

DAYLIGHT COME

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Daylight Come, is an experimental audio project that traces my family's history in the context of Jamaica, immigration to Britain, colonisation and past enslavement.

AI-generated voices proved instrumental in developing this particular project. Their constant availability allowed for the continuous experimentation that was crucial to its completion. Voices were created using ElevenLabs AI.

Please consult the text document "A Simplified Historical Timeline of Jamaica".
My thanks to Dr Lisa Hill of Anglia Research for her assistance with my genealogy research.
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THE PROLOGUE

EP01 [00:01.830] - Main Voice

*But what of those who disappear, abandoned, lost, and full of fear?
No bone of my bones or flesh of my flesh here, only dust, interspersed with strangers.
The land remembers the earth it keeps, those who wandered in their peaceful sleep.
Beneath the grass, the shade, and the trees, their souls find solace.
And finally, peace.*

It is 2013.
In the Gardens of Remembrance, I'm visiting my sister, Vera.
It's been quite some time since we last spoke.

EP01. OUR JAMAICAN ORIGINS

EP01 [00:55.660] - Speaker 2

Flash back... to 1948.

EP01 [00:58.380] - Main Voice

My sister, Vera, is born in Mount Charles, St Andrew, Jamaica.
This is the year of British Ship Empire Windrush's much publicised voyage bringing hundreds of West Indian wayfarers from Jamaica to the Motherland.

EP01 [01:14.970] - Speaker 2

The British had called on the West Indies for workers to help rebuild Britain after the war... but instead of warm welcomes, these voyagers are greeted with racial prejudice and discrimination.

EP01 [01:25.430] - Main Voice

Sometime between the mid and late '50s, Sister Vera, between 7 and 12 years old, ends up in England. No one could ever recall how, when, or who she went with.

In 1955, I'm born in St. Thomas, a parish at the Southeastern end of Jamaica. I'm given my phantom father's surname. On my birth registration, his full name is a row of 10 stars. I never meet him.

Well, while we're here in St. Thomas, let's peer through the telescope... back, back... back 300 years earlier...

Having just captured Jamaica from the Spanish, the British import a steady stream of enslaved Africans to toil on sugarcane plantations. They also take advantage of the island's location to challenge the Spanish dominance of the Caribbean.

Many of the first English settlers are landowners/enslavers. Others are pirates, approved by the government.

EP01 [02:37.160] - Speaker 2

Buccaneers, like Henry Morgan, join mercenaries to attack the Spanish galleons carrying gold and silver from Central and South America to Spain.

EP01 [02:44.980] - Main Voice

He buys three large sugar plantations with his ill-gotten gains. Morgan is knighted by Charles II of England for his so-called services to the Crown.

EP01 [02:55.740] - Speaker 2

Port Royal, the unofficial capital of Jamaica, becomes home from home for privateers and buccaneers, rich with gold stolen from the Spanish. With one drinking house for every 10 residents, the place is teeming with debauched, drunken buccaneers, pirates, cutthroats, and prostitutes. Even animals take part in the drinking.

EP01 [03:14.670] - Main Voice

It is known as the wickedest city in the world, the Sodom of the New World, the sin city of the 17th century.

EP01 [03:24.120] - Speaker 2, Main Voice

It came to pass that destruction befalls the city of sin. A day of judgement comes in the year of 1692, not with fire nor brimstone, but an Almighty earthquake and tsunami that suck and swallow the city into the sea.

Even in the aftermath, the debauchery continues, with some of the survivors looting and breaking into homes. They rob and strip the dead, and in some cases, hack off their bloated fingers to retrieve gold rings.

EP01 [03:51.520] - Main Voice

For dead men cannot point the finger, nor tales can they tell.

Back to 1955, my birth year.

The Jamaica Tourist Board is established to boost the tourism industry, which had begun in the late 19th century, but restricted to the wealthy happy few. Jamaica thus becomes an all-inclusive tourist paradise, but not for the locals labouring the land lambasted by the sun.

EP01 [04:21.390] - Speaker 2

This year, around 15,000 West Indians, mostly Jamaicans, will make the long journey to Britain.

EP01 [04:26.790] - Main Voice

A British Pathé newsreel entitled “Our Jamaican problem” fades in.

EP01 [04:32.260] - Speaker 2

The opening caption proclaims, “Nationwide concern is felt at the influx of British West Indians who come in search of hope”.

EP01 [04:38.920] - Main Voice

Petitions are signed, and resentment rides high against the West Indians fluxing in.

EP01 [04:47.550] - Speaker 2

Back in Jamaica, enslavement and the rape of enslaved Black women by their White male colonisers gave birth to a racial hierarchy. This in turn created a social hierarchy, putting Whites at the top, people of varying shades with limited privileges in the middle...

