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Small Island

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Published by Headline Review

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2004
by Review

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2004 by Review

An imprint of Headline Publishing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 0 7553 2565 6 (A format)
ISBN 0 7553 0750 X (B format)

Typeset in Centaur by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable
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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
A division of Hachette Livre UK Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Prologue

Queenie

I thought I'd been to Africa. Told all my class I had. Early Bird, our teacher, stood me in front of the British flag – she would let no one call it the common Union Jack: 'It's the flag of Empire not a musical turn.' And I stood there as bold as brass and said, 'I went to Africa when it came to Wembley.' It was then that Early Bird informed me that Africa was a country. 'You're not usually a silly girl, Queenie Buxton,' she went on, 'but you did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition, as thousands of others did.'

It was a Butchers' Association trip. Every year there was an outing organised for the butchers, the butchers' wives and children and even the butchers' favourite workers. A day out. Mother liked to go. 'It's like a holiday,' she would say to Father.

'Bloody waste of time,' he'd grumble. But he went all the same.

Some years nearly everyone from our farm went. The inside girls who helped Mother with the pies. The outside girls who fed the pigs and poultry. Even the stupid boys, who helped Father in

the shed, changed out of their splattered aprons and into their ill-fitting, fraying best suits for the trip. We always got dressed in our best to paddle in the sea at Blackpool or ride a red bus round Piccadilly Circus or laugh at the monkeys in the zoo. Then it was time to go home again. The men would be dozing from too much beer and the children would be snivelling after being whacked for dirtying their clothes or getting a piece of rock stuck in their hair. As often as not one of the farm girls would go missing with one of the farm boys only to turn up later, looking sheepish and dishevelled.

The year we went to the Empire Exhibition, the Great War was not long over but nearly forgotten. Even Father agreed that the Empire Exhibition sounded like it was worth a look. The King had described it as 'the whole Empire in little'. Mother thought that meant it was a miniature, like a toy railway or model village. Until someone told her that they'd seen the real lifesize Stephenson's Rocket on display. 'It must be as big as the whole world,' I said, which made everybody laugh.

We had to leave my brothers Billy, Harry and Jim behind. They were too small and everyone agreed with Father when he told the grizzling boys that they would get swallowed up by the crowd. 'I'm not scared of being eaten,' Billy whimpered. They sobbed and clung to Mother's coat. So she had to promise to bring each of them back something nice – a model engine or soldiers. She left them with the inside girl Molly, who stood at the window sulking, giving us all a look that could curdle milk.

I was dressed in a white organza frock with blue ribbons that trailed loose down the front and my hair was set in pigtails adorned with big white bows. All the way there on the train Mother and Father chatted with other butchers and butchers' wives about, of all things, the bother of humane killing over the

poleaxe. Which left me sitting between two of our farm helpers, Emily and Graham, who spent the time giggling and flirting over my head.

Emily had been our outside girl for two months. She had a kindly foster-mother, who lived in Kent and made pictures from spring flowers, and a father and two uncles in London, who drank so much that they had not been awake long enough to take part in the war. Graham helped Father in the shed. He looked after the fire under the copper of pig swill, took the pork pies to the bakehouse when needed and generally ran round doing everything Father asked, only not quite quick enough. Father called Graham Jim. On Graham's first day he had said his name to Father who looked him up and down and said, 'I can't be bothered with a fancy name like that – I'll call you Jim.' Consequently some people called him Jim and others Graham – he'd learned to answer to both. But Graham's only ambition, as far as I could tell, was to get a feel of Emily's bust.

Hundreds and hundreds of people were tramping in through the gates of the exhibition, past the gardens and the lakes. Or milling about, chatting. Little kids being dragged to walk faster. Women pointing, old men wanting a seat. 'Over here! No, over here . . . Over here's better.' The Empire in little. The palace of engineering, the palace of industry, and building after building that housed every country we British owned. Some of them were grand like castles, some had funny pointed roofs and one, I was sure, had half an onion on the top. Practically the whole world there to be looked at.

'Makes you proud,' Graham said to Father.

At which Father looked his butcher's boy up and down for a minute and said, 'Will you listen to him?'

