, and I sits down and face them four bare walls. Prison walls I staring at, all the time. It have television, radiogram, record player. You can't ask for more comforts. But it lacking in something basic. It ain' have peace and happiness! You remember back home, when we was working out for them white people in the Garrison Barracks, how when the evenings come, we could stroll round the Garrison Pasture, or the Explanade? Maybe go for a bus drive and let little o' Silver Sands sea breeze blow in we face? Well, that don't happen here! No place to go. Nowhere to enjoy weselves. All we doing is making money. And nothing, nowhere to spend it . . .'

'Don't talk so loud, the man in front list'ning . . . You been going church lately?'

'Hold over. Lemme tell you something. I get *saved*.'

'No! Clemintine, you lie!'

'Shhh! The whole streetcar ain' talking to you, woman. Only me talking to you. Yesss! I meet my Savior, soul. Is the onliest salvation what going to help soften my burdens, and my troubles. I looks at the situation this way: I here in Canada three years now, going 'pon four. After work, I changes my clothes and sits down in that Baptist church 'pon Soho Street, and praise my Gawd. Is the onliest salvation I sees in this place. I can't say I going looking for friends. Friends does bring yuh grief!'

'You couldn't be serious, though?'

'Don't let we pass the stop. We getting off at the next one. Look, sweetheart, I come in this place with the '57 batch o' girls. And when that big ugly man down at the Negro Citizens Place finish greeting ever'body, and showing we 'bout Toronto, loneliness step' in. Loneliness. I up there in Bayview. Nobody to talk to me. Only work. I ain' see a soul my color, saving the other Bajan girl, Babbie, what works for that nice doctor family. I spraining my brain. Things ain' working out, at all. 'Cause we is womens together. And as womens, we does feel a certain way lonesome when we lonely.'

'But how you? Engage' yet?'

'Me, darling? Bother out my soul-case with the niggers in this world!'

'You mean you ain' settle down with a man?'

'And what 'bout you?'

'I have God! And my Bible.'

'Uh-huhn? . . . I had a man once. I come up in Canada. I work hard as hell. And I saying I sending back money to him in Barbados, to help make up his plane fare. Well, eight months pass', and I still ain' hear one word from that brute. I getting ready all the marrieding things: white dress, veil, even the eats and drinks, 'cause I had a wonderful freeness in mind. I prepared. And you know, as the Regulations say, we could married after one year pass'. Well, I so *good* to that man! And he writing me all these love letters, how: "Darling, you leave me down here, and I lonely for you. Your heart in front o' my eyes all the time." And Clemintine, the sweet words! How he miss' me in a certain way and that

he hope the reaches of his letters would find me in a perfect state of good health, praise God! Darling, I don't know what them sweet words do to my heart in this cold place, but I pouring all my money in that man hand when the payday come. Two days after the month end, brisk! I down in the post office taking out money order. 'Cause, blood more thicker than water. And I know how lonely them winter nights is, up here, child; and iffing I could do little goodness for the man who say he love me, well, you ain' see no crime in that, eh? But, child, when I hear' the *shout!*

'Wha' happen?'

'Man in the States! He grab-on 'pon my money and run to 'Mer'cal'

'Another woman, eh, soul?'

'Some slick Yankee rat turn the man head. And that's the last I hear.'

'The dirty, ungrateful rat!'

'Me, soul! I trying to put man outta me mind! . . . and when I gets that certain feeling, I buys a half bottle o' rum and drinks myself in a nice stupor, up in the Missy quarters, where I safe. And when I get enough 'pon that bank account, it is a acre or two o' land up in Highgate Garden that I after. Nice small stone bungalow, and a nice English Austin car . . . I fix up for the rest o' me old days. I out-out man outta my life, honey!'

'You playing the fool, yuh, child. How you mean?'

'Well, I say I not *looking* for *no* man. If when I fix up myself good back home, and some retired old gentleman, with a little cash in his pockets, who ain' have no wife, and who ain' looking for bed companion, want little attention and somebody to take care 'o him well . . . *perhaps* me and him could come to a understanding.'

'Take off yuh coat, lemme make some tea. I have some rum from home. Want little?'

'A drop in the tea, thanks, so the Missy won't smell it on my breath.'