EP01 [05:03.320] - Main Voice

...and relegating blacks to the bottom.

EP01 [05:05.840] - Speaker 2

This colourism will forever remain a significant issue among West Indians.

EP01 [05:10.560] - Main Voice

My dark-skinned mother badmouths the vainglorious brown-skinned gals of Kingston, who are, according to her, way too proud of their lighter complexion. Notwithstanding, she is also capable of looking down on Mrs So and So, saying, “her skin is so black”, which suggests she might well be ugly, too.

It's 1919. Mabel Eugena Parks, alias Mrs. Mabel Telfer, alias My Goddy May, is born in Jamaica. Nine years later, 1928, my mother, Esther Eugena Parks, Goddy Mays' younger sister, is born in Trinityville, St. Thomas, Jamaica.

Esther very rarely speaks of my grandmother Maud (born Maudrianna Lenorah Parkes), except to say, without going any further, that she lived a hard life and died too soon. I should, of course, have pushed for details. I know. And now there's no one left to ask. The ship has sailed.

Her father, James Patterson, a farmer and devout Christian, teaches her at an early age to read the Bible and the ways of the righteous.

EP01 [06:28.770] - Speaker 2

*For he that soweth his flesh,
shall of the flesh reap corruption.
But he that soweth to the spirit,
shall of the spirit reap life everlasting.
What a blessedness...*

EP01 [06:38.100] - Main Voice

*...What a peace is mine,
leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.*

In later life, she could rage as though possessed, with curse words, foul-mouthed and imaginative enough to make a sailor blush, when she is riled... despite always being ready to quote from the Bible. Not so surprising, though, considering how much wild stuff there is in the Bible. Her Trinitarian Bible Society pocket-sized edition, with its scriter-paper thin pages, is another of the handful of possessions of hers that I kept... as evidence that she had existed.

In Jamaica, she has Vera in 1948, and me in '55. And, as I later learn from Goddy May, a secret son! I don't know when he was born, she never mentions him. I somehow gather he is raised by his father's family. The three of us all have different fathers.

Irresponsible macho Jamaican men, plus the notion that children are a blessing from God, plus the absence of family planning, all add up to too many unwanted pregnancies.

EP01 [07:50.640] - Speaker 2

Anthropologist, Edith Clarke, a member of the Jamaican white elite, explores this in her classic 1957 study, "My Mother Who Fathered Me". She looks at instability rates, low marriage rates, high illegitimacy rates, reprobate father rates...

EP01 [08:05.940] - Main Voice

...and mothers hence obliged to become de facto fathers... rates. My future siblings are in generational cycle repeat mode. It's up to their offspring to wash away these traits.

EP01 [08:20.880] - Speaker 2

November 1960.

EP01 [08:23.160] - Main Voice

My mother joins the exodus to England. The move to the motherland. Her head is filled with dreams. From her aunt Mel, she borrows the fare and crosses the oceans on the revamped warship, the Ascania.

EP01 [08:37.100] - Speaker 2

All ports from Kingston, Jamaica, stopping at Basse-Terre, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Montserrat, Leeward Islands, Vigo - Spain, and at long last, Southampton, England, the promised land.

EP01 [08:50.930] - Main Voice

Inside my mother's only ever passport, there is a solitary violet inked triangular stamp. Not only does she never return to Jamaica, she never actually leaves the shores of Britain.

EP01 [09:05.690] - Speaker 2

September, 1961.

EP01 [09:08.480] - Main Voice

I'm with my Goddy May at Palisado's Airport. I'm almost six years old, and I'm leaving our rural dwellings, never to return. With an Almighty roar, our plane lunges upward and into the sky. We stop briefly at Montigo Bay and New York Airport, and the next day, we finally hit the ground at London Airport. All I remember of the whole thing is throwing up just before touchdown.

We are picked up by relatives and bundled over to Brixton. My first home in England, in Angel Park Gardens. We live for a short while in Great-Aunt Mel's semi-detached Victorian house. She makes Jamaican wedding cakes for a living. Rum-soaked towers, shrouded in inch-thick icing, with plastic bride and plastic groom, perched on the top.

EP02. GREAT AUNT MEL

EP02 [00:00.220] - Main Voice

My Great Aunt Mel. Statuesque and hair-netted, she fills the whole house with her presence. Aunt Mel, aka Jocelyn Melvina Parks, born 1904 in the rural region of St Andrew Parish, a donkey ride from the Blue Mountains where, believe it or not, snowflakes occasionally fall on the highest peaks.