There was a lot of discussion about what we should see – the

whole world and only one day to see it. Mother was not interested in the different woods of Burma or the big-game trophies of Malaya. She said, 'Maybe later,' to the coffee of Jamaica. 'Ooh, no,' to the sugar of Barbados. 'What for?' to the chocolate of Grenada. And 'Where in heaven's name is that?' to Sarawak. In Canada there was a lifesize model of the Prince of Wales made in yellow butter. I had to struggle to the front to get a good look. I pressed my face close to the glass and Mother came and dragged me back. 'You hold Emily's hand,' she told me. 'I don't want you getting lost.' Then she moaned at Emily in front of the crowd, who strained to look past my mother and her blushing outside girl, everyone muttering, 'Butter really? Butter? Never.' Mother told Emily that she had only been brought along to look after me and that if she lost me then she would be in trouble – very big trouble indeed. So Emily attached herself to me like soot to a miner. And where Emily went Graham followed.

Australia smelt of apples. Ripe, green, crisp apples. A smell so sharp and sweet it made my teeth tingle. 'We'll have some of them,' Father said, as he joined the queue to buy a small brown bag of the fruit. Mother saved hers until later, but I ate mine and gave the core to Emily. Graham then told us all that he was going to live in Australia. 'Australia – you? You daft beggar,' Father laughed.

I was promised that I would see a sheep being sheared in New Zealand but we only arrived in time to see the skinny shorn animal trotting round a pen with the fleece at the side. Hong Kong smelt of drains, and India was full of women brightly dressed in strange long colourful fabrics. And all these women had red dots in the middle of their forehead. No one could tell me what the dots were for. 'Go and ask one of them,' Emily said

to me. But Mother said I shouldn't in case the dots meant they were ill – in case they were contagious.

The smell of tea in Ceylon had Mother swallowing hard and saying, 'I'm dying for a cuppa and a sit-down. My feet!' At which Father began grumbling that he hadn't seen the biscuit-making or cigarette-packing machines yet. I cried because I wanted to see more countries. Emily called me a little madam and Mother told her to watch her mouth. So Father gave instructions to Graham – which he had to repeat twice to make sure he was understood – to meet him and Mother later in the rest lounge of the gas exhibit. Mother and Father then went off to find modern machinery and refrigeration, while me, Emily and, of course, the soppy Graham carried on travelling the world alone.

That's when we got lost in Africa. We wandered in, following the syrupy-brown smell of chocolate. Emily trailed behind Graham only looking at me every so often to shout, 'Come on – hurry up.' I wanted one of the cups of cocoa that everyone was sipping but instead Emily pulled me by one of my pigtails and told me to keep up. Then we found ourselves in an African village with Graham looking around himself, scratching his head and telling Emily he was wanting the toilet.

We were in the jungle. Huts made out of mud with pointy stick roofs all around us. And in a hut sitting on a dirt floor was a woman with skin as black as the ink that filled the inkwell in my school desk. A shadow come to life. Sitting cross-legged, her hands weaving bright patterned cloth on a loom. 'We've got machines that do all that now,' Graham said, as Emily nudged him to be quiet. 'She can't understand what I'm saying,' Graham explained. 'They're not civilised. They only understand drums.' The woman just carried on like she'd heard no one speak – pushing her stick through the tangle of threads.

'Have you seen the toilet?' Graham asked her, but she didn't understand that either.

'I want to go,' I said, because there was nothing interesting to look at. But then suddenly there was a man. An African man. A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate. I clung to Emily but she shooed me off. He was right next to me, close enough so I could see him breathing. A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. The droplets of sweat on his forehead glistened and shone like jewels. His lips were brown, not pink like they should be, and they bulged with air like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, had two nostrils big as train tunnels. And he was looking down at me.

'Would you like to kiss him?' Graham said. He nudged me, teasing, and pushed me forward – closer to this black man.

And Emily giggled. 'Go on Queenie, kiss him, kiss him.'

This man was still looking down at me. I could feel the blood rising in my face, turning me crimson, as he smiled a perfect set of pure blinding white teeth. The inside of his mouth was pink and his face was coming closer and closer to mine. He could have swallowed me up, this big nigger man. But instead he said, in clear English, 'Perhaps we could shake hands instead?'

Graham's smile fell off his face. And I shook an African man's hand. It was warm and slightly sweaty like anyone else's. I shook his hand up and down for several seconds. And he bowed his head to me and said, 'It's nice to meet you.' Then he let my hand go and stepped out of our way so we could pass. Emily was still giggling, looking at Graham and rolling her eyes. She grabbed my arm and pulled me away while Graham mumbled again that he needed the toilet. And the African man must have understood because he

pointed and said, 'Over there by the tree is a rest room where I think you will find what you need.'

