Small Island

Andrea Levy

Chapter 1

Hortense

It brought it all back to me. Celia Langley. Celia Langley standing in front of me, her hands on her hips and her head in a cloud. And she is saying: 'Oh, Hortense, when I am older' (all her dreaming began with 'when I am older'). "When I am older, Hortense, I will be leaving Jamaica and I will be going to live in England." This is when her voice became high-class and her nose pointed into the air - well, as far as her round flat nose could - and she swayed as she brought the picture to her mind's eye. "Hortense, in England I will have a big house with a bell at the front door and I will ring the bell." And she make the sound, ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. "I will ring the bell in this house when I am in England. That is what will happen to me when I am older."

I said nothing at the time. I just nodded and said, "You surely will, Celia Langley, you surely will!" I did not dare to dream that it would one day be I that would go to England. It would one day be I that would sail on a ship as big as a world and feel the sun's heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing. But there was I! Standing at the door of a house in London and ringing the bell. Pushing my finger to hear the ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. Oh, Celia Langley, where were you then with your big ideas and your nose in the air? Could you see me? Could you see me there in London? Hortense Roberts married with a gold ring and a wedding dress in a trunk. Mrs Joseph. Mrs Gilbert Joseph. What you think of that, Celia Langley? There was I in England ringing the door bell on one of the tallest houses I had ever seen.

But when I pressed this doorbell I did not hear a ring. No ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. I pressed once more in case the doorbell was not operational. The house, I could see, was shabby. Mark you, shabby in a grand sort of a way. I was sure this house could once have been home to a doctor or a lawyer or perhaps a friend of a friend of the king's. Only the house of someone high-class would have pillars at the doorway. Ornate pillars that twisted with elaborate design. The glass stained with coloured pictures as a church would have. It was true that some were missing, replaced by cardboard and strips of white tape. But who knows what devilish deeds Mr Hitler's bombs carried out during the war? I pushed the doorbell again when it was obvious no one was answering my call. I held my thumb against it and pressed my ear to the window. A light came on now and a woman's voice started calling, "All right, all right, I'm coming! Give us a minute."

I stepped back down two steps avoiding a small lump of dog's-business that rested in some litter and leaves. I straightened my coat, pulling it closed where I had unfortunately lost a button. I adjusted my hat in case it had sagged in the damp air and left me looking comical. I pulled my back up straight.

Published by Headline - RRP £7.99

The door was answered by an English woman. A blonde-haired, pink cheeked English woman with eyes so blue they were the brightest thing in the street. She looked on my face, parted her slender lips and said, "Yes?"

"Is this the household of Mr Gilbert Joseph?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Gilbert Joseph?" I said, a little slower.

"Oh, Gilbert. Who are you?" She pronounced Gilbert so strangely that for a moment I was anxious that I would be delivered to the wrong man.

"Mr Gilbert Joseph is my husband - I am his wife."

The woman's face looked puzzled and pleased all at one time. She looked back into the house, lifting her head as she did. Then she turned back to me and said, "Didn't he come to meet you?"

"I have not seen Gilbert," I told her, then went on to ask, "but this is perchance where he is aboding?

At which this English woman said, "What?" She frowned and looked over my shoulder at the trunk which was resting by the curbside where it had been placed by the driver of the taxi vehicle.

"Is that yours?" she enquired.

"It is."

"It's the size of the Isle of Wight. How did you get it here?" She laughed a little. A gentle giggle that played round her eyes and mouth. I laughed too, so as not to give her the notion that I did not know what she was talking about as regards this 'white island".

I said, "I came in a taxi cab and the driver assured me that this was the right address. Is this the house of Gilbert Joseph?"

The woman stood for a little while before answering by saying, "Hang on here. I'll see if he's in his room." She then shut the door in my face.

Gilbert

My mirror spoke to me. It said: "Man, women gonna fall at your feet." In my uniform of blue - from the left, from the right, from behind - I looked like a god. And this uniform did not even fit me so well. But what is a little bagging on the waist and tightness under the arm when you are a gallant member of the British Royal

Published by Headline - RRP £7.99

Airforce? Put several thousand Jamaican men in uniform, coop them up while, Grand Old Duke of York style, you march them up to the top of the hill and then back down again and they will think of nothing but women. When they are up they will imagine them and when they are down they will dream of them. But not this group I travelled with to America. Not Hubert, not Fulton, not Lenval, not James, not even me. Because every last one of us was too preoccupied with food. The only flesh we conjured was the sort you chewed and swallowed.

This was war. There was hardship I was prepared for - bullet, bomb and casual death - but not for the torture of missing cow-foot stew, not for the persecution of living without curried shrimp or pepper-pot soup. I was not ready, I was not trained to eat food that was prepared in a pan of boiling water, the sole purpose of which was to rid it of taste and texture. How the English built empires when their armies marched on nothing but mush should be one of wonders of the world. I thought it would be combat that would make me regret having volunteered, not boiled-up potatoes, boiled-up vegetables - grey and limp on the plate like it had been eaten once before. Why the English come to cook everything by this method? Lucky they kept that boiling business as their national secret and did not insist that people of their colonies stop frying and spicing-up their food.