The dirt tracks leading from her home are so rough that it takes her hours to cover even the shortest distances. Travelling from her neighbourhood into Kingston, although not far as the crow flies, is a major expedition. Along the way, she and her papa would usually pause at the village of the evocatively named Halfway Tree.

Before embarking on her journey to Britain in the late '50s, Aunt Mel's life in Jamaica was anything but ordinary. Like their rural neighbours, they produce most of what they eat, from their little plot of land, and a few hens cluck-cluck clucking around the yard.

She is 10 years old when, "BOOM", World War I erupts, and Aunt Mel sees her kinfolk, manipulated by the Church's persuasive powers, marching onwards off to war like good Christian soldiers, joining the ranks of 10,000 Jamaican military to fight for Blighty.

EP02 [01:22.810] - Main Voice

After the war, life continues as before... until the Caribbean economy begins to decline, even ahead of the Great Depression. The impact of the Great Depression, plus the failing sugarcane and banana industries, plus oppression and increasingly deplorable near-slavery working conditions on the island, plus, plus, plus, all lead to the 1938 cane workers and labourers strikes.

Aunt Mel, like most Jamaican women, takes part in organising the protests. The strikes escalate into riots, which are then crushed by the brutal British forces. The governor of Jamaica sends a telegram to Britain that reads:

Reports received today indicate that a crowd of 3,000 strikers demolished the Tate and Lyall office at Old Frome, attacking the staff and police with stones, sticks, and iron bars, necessitating immediate firing by the police...

EP02 [02:15.000] - Speaker 2

...Two killed, about 11 wounded, 30 arrests made.

EP02 [02:18.840] - Main Voice

A total of 46 are killed and hundreds injured, with thousands detained and prosecuted.

EP02 [02:24.800] - Speaker 2

The positive outcome, the silver lining of this disaster, is that Jamaican activists are allowed leeway in founding Jamaica's modern political party system.

EP02 [02:34.100] - Main Voice

Next up, World War II comes to a head, and once again, her kith and kin are fighting the good fight for Britain.

During the war, Jamaica becomes home to detention centres for thousands of displaced Europeans. One of the most famous centres was the Gibraltar camp, where Aunt Mel works as a cook. She says it was more like a little town. Over 3,000 people lived there as refugees. There were schools, shops, offices, a hospital and a police station, a jail, and of course, a church. There was also a synagogue room and a kosher kitchen.

There was always something going on, weddings and funerals and scuffles and scandals. Over 100 babies were born there. She heard stories such as one about a rescue mission in the middle of the war, where 200 Polish Jews who were hiding out in Portugal were brought to Gibraltar Camp in Jamaica, escaping certain death, and stayed there for three years.

And all of this against a backdrop of frequent hurricanes, thrashing, crashing, slashing... rushing across the island, each time leaving devastation, desolation in their wake. One of the most cruel is Hurricane Charlie in 1951.

EP02 [03:57.880] - Speaker 2

The whole island is affected, but the South Coast is hit hardest. Pummeled. 154 confirmed dead, and 2,000 injured. Over 9,000 are left homeless. Pounding rainfall continued after the hurricane causing landslides across the island. 80% of Morant Bay is destroyed, and several other communities are completely wiped out. Banana and other food crops are destroyed.

EP02 [04:20.970] - Main Voice

Seventy prisoners couldn't believe their luck when the raging hurricane batters down a wall of the Kingston General Penitentiary, allowing them to escape into the night. Fugitives in flight.

Aunt Mel says prison guards set off on a manhunt the following day to try to round up the convicts, but she thinks they only found a few of them. The people of the island had far greater problems to be concerned about. Aunt Mel and her family, living more inland, up in Mount Charles, survived the hurricane unscathed.

This image of devastation fades away and is replaced by a distinctly un-Jamaican suburban street...

Ten years have passed... it's 1961, and we find the now "Great-Aunt" Mel, living it up in London.

Aunt Mel, the matriarch's downtrodden hubby's name is simply Uncle. His philosophical outlook enables him to deal with his larger-than-life wife. To remain abreast of the news from back home, Uncle sits there, over by the window, legs crossed, perusing the Jamaican Weekly Gleaner, the Caribbean's oldest newspaper, launched in 1834... the Year of Emancipation. Every now and then, Uncle murmurs, "My, my..." or "My goodness", at the goings on.

Sometime later, Aunt Mel eventually bids goodbye to Britain and returns to Jamaica forever... while Uncle opts to remain.

EP03. THE EARLY DAYS IN BRITAIN

EP03 [00:00.790] - Main Voice

Here are a few snapshot memories of those first few months in England...

Click — parked on the street outside, our first white neighbour's wood-trimmed, dusty-deep-green Morris Minor.

Click — packets of Smith's crisps with a little twisted blue bag of salt.