But Graham never found the toilet. He had to wee behind some bins while me and Emily kept a look-out.

Father said later that this African man I was made to shake hands with would have been a chief or a prince in Africa. Evidently, when they speak English you know that they have learned to be civilised – taught English by the white man, missionaries probably. So Father told me not to worry about having shaken his hand because the African man was most likely a potentate.

To take my mind off the encounter Father promised me a trip on the scenic railway. 'Come on, we'll be able to see for miles up there,' he persuaded Mother. She was reluctant, worried I might be sick over everyone on the ground. Father called her a daft 'aporth, then promised her the most wonderful view she'd ever see. I waved to Emily and Graham as our little carriage slowly nudged further and further up. They'd stayed behind – Emily chewing toffee and Graham smoking a cigarette. But then they disappeared. 'They'll turn up later,' Mother sighed.

We went up and up into the heavens until people were just dots below us. As we hung right at the top – the twinkling electric lights below mingling with the stars – Father said something I will never forget. He said, 'See here, Queenie. Look around. You've got the whole world at your feet, lass.'

1948

One

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 point 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 made 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 who would go to England. It would one day be I who 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 doorbell 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 bell 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. 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 had 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.

The door was answered by an Englishwoman. A blonde-haired, pink-cheeked Englishwoman 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 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 Englishwoman said, 'What?' She frowned and looked over my shoulder at the trunk, which was resting by the kerbside 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 taxicab 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.

And I wondered how could a person only five feet six inches tall (five feet seven if I was wearing my wedding-shoe heels), how

could such a person get to the top of this tall house? Ropes and pulleys was all I could conceive. Ropes and pulleys to hoist me up. We had stairs in Jamaica. Even in our single-storey houses we had stairs that lifted visitors on to the veranda and another that took them into the kitchen. There were stairs at my college, up to the dormitories that housed the pupils on two separate floors. I was very familiar with stairs. But all my mind could conjure as I looked up at this tall, tall house was ropes and pulleys. It was obvious that I had been on a ship for too long.

In Gilbert Joseph's last letter he had made me a promise that he would be there to meet me when my ship arrived at the dockside in England. He had composed two pages of instructions telling me how he would greet me. 'I will be there,' he wrote. 'You will see me waving my hand with joy at my young bride coming at last to England. I will be jumping up and down and calling out your name with longing in my tone.' It did occur to me that, as I had not seen Gilbert for six months, he might have forgotten my face. The only way he would be sure of recognising his bride was by looking out for a frowning woman who stared embarrassed at the jumping, waving buffoon she had married.

But it did not matter – he was not there. There was no one who would have fitted his description. The only jumping and waving that was done was by the Jamaicans arriving and leaving the ship. Women who shivered in their church best clothes – their cotton dresses with floppy bows and lace; their hats and white gloves looking gaudy against the grey of the night. Men in suits and bow-ties and smart hats. They jumped and waved. Jumped and waved at the people come to meet them. Black men in dark, scruffy coats with hand-knitted scarves. Hunched over in the cold. Squinting and straining to see a bag or hair or shoes or a voice or a face that they knew. Who looked feared – their eyes

opening a little too wide – as they perused the luggage that had been brought across the ocean and now had to be carried through the streets of London. Greeting excited relatives with the same words: 'You bring some guava, some rum – you have a little yam in that bag?'

As my feet had set down on the soil of England an Englishwoman approached me. She was breathless. Panting and flushed. She swung me round with a force that sent one of my coat buttons speeding into the crowd with the velocity of a bullet. 'Are you Sugar?' she asked me. I was still trying to follow my poor button with the hope of retrieving it later as that coat had cost me a great deal of money. But this Englishwoman leaned close in to my face and demanded to know, 'Are you Sugar?'

I straightened myself and told her, 'No, I am Hortense.'

She tutted as if this information was in some way annoying to her. She took a long breath and said, 'Have you seen Sugar? She's one of you. She's coming to be my nanny and I am a little later than I thought. You must know her. Sugar. Sugar?'

I thought I must try saying sugar with those vowels that make the word go on for ever. Very English. Sugaaaar. And told this woman politely, 'No I am sorry I am not acquainted with . . .'

But she shook her head and said, 'Ohh,' before I had a chance to open any of my vowels. This Englishwoman then dashed into a crowd where she turned another woman round so fast that this newly arrived Jamaican, finding herself an inch away from a white woman shouting, 'Sugaaar, Sugaaar,' into her face, suddenly let out a loud scream.