I was brought up in a family with ten children. At that dinning table at home one lax moment and half my dinner could be gone to my neighbour. I learn to eat quickly whilst defending my plate with a protective arm. But with this English food I sat back, chewed slowly and willed my compatriots to thieve. I had not yet seen a war zone but if the enemy had been frying up some fish and dumpling whose knows which way I would point my gun.

Now I am telling you this so you might better understand what a lustless and ravenous Jamaican experienced when he arrived, guest of the American government, at the military camp in Virginia. The silver tray had compartments so the food did not get messed up. Into each compartment was placed bacon, eggs (two proper eggs!), sausages, fried tomato, fried potatoes, toast, a banana and an orange. The cereal with milk was in a little bowl to itself. My arm was round that plate of food before I had even sat down. Only when I was assured that the rumour of second, third or fourth helpings was not the reverie of a deranged mind, did I relax. I swear many tears were wept over that breakfast. Paradise, we all decided, America is paradise. A bath with six inches of water that rivalled the Caribbean sea in my affection and more meals of equal, no, greater satisfaction than the first, had the word paradise popping from our mouths like the cork from champagne.

Queenie

I was christened Victoria Buxton. My mother had wanted me to be christened Queenie but the vicar had said, "No, Mrs Buxton, I'm afraid Queenie is a common name."

Published by Headline - RRP £7.99

"Common!" my mother had replied. "How can it be common? It's a queen's name." The vicar had then given an impromptu sermon which my mother, father and their gathered guests had to listen to as they stood round the stone font in our bleak local church. The vicar went on at length about monarchs having proper names like Edward, George, Elizabeth while everyone, dressed in their pinching church-best shoes began to shift from foot to foot and stifle yawns behind their scrubbed hands. "Take our late queen," the vicar finally explained, "her name, Mrs Buxton, was not queen but Victoria."

So that was how - one thundery August day in a church near Mansfield, dressed in a handed down white-starched christening gown that wouldn't do up at the neck - I, the first born child of Wilfred and Lillie Buxton, came to be christened Victoria yet called forever Queenie.

My mother, Lillie, was an English rose. Flaxen hair, a complexion like milk with a faint pink flush at her cheeks and a nose that tipped up at the end to present the two perfect triangles of her nostrils. She was a farmer's daughter and had hands that could clasp like a vice, arms as strong as a bear's and hips that widened every year until even the old men on the village green agreed they were childbearing.

My father, Wilfred, was a butcher - the son of a butcher, the grandson of a butcher and the great-grandson of a butcher. Father was ten years older than Mother and not very good looking. Some said it was his good luck at courting and winning the hand of a lass who had once won a village country maid contest that left his face with that startled "You don't say" expression. The front of his hair was cursed by a 'cow's-lick' that meant every day his hair fell in eccentric wild swirls over his forehead. His bulbous fat hands were like great hams. Broad, pink and fleshy with stubby fingers. He wore leather straps round each wrist to protect them from the sharp blows of his butchering knives. I thought those straps held his hands on to the ends of his arms. Leather and three inches wide, they only came off when he had a bath on alternate Saturday nights in front of the range in the kitchen. I had to bring the hot water that rolled black grime down his skin like mud washing off a wall, while the leather straps would be on the floor, still in the shape of his wrists. Blackened manacles - worn, battered and bloody. I never looked at the front of him in the bath in case I saw stumps where his fat ham hands should have been.

There was a shed on our small farm, out of the back door, across the yard and round a bit, where Father did his butchering. Carts from the cold store, driven by young boys whose aprons were splattered and smeared with dried blood and who smelt acrid like vinegar made from rotting flesh, would come into the yard and dump the carcasses of slaughtered cows, sheep and pigs. Father carried them over one shoulder into the shed. And with sharpening, slicing, chopping, grunting, slopping noises, cows were turned into topside, rump, sirloin, best rib, chuck, shin, brisket, silver side. Lambs into leg, loin, best end, neck, breast, shank end, chump chop, cutlet, scrag end, shoulder. And the pigs were turned from snuffling muddy pink porkers that had been fed every morning on swill boiled up in a copper, into heads, feet, hind, loin, knuckle, fillet, belly, spare rib, blade bone. Or salted, cured and smoked in an outhouse for bacon. The bits that had no name were squeezed into sausage skins, extruded and twisted as Buxtons finest pork sausages. All the offal -

Published by Headline - RRP £7.99

the liver, the kidneys, the hearts - was packed on to trays. The fat was rendered down in a cauldron and set into lumps of lard. And anything left after that was stuffed into a mincer. The bits that had fallen on the top of the table were finest beef mince and the bits that were swept off the floor were not. Father always dreamed of having sons - sons who could sharpen, slice, chop and carry. Sons who would replace the stupid boys he had to hire who stole cuts of meat when they thought he wasn't looking, stuffing them under their caps and down their shirts.

Published by Headline - RRP £7.99