Clickety, click — our family doctor puffing his pipe, filling the air with fragrant fumes during consultations.

So, Vera, how *did* she arrive in England? The most plausible explanation would be that Aunt Mel brought her to England as her ward, as her more or less indentured slave. This reminds me of the Black slave owners of the past...

EP03 [00:48.910] - Speaker 2

...Black owners of slaves in Jamaica... freed Black slaves who had been bequeathed land and belongings in the wills of White slave owners. With that land came servants and slaves.

In some cases, the motivation for ownership by Black masters was benevolent... to protect the enslaved from falling into the hands of White masters, thereby receiving harsher treatment.

EP03 [01:11.100] - Main Voice

However, if colonisers hadn't introduced enslavement into Jamaica, the notion of blacks trading and owning slaves, as opposed to plain old servants, would not have occurred.

Aunt Mel used to beat both Vera and my mother, who was already a grown woman, with a belt. She must have felt she was teaching them discipline... for their own good. Anyway, the first year in England, I spend most of the time with my Goddy May in Great-Aunt Mel's house before living with my mother once and for all.

Decades later, I learn the original plan had been for Goddy May to adopt me, but her husband, Telfer, opposed it. I'm shocked to also learn that he used to beat her.

One of the last Sometimes I set eyes on Telfer. He's lying sick in bed. An Obeah healer is called in to expel a curse that has been cast upon him. She places her hand upon the heads of each of us around the bed to cast out evil and make him well again. I'm not convinced, but I close my eyes and do as I'm told, and I act as though I'm feeling the Obeah flow. My mother often speaks of Obeah and duppies back home.

EP03 [02:27.840] - Speaker 2

Duppies are restless spirits, known to manifest in forms such as the rolling calf, a shapeshifting hornless goat, where one of its front legs is that of a man, while the other is that of a horse.

EP03 [02:41.180] - Main Voice

A rolling calf can be heard approaching from the clatter and clanging of the chains that hang from its neck as it roams in search of victims. The only thing you can do as it pursues you with its red eyes glowing and its trademark stench of breath is to mark crosses on the ground. Since it's obliged to circle around each cross... slowing it down... perhaps giving you a chance to get away.

I have a faded memory where I'm playing with other kids at Goddy May's house in Jamaica. I'm barely more than four years old. We're playing in the dirt under the house. I can see Goddy May calling out to us. She's gesticulating... trapped in a jittery, silent home movie.

I can no longer hear the words she's saying.

Goddy May's dream, like so many others, is to work hard in England for a better life upon her return to Jamaica.

She inherits a plot of land, upon which, to build a house, she plans.

Rip-off relatives and twisted solicitors are swindling.

She soon finds the size of her plot dwindling.

*Worn down by the connivances and schemes,
she gives up her dreams.*

A few Jamaicans we know managed to earn enough, against all odds, to return home.

EP03 [04:16.020] - Speaker 2

In many cases, their dreams turned into nightmares as they found themselves in the constant threat of being robbed.

EP03 [04:21.410] - Main Voice

If you left Jamaica and returned, you're automatically categorised as the rich relative... and relatively, you *are* rich.

EP03 [04:29.920] - Speaker 2

Having Dobermans guarding their properties hadn't been a part of their plan.

EP03 [04:34.600] - Main Voice

We find out that some of them ended up re-immigrating to Britain's relative peace and safety. Here's Goddy May's 1961 Jamaica-issued British passport, now with neatly snipped-off corners. It's the sole possession of hers I own.

EP03 [04:54.290] - Speaker 2

It requests that, "All those whom it may concern allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance into Great Britain".

EP03 [05:02.080] - Main Voice

It says I'm her one and only child.
So what about her real child? My cousin Morris.

Cousin Morris, gold tooth and three-piece suit, forever the lady's man. Sitting by the showpiece, radiogram, covered in doilies and plastered ornaments, packed with fancy '50s and '60s glassware. The crackle and the hiss as he drops the needle onto the black, spinning vinyl.

Rum, laughter, cigarette haze hanging in the air. Goddy May, with freshly permed hair and a ciggy in one hand, slapping down those dominoes. Blam.

After a short while, my mother and I live in a bedsit in a rambling old Victorian house on Angell Road, just a stone's throw away from Aunt Mel's abode. Tenants are mostly West Indians, fresh off the boat, with the odd Irishman thrown in.

Just a short walk down our street, I begin my first school in England at the age of six. St. John's Angell Town Primary School. Culture shock. These are the days of structural, out-in-the-open, no-beating-about-the-bush racism. Classmates jostle me, snatch away my bag of sweeties, and throw them over the schoolyard fence. This incident remains the sole and indelible memory of that first school in England.