It was two hours I waited for Gilbert. Two hours watching people hugging up lost relations and friends. Laughing, wiping handkerchiefs over tearful eyes. Arguing over who will go where. Men lifting cases, puffing and sweating, on to their shoulders.

Women fussing with hats and pulling on gloves. All walking off into this cold black night through an archway that looked like an open mouth. I looked for my button on the ground as the crowds thinned. But it would not have been possible to find anything that small in the fading light.

There was a white man working, pushing a trolley – sometimes empty, sometimes full. He whistled, as he passed, a tune that made his head nod. I thought, This working white man may have some notion as to how I could get to my destination. I attracted his attention by raising my hand. 'Excuse me, sir, I am needing to get to Nevern Street. Would you perchance know where it is?'

This white man scratched his head and picked his left nostril before saying, 'I can't take you all the way on me trolley, love.' It occurred to me that I had not made myself understood or else this working white man could not have thought me so stupid as to expect him, with only his two-wheeled cart, to take me through the streets of London. What – would I cling to his back with my legs round his waist? 'You should get a taxi,' he told me, when he had finished laughing at his joke.

I stared into his face and said, 'Thank you, and could you be so kind as to point out for me the place where I might find one of these vehicles?'

The white man looked perplexed. 'You what, love?' he said, as if I had been speaking in tongues.

It took me several attempts at saying the address to the driver of the taxi vehicle before his face lit with recognition. 'I need to be taken to number twenty-one Nevern Street in SW five. Twenty-one Nevern Street. N-e-v-e-r-n S-t-r-e-e-t.' I put on my best accent. An accent that had taken me to the top of the class in Miss Stuart's English pronunciation competition. My recitation of 'Ode

to a Nightingale' had earned me a merit star and the honour of ringing the school bell for one week.

But still this taxi driver did not understand me. 'No, sorry, dear. Have you got it written down or something? On a piece of paper? Have you got it on a piece of paper?' I showed him the letter from my husband, which was clearly marked with the address. 'Oh, Nevern Street – twenty-one. I've got you now.'

There was a moon. Sometimes there, sometimes covered by cloud. But there was a moon that night – its light distorting and dissolving as my breath steamed upon the vehicle window. 'This is the place you want, dear. Twenty-one Nevern Street,' the taxi driver said. 'Just go and ring the bell. You know about bells and knockers? You got them where you come from? Just go and ring the bell and someone'll come.' He left my trunk by the side of the road. 'I'm sure someone inside will help you with this, dear. Just ring the bell.' He mouthed the last words with the slow exaggeration I generally reserved for the teaching of small children. It occurred to me then that perhaps white men who worked were made to work because they were fools.

I did not see what now came through the door, it came through so fast. It could have been a large dog the way it leaped and bounded towards me. It was only when I heard, 'Hortense,' uttered from its mouth that I realised it was my husband. 'Hortense. You here! You here at last, Hortense!'

I folded my arms, sat on my trunk and averted my eye. He stopped in front of me. His arms still open wide ready for me to run into. 'Don't Hortense me, Gilbert Joseph.'

His arms slowly rested to his sides as he said, 'You no pleased to see me, Hortense?'

I quoted precisely from the letter. ' "I will be at the dockside to

meet you. You will see me there jumping and waving and calling your name with longing in my tone." '

'How you find this place, Hortense?' was all the man said.

'Without your help, Gilbert Joseph, that's how I find this place. With no help from you. Where were you? Why you no come to meet me? Why you no waving and calling my name with longing in your tone?'

He was breathless as he began, 'Hortense, let me tell you. I came to the dock but there was no ship. So they tell me to come back later when the ship will arrive. So I go home and take the opportunity of fixing the place up nice for when you come . . .'

His shirt was not buttoned properly. The collar turned up at one side and down at the other. There were two stray buttons that had no holes to fit in. The shirt was only tucked into his trousers around the front, at the back it hung out like a mischievous schoolboy's. One of his shoelaces was undone. He looked ragged. Where was the man I remembered? He was smart: his suit double-breasted, his hair parted and shiny with grease, his shoes clean, his fingernails short, his moustache neat and his nose slender. The man who stood jabbering in front of me looked dark and rough. But he was Gilbert, I could tell. I could tell by the way the fool hopped about as he pronounced his excuses.