'But I had something to ask you. Who presses your hair? I looking for somebody nice to fix mine. I had such a nice hairdresser back in Barbados! . . . up 'long Jessemy Lane!'

'I does mine myself. But I could do yours too.'

'And bu'n off me two ear hole? I don't know, though, why some o'

we girls who pass' the Scheme, don't open up a little nice, hairdressing place?'

'Child . . . heh-heh-heh! . . . they 'fraid.'

'But why we kind always hiding?'

'Ain' no common thing such as hiding, Pinky, darling. I telling you, child, that when you here as long as me or the next one, you going learn that what and what we does with our hair, it ain' no small thing that call for hiding. Them other too malicious. Too fresh! Ever'day, my Missy saying, "Clemmy, dear, who fixes your hair? My! it's always in place. You uses Clairol or Helena Rubinstein shampoo?" I keeps my mout' shut. Let her take *that!* Now, tell me, what I going to go picking my teet' to her, for? I remember one time, I taking my rest period before I go downstairs and put the steak in the oven. I gets so tired in the afternoons! So, I say to myself: "This place so hot and humid, you better lay down here in your slip." Well, I can't tell how long I been laying down. But when I open my eyes! Missy standing over me, look, she there, right over me, examining ever' hair in my head! I carry-on so stink, I make myself shame. She says to me, "But Pinky, I was only trying to wake you. The master coming home early for supper." And Clem, I take such a turn in her arse, she nearly change her color! I says, "Well, niggerwoman, you drunk in Hell? Snooping 'bout the little dirty room you give me, and you think I going to smile up in your face and forgive you, as the rest do? Now lis-ten to me. And listen good good good. Mistress Bergenstein, you make this the last time you come in my room! It may be in your house, but the Regulations says this room is mine. Now, you get to-hell outta here, before I hold on 'pon you, and screel out for blue murder!"'

'Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!'

'You ain' in 'greement with me?'

'That I is, child. She won't come round again!'

'You damn right she never come round again. You gotta make these whores understan' what the position is.'

'The tea ready, soul. Help yuhself . . . Oh, I forgot to ask you. You ever get black-eye pea, or dry pea, since you here?'

'Mout' ain' touch little home food since I land up here, saying I bettering myself, child.'

'Must get yuh some.'

'Mout' watering for little good bittle!

'When I say one thing, I got to say the next. You intend to stay in the Domestic Scheme, all the time you in Canada? Or you thinking 'bout taking up something diff'runt? Like nurse aid, or nursing assistant?'

'I don't know yet, child. Sometimes, when I realize that Canada ain' mine, I mad to bound back home where people does smile, and tell me good morning. 'Nother time, I takes a look at the situation, and I have to decide to stick it out. 'Cause where in Barbados people like me and you going get television, telephone, carpet 'pon the floor, inside running water from? Is like that, soul. We here, through the tender mercies o' God. He open this door for us. And we gotta thank him. This Scheme is the best thing ever happen to poor womens like we. Is for that, and *that* alone, we shouldn't complain. Canada ain' no bed o' roses. And since *they* like they ain' want we nowhere in this Christ's world, we have to stick it out wherever the Lord say we going get a little break.'

'Is too nice to have somebody . . . one o' your own . . . to exchange a thought or two with, sometimes. I sits there at that third-floor window up in that Forest Hill Village, and I looks down and see all them people, happy happy, and enjoying themselves, and I ain' part o' that life, at all. I there looking out like I is some damn monkey. Days come and go, and not a friend to pick my teet' with, or swap two ideas. Only people. All these years, people people people, and more people. Ain' a friend . . . not till I run in you this forenoon down in the subway place.'

'Ain't a pleasant existence, at all . . .'

'More than we mortals can bear! Many's the night when I flood that pillow with tears. Water dropping outta my eyeball like a tap leaking. Cry-water, Clem, tears! 'Cause I don't have a living soul . . . not one living *soul* . . . to say, "white in your eyes!" And yet, I earning more money than I ever had hope to work for in all my lifetime back in that island; and still I spending all my young years in a Missy kitchen. Before the Lord's sun rise up from behind the hills, I down there making breakfast . . . lunch, snacks. Child, you never see a people could eat so much o' snacks in one day! And the suppers at night! They spends all their time eating. Two-pound piece o' steak for a fourteen-year-old kid? Ain' that worthlessness to the height?'

'You is a joker.'