EP03 [06:39.170] - Main Voice

The milkman of human kindness comes rattling in the early morning, distributing the gold and silver-topped bottles.

At school, in the dead of winter, when Jack Frost nips, we tepidly sip through straws, radiator-warmed, watery milk from kiddy-sized bottles.

As a single-parent, low-income family, we receive milk vouchers.

EP03 [07:01.030] - Speaker 2

Drink a pint of milk a day, and don't forget to pray.

EP03 [07:07.410] - Main Voice

I revisit my first London winter, peering through dense fog. Not misty, water-coloured memories, but charcoal on thunder-gray paper.

The coal man schlepping sacs so black upon his back, the rag'n'bone man, clang-a-langing down the street, the Indian salesman, suitcasing cardigans and quilts.

And mid-morning, there... there in the street below, comes Jeffrey, the worn-out West Indian road sweeper, wielding his broom with calloused hands. He mutters to himself and yells at someone who exists only in his head, swiping at them with his broom. He seems fairly harmless, but to be on the safe side, we stay just out of reach.

The winter evenings after school are never-ending.

As I make my way home in the near dark, the street lamps are just blinking awake. Their halos whispering in the smog, and shady figures in the shadows go about their business.

Home and thawing out, gazing into the dancing flames of our paraffin heater, complete with asbestos parts, unknowingly breathing in the toxic fumes.

Fire, fire.

We're awakened by smoke and commotion. Strangers in the night hand me through a window to outstretched arms in the garden down below, and I'm sleepy-headed, barefoot and bewildered in the backyard.

EP03 [08:47.060] - Main Voice

It turns out a drunk neighbour had fallen out of bed, knocking over his heater. The odour of sodden, charred wood fills the house for days.

EP04. "I HAVE COME WITH NEWS FROM JAMAICA"

EP04 [00:03.410] - Speaker 2

The early 1960s, Brockwell Junior School, Southwest London.

EP04 [00:08.630] - Main Voice

The school day begins with assembly in the great hall. Our young minds need to be assembled. Assembly ends with rousing hymns singing. Red-face Mr. Sibly, our headmaster, gesticulating, accompanying the pounding school organ, driving us on to exalting renditions of "All Things Bright and Beautiful".

Looking back, I see now how much religion was cross-stitched into the fabric of our early school curriculum.

Lunchtime, also referred to by some as dinner time... the din of a hundred hungry youngsters.

Dinner ladies, dishing out the mash, giving out the gravy.

A second helping of shepherd's pie, the Friday fish fingers, a piece of cake, ice cream and jelly... and a punch in the belly.

In the afternoon, old Tannoy loudspeakers are mounted high on the classroom walls. They seem more suited to relaying information about the country being at war. Instead, they broadcast children's stories. We sit, leaning forward, heads resting on our arms, crossed on our desks.

"Are you sitting comfortably", asks the pre-recorded storyteller lady, leaving a pause for our unheard yesses. "Then...", she says softly, "I will begin".

EP04 [01:38.420] - Speaker 2

The 6th of August, 1962.

EP04 [01:40.880] - Main Voice

Jamaica gains its independence. The government selects a new motto, “Out of many, one people”, reflecting the diversity of the Jamaican people, the mix of different races, cultures, religions.

The previous motto in Latin, “Indus uterque serviet uni”, to the effect of “the two Indies who will serve one master” had become inappropriate, oppressive, offensive.

Jamaicans who had moved to the UK before independence, like me, automatically become British citizens.

EP04 [02:14.740] - Speaker 2

A Jamaican flag is designed by the House of Representatives. The official interpretation of the colours is, “The sun shineth, the land is green, and the people are strong and creative”.

EP04 [02:29.920] - Main Voice

From our new English habitats, we send letters... home from abroad. Affectionate airmail letters are written to kith and kin, with last-minute thoughts squeezed into the margins and then fondly folded and licked closed.

*The black of the hand that lingers,
the blue of the letter it holds,
the red of the post box waiting,
the grey of the sky so low.*

Big voice, big hair. Little Helen Shapiro from East London will go on tour, supported by... *The Beatles*.

EP04 [03:10.450] - Speaker 2

September 1962.

14-year-old Helen Shapiro's song “Walking Back to Happiness” is number one in the UK charts.

EP04 [03:17.480] - Main Voice

Admired and copied by all the teenage girls like Vera, the mere title of the song walks me right back to the '60s and Sister Vera's slightly manic explosive laugh.

The early '60s are the happiness times. The times before my future siblings come along. The times before my mother is buried under weight and responsibility. The times she takes me on a special outing to Battersea Park Fun Fair for amusement rides and the sugary happiness of toffee apples and candy floss.

...

We're back in Aunt Mel's house.

Vera, in the corner of the room, stands next to the stuffed armchair of the three-piece suite.

EP04 [04:02.550] - Speaker 2

And what is she doing?

EP04 [04:04.340] - Main Voice

She has just sat on my cherished plastic toy guitar... and broken it.

EP04 [04:08.990] - Speaker 2

And what colour is it?

EP04 [04:10.210] - Main Voice

Red. It's red. My memory has recorded the armchair and the guitar so clearly. But she, she is in the shadows. She laughs and laughs and laughs. And laughs. It's not a happy memory, but I have so few memories of her that I might as well keep it... because every memory... counts.

EP04 [04:39.030] - Speaker 2

1963.

EP04 [04:40.480] - Main Voice

Hell freezes over. It's the coldest winter on record in the UK!

EP04 [04:44.760] - Speaker 2

The upper reaches of the River Thames freeze.

EP04 [04:47.030] - Main Voice

And biting bitter Siberian winds slap me around, sending me slipping and sliding, almost sweeping me off my feet.

And in the background of this winterscape, the Cold War is hot, hot, hot, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war. On the news, it's Khrushchev this, Kennedy that, and the devil knows what.

Summer.

We're invited to a wedding, a full-on Jamaican affair.

Here's the studio photo of me, around seven or eight years old, dressed in my wedding gear. I wear a stylish little suit with a bow tie and some very sharp-looking shoes.

Behind me is a backdrop, painted to look like a wall with windows onto the street outside.

I'm next to a plant stand, gingerly resting my hand next to an ornate oval-shaped bowl of plastic flowers and ferns.

I'm smiling at someone who seems to be off-camera.

EP04 [05:47.130] - Speaker 2

The photo is mounted in a plywood and glass frame with fancy roses and lots of gold decorative trimmings.

EP04 [05:52.960] - Main Voice

It's a raucous wedding reception. Plates of curry goat and rice are passed around... and chunks of Jamaican wedding cake with edible silver balls embedded in the icing. And the place is just packed and sweltering.

March 1963.

My sister, Sarah, is born... unexpectedly... out of the blue. She lies there in her powder pink cot, squigged into a corner of the already crowded room. She sucks her thumb and will do so well into her late teens. Her father, who goes by the name of Big Head, has another family... a real one, and therefore claims he cannot manage much child-support-wise. My mother has to take him to court many times to let the judge be the judge of that. He, of course, constantly falls back on the payments.

Later, as I try to conjure up images of him, I see a plywood money box he made with pale blue and white inlaid Formica panels. For some reason, we kept that box for ages, for much longer than he was ever around. Isn't it ironic that such a tight-fisted person is remembered in association with a money box?

EP04 [07:26.080] - Main Voice

It's late at night. I'm about nine years old. Comes a quiet knock, knock, knocking on our door. The stranger on the other side says something like,

EP04 [07:28.000] - Speaker 2

"I've come with news... from Jamaica".

EP04 [07:31.000] - Main Voice

And something like,

EP04 [07:32.000] - Speaker 2

"The boy's father is dead".

EP04 [07:34.310] - Main Voice

And something like, "He was killed by a tree".

Gone. For good. No more need to keep his placeholder.

Our invisible visitor's footsteps creak down the stairs and away into the night.

And the door speaks no more.

We will never talk about this night.

*And in the still of the night,
a tree falls in the forest but makes no sound.
The willow is silenced.*

Many years later, I'm standing in the doorway, about to go out, when my mother suddenly tells me I resemble my father. This is the only time, in her entire life, she ever makes any reference to him. I'm too taken aback by her out-of-the-blue remark to comment. The opportunity is somehow lost... and never again arises.

She randomly beats me, pinning me down... whacking me with a slipper. When I'm a little older and stronger, I can escape her grasp and go rushing down the stairs to safety. I say she randomly beats me because the beatings seem totally disproportionate to my perfectly normal young-child misbehaviour. My future siblings will receive far fewer beatings than I did.

"I reckon it was some vengeance against your dad", suggests a friend later on.

EP04 [09:09.600] - Main Voice

I once saw a photo of me taken in Jamaica. Might well have been the only one. If I squint inside my head, I can almost see it now... Glossy, black and white with deckled edges. Based on my age in the photo, it might well have been taken as a souvenir when my mother was heading off to England, leaving me with her sister, not knowing when or even if she would see me again.

In the photo, I'm standing in the sun in front of a porch. I'm wearing a white shirt with drops of blood in front... nose bleeds from eating too many mangoes. I was a mango maniac.

That photo is lost, gone forever. Maybe hypnosis could help rebuild it in my head.

EP04 [09:56.520] - Speaker 2

Research has found that hypnosis does not work well as a memory recovery method. People who have been hypnotised tend to feel confident their memories are accurate, contributing to the persistence of false memories and fake mental photos.

EP05. GOING TO BRITAIN?

EP05 [00:00.700] - Main Voice

For a while, we live in pre-gentrification Brixton, on Somerleyton and Geneva roads... later brutally bulldozed to pave the way for the brutalist barrier block.

EP05 [00:12.940] - Speaker 2

Around 3,000 West Indians are living in Lambeth in South London. Most are in Brixton, packed into small flats and bedsits.

EP05 [00:20.540] - Main Voice

We move into rooms in a draughty old detached house on Somerleyton.

EP05 [00:24.190] - Speaker 2

The area's theatrical digs of the '30s had transitioned into grubby bachelor flats of the '50s and are now in the '60s, cramped Caribbean dwellings...

EP05 [00:32.410] - Main Voice

But the comforting aroma of Caribbean cooking lingers on every floor.

*In the cupboard out there on the landing,
the gas meter is standing.
It swallows shillings and sixpences,
and instructs on actions to take... in the unlikely case of gas escape.*

Somerleyton runs parallel to Geneva. Their enormous gardens face to face. Opposite our garden. There is no house, no garden, just a wasteland, a bomb site... our adventure playground, where I fall off a makeshift swing onto broken glass, leaving me with a lifelong scar.

At the far end of the street, I go to Sunday School in a back-home-style wooden hut, and sing songs of praises. We memorise passages of scripture for next Sunday, and we sing stuff like, "Shall we gather at the and all hail the power of Jesus's name?"... et cetera.

Mr. Sunday-Ani, our cane-chewing African landlord, lives in the basement with his beautiful and extremely young bride. On Friday, Sunday climbs the stairs to collect rent and negotiate arrears.

And in the garden, clothes, sheets, and breached, boiled, Tide-washed nappies are swaying laying in the breeze.

At some stage, Vera moves in into a teeny room on the top floor. I suddenly remember blood, Vera's worrying nose bleeds.

EP05 [02:15.980] - Main Voice

Blood.
Sometimes so intense, she has to be taken to hospital.
Blood. Everywhere.
And something about bits of wood being used to stop the bleeding. Please stop the bleeding.

...

Here's a little pamphlet entitled "Going to Britain?", that the BBC Caribbean Service published in 1959... a couple of years before we headed off to Britain. The general gist is... give up the idea, don't go. But if you really, really must, here's some essential advice. Some chapters are written by a Jamaican who has been through the mill and knows the drill.

EP05 [02:58.740] - Speaker 2

It contains a multitude of tips, warnings, and words to the wise.

EP05 [03:03.440] - Main Voice

It speaks of the scarcity of jobs compared to just after the war.

EP05 [03:08.550] - Speaker 2

It speaks of what, and what not, to pack.

EP05 [03:11.610] - Main Voice

It speaks of your savings gone in a flash.

EP05 [03:15.140] - Speaker 2

It speaks of how big England is and how you had better have your destination address clearly written.

EP05 [03:21.790] - Main Voice

It speaks of board and lodgings and single rooms for single men.

It speaks of biting cold, sleet, snow, and chilblains... and of sleeping under a thousand blankets.

It speaks of black hair falling and dark skin as grey and dry as parchment from the icy air.

EP05 [03:40.570] - Speaker 2

It speaks of etiquette and being on your better-than-best behaviour.

EP05 [03:44.630] - Main Voice

It speaks of keeping your cool if, when, you're slurred.

It speaks of hardship...

It speaks of foolish Barbadians making faux pas, making matters worse for all West Indian immigrants.

It speaks of white-collar workers' work and no-collar coloured men looking for work.

It speaks of watching your step and being on the ball while trying to get a foot in the door... and keeping a low profile... and doing as the Romans when in Rome.

EP05 [04:18.860] - Speaker 2

It speaks of trade unions and closed shops.

EP05 [04:22.220] - Main Voice

It speaks of elevenses and cups of char at the factory.

It speaks of factory-floor pyramids, of semi-skilled and skilled, of supervisor and shop steward... and of understanding them so you don't mess up your chances.

...

It speaks.

EP05 [04:44.920] - Speaker 2

Sometime in the mid '60s.

EP05 [04:46.980] - Main Voice

While my mother is in hospital, I stay at Goddy Mays. I share cousin Morris' room, sleeping in the same bed.

Tonight, I go to sleep, and he goes out, gallivanting.

In the night, I turn, and I'm startled by pale Caucasian flesh sleeping soundly next to me. I gradually realise my cousin Morris has gallivanted a female friend home and into the bed.

I find it puzzling that this woman just hops into bed alongside an unknown, sleeping young boy.

I lie there, disconcerted, feigning sleep... contemplating this woman comfortably cuddled up, comatose, beside me. I finally drift off to sleep again.

Cousin Morris has gone far beyond the pale.

In the morning... by Goddy May, he will be flailed.

Still in the mid '60s.

We move to Leander Road, London SW2. Still Brixton... but a little less Brixton-y.

Here, Vera lives with us for at least part of the time. I remember one particularly heated row between her and our mother, who kept going on and on at her.

And on.

The row that broke the camel's back.

And on.

...

Summer.

EP05 [06:18.030] - Speaker 2

Ice cream men aren't allowed to play their jingles in the evening, so they simply park on the streets, knowing the distinctive purring of their engines will make their presence felt...

EP05 [06:26.670] - Main Voice

And thus, Mr. Whippie, Mr. Softy, or Tony Bell lure us out into the balmy evening, where we will sit on the polished step, slurping our ice creams and lollies... carefree... playing "I spy with my little eye".

...

Inside, In the corner of the room, wedged in beside the bed, is our mother's huge plastic bag, bulging and piled high with clothes, bedspreads, and whatnot.

One afternoon during the holidays, while she's out shopping, we decide to search the bag. We gingerly slide our hands down the sides and feel around to avoid leaving any telltale signs. Vera cackles. She's found something. She slides out her hand, holding a stubby black bottle. We freeze when we see the label... POISON, in large capitals, she hastily shoves the bottle back. Our imaginations run riot.

What's she doing with poison?
What if she realises we found her secret?
I never found that bottle ever again.

...

After a short while, we move back, back into the dark heart of Brixton to Geneva Road. Vera, who now lives on her own, drops by from time to time. There's always a cloud of tension in the air between her and our mother.

Words unspoken, recriminations fly, invisible to the naked eye.

EP05 [08:00.000] - Main Voice

Coldharbour Lane runs perpendicular to the Somerleyton and Geneva Road sandwich. It's a stretch that will later be, for a while, referred to as one of the most dangerous streets in London... a gangster's paradise where bullets fly.

But here and now, it's where I drop off my baby sister at her nursery, where the assistants gently bounce babies on their knees, singing, "The wheels on the bus go round, round, round".

Across the road is the petrol station, where I refill and lug, glug-glugging, our smelly paraffin cans home. And next to that, the labour exchange, where West Indians and Irishmen lumped together, linger looking for work. The Irish-Jamaican connection goes a long, long, long way back. Irish people were first brought to Jamaica as prisoners and indentured servants when the British captured the island.

EP06. ESTHER

EP06 [00:00.760] - Main Voice

She stands 5'9, erect, straight-backed, big-boned, yet slender-framed.
Dark-brown eyes with a bright piercing gaze.
Flared nostrils when provoked.
Thick black hair that she first plaits... then perms... then covers almost permanently with head scarves.

She has large, powerful hands with strong spindly fingers.
She can pour boiling hot soup into the palm of her cupped hand to taste without flinching.
She looks much younger than her age until her health problems start to take over.
She can easily place the whole of her palms on the floor without bending her knees up until her early '70s.

Way up there on the list of Esther's skills is talking, talking she seemed capable of talking without ever needing to breathe. I would sometimes watch her very closely, barely blinking, while she spoke, to try to see when, if, she took a breath during her seamless verbal streams. But there was never any physical clue, no telltale signs of breathing. It was particularly impressive when she was in raging-rant mode, as if possessed.

Where did she get the energy from?

Even when she became frail and poorly, she could still talk the hind legs off a drove of donkeys.

EP06 [01:21.660] - Main Voice

When I move abroad, and we speak on the phone... in the days when long-distance calls cost a fortune, the cost doesn't deter her. She considers one hour, just a quick call.

At the end of two hours, when I haven't been able to get a word in edgewise the whole time, and she says, "We have been speaking too long... and the next time, we have to start with me talking".

"Because you never say anything!", she says accusingly... quite seriously.

After hanging up, my ears, head and mind all ache. I sit for a while and stare at the wall... and the wall just stares back at me, silently.

Once, during a two-hour call, out of sheer frustration, I throw the cordless phone against the wall. Its case springs open, sending the two batteries and plastic flying across the room. You might well have done the same.

My frustration, not anger, comes from not being able to exchange even a few words like in a real conversation. It feels as though she is speaking to me as if I were a dead person. I'm happy to be the good listener most of the time, but there are limits.

EP06 [02:29.960] - Main Voice

I push the batteries back in and tape the cover down to keep them in place.

When I put the phone to my ear... guess what