'So I was just going to go to the dock again. But then here you are. You turn up at the door. Oh, man, what a surprise for me! Hortense! You here at last!'

It was then I noticed that the Englishwoman who had answered the door was looking at us from the top of the steps. She called from on high, 'Gilbert, can I shut the door now, please? It's letting in a terrible draught.'

And he called to her in a casual tone, 'Soon come.'

So I whispered to him, 'Come, you want everyone in England to know our business?'

The Englishwoman was still looking at me when I entered the hallway. Perusing me in a fashion as if I was not there to see her stares. I nodded to her and said, 'Thank you for all your help with finding my husband. I hope it did not inconvenience you too much.' I was hoping that in addressing her directly she would avert her eye from me and go about her business. But she did not. She merely shrugged and continued as before. I could hear Gilbert dragging at my trunk. We both stood listening to him huffing and puffing like a broken steam train.

Then he ran through the door, saying, 'Hortense, what you have in that trunk – your mother?'

As the Englishwoman was still looking at us I smiled instead of cussing and said, 'I have everything I will need in that trunk, thank you, Gilbert.'

'So you bring your mother, then,' Gilbert said. He broke into his laugh, which I remembered. A strange snorting sound from the back of his nose, which caused his gold tooth to wink. I was still smiling when he started to rub his hands and say, 'Well, I hope you have guava and mango and rum and—'

'I hope you're not bringing anything into the house that will smell?' the Englishwoman interrupted.

This question erased the smile from my face. Turning to her I said, 'I have only brought what I—'

But Gilbert caught my elbow. 'Come, Hortense,' he said, as if the woman had not uttered a word. 'Come, let me show you around.'

I followed him up the first stairs and heard the woman call, 'What about the trunk, Gilbert? You can't leave it where it is.'

Gilbert looked over my shoulder to answer her, smiling: 'Don't worry, Queenie. Soon come, nah, man.'

I had to grab the banister to pull myself up stair after stair. There was hardly any light. Just one bulb so dull it was hard to tell whether it was giving out light or sucking it in. At every turn on the stairs there was another set of steep steps, looking like an empty bookshelf in front of me. I longed for those ropes and pulleys of my earlier mind. I was groping like a blind man at times with nothing to light the way in front of me except the sound of Gilbert still climbing ahead. 'Hortense, nearly there,' he called out, like Moses from on top of the mountain. I was palpitating by the time I reached the door where Gilbert stood grinning, saying: 'Here we are.'

'What a lot of stairs. Could you not find a place with fewer stairs?'

We went into the room. Gilbert rushed to pull a blanket over the unmade bed. Still warm I was sure. It was obvious to me he had just got out of it. I could smell gas. Gilbert waved his arms around as if showing me a lovely view. 'This is the room,' he said.

All I saw were dark brown walls. A broken chair that rested one uneven leg on the Holy Bible. A window with a torn curtain and Gilbert's suit – the double-breasted one – hanging from a rail on the wall.

'Well,' I said, 'show me the rest, then, Gilbert.' The man just stared. 'Show me the rest, nah. I am tired from the long journey.' He scratched his head. 'The other rooms, Gilbert. The ones you busy making so nice for me you forget to come to the dock.'

Gilbert spoke so softly I could hardly hear. He said, 'But this is it.'

'I am sorry?' I said.

'This is it, Hortense. This is the room I am living.'

Three steps would take me to one side of this room. Four steps could take me to another. There was a sink in the corner, a

rusty tap stuck out from the wall above it. There was a table with two chairs – one with its back broken – pushed up against the bed. The armchair held a shopping bag, a pyjama top, and a teapot. In the fireplace the gas hissed with a blue flame.

'Just this?' I had to sit on the bed. My legs gave way. There was no bounce underneath me as I fell. 'Just this? This is where you are living? Just this?'

'Yes, this is it.' He swung his arms around again, like it was a room in a palace.

'Just this? Just this? You bring me all this way for just this?'

The man sucked his teeth and flashed angry eyes in my face. 'What you expect, woman? Yes, just this! What you expect? Everyone live like this. There has been a war. Houses bombed. I know plenty people live worse than this. What you want? You should stay with your mamma if you want it nice. There been a war here. Everyone live like this.'

He looked down at me, his badly buttoned chest heaving. The carpet was threadbare in a patch in the middle and there was a piece of bread lying on it. He sucked his teeth again and walked out the room. I heard him banging down the stairs. He left me alone.

He left me alone to stare on just this.