'And I sweating off my behind in front o' the hot stove. But what I going do? Pick up myself and say I looking for another job? It don't have no *other* job, darling!'

'Let we talk 'bout something else, child. Them thoughts does make me too blind drunk with vexatiousness. The more I think 'bout these things, the more I want to puke.'

'This is nice tea. It bringing the air outta my stomach nice.'

'Is the Missy steak you t'ief that giving you gas, soul.'

'How yuh like this fur-imitation coat she give me for my Christmas, last Christmas?'

'Missy give you that? You works for a damn fine lady, then.'

'She have her bad ways. But yuh can't kill her. Live and let them live, too.'

'Can't beat them; have to 'gree with them.'

'I hope you ain' thinking I does work for a slave driver.'

'I know yuh feelings, darling!'

'Cause words does get back to Missy ears.'

'You is a woman and a human being. Ever' human being have feelings. Ever' woman is flesh. That is why it so damn hard 'pon we who come up here adventuring in this rough country, without we mens as companions. And I ain' so drunk saying I tangling up with no white mens. Leave that for the Jamaican girls, love. And Canada ain' no featherbed we laying down 'pon.'

'Is the Gospull!'

'That's why I telling you, child, looka, *hang on*, you hear me? Hang on! Even if it is by the skin o' your teet', hang on! For I hanging on. I take up the Bible. Not causing I is this big-able Christian-minded person. It ain' true. I like my rum, and my dances. But here, if I don't have church to look forward to, well . . . Where it have a place for me and you kind to enjoy weselfs? The Granitt Club? The Yacht Club?'

'A shame, a shame! We can't even put on a nice frock and go for even a moonlight walk.'

'Venture outta that place the Missy put you in, and see if man don't snatch you up offa the street! Ravage you! This place bad, it wild, savage. You can't trust *nobody*. We in *barracks*. Permanunt barracks. You see that

rubber stamp-thing the Immigration People put on we passport when we land? You know what it say? PERMANUNT! And it mean just that. We permanunt in this hell! . . . but I start out to tell you something else, though . . .'

'Bout the church.'

'Church? What church? I only going there as I tell you, 'cause it don't have no other place for me to go.'

'Hey! I forget . . . what is the hour? It ain' three yet, nuh? Drunk or sober mind yuh damn business. I ha' a work to go to.'

'Three? Today, or tomorrow morning?'

'It pass' three?'

'Five o'clock, honey.'

'Wuh loss! Look my crosses! The lady waiting for the things . . . well, look, Clemintine, child, me and you going have to get together some time soon, and lick we mout' again . . .'

'See yuh Thursdee?'

'God willing . . .'

'Care yuhself. Don't let that Missy put more on you than you able to bear, child.'

'Not me, nuh, soul. Dog my age ain't no pup!'

'Well, you hang on!'

'In the name o' Christ! I hanging on, praise God!'

EARL LOVELACE

A Brief Conversion

I

Every third Sunday just at the hour when the Shouters are holding service in their church up on the hill into which our street disappears, a bicycle bell rings once; and with the bleak brightness of an undertaker, Mr Fitzie, itinerant barber and sweepstake seller, one of his legs shorter than the other, appears out of the clump of trees that rings our house, pushing his bicycle into our yard with his assured hip-shortened walk, a rhythmic drop-rising, up-downing, each step, climbing down from the height it would ascend with the next, prancing with the oiled inhuman smoothness of the pedal of a foot machine, sets down his box on the big stone in the shade of our chenette tree, and calls out to my mother, and she sends us out, my brother and me, with two chairs, one for Mr Fitzie to use and the other for her to sit on to be director and witness of this rite.

Of those mornings, these remain with me: the smell of the blossoms of our cedar tree, the sounds of the Shouters' hypnotic, rhythmic hymns and the clip-clipping of Mr Fitzie's barbering scissors as they helicopter over my head, not yet touching a hair, Mr Fitzie flexing his fingers, flourishing his dexterity and announcing his power over me before he brings the scissors down to engage my hair; the smell of cheap face powder and, on the ground beside my chair, the fluff of my shorn hair. Or was he shearing me of vanity? Do not learn the vanity of a muff. Do not learn the vanity of a covering of hair. There is no mirror to see what is going on. I run my hand over my head. I feel the loss of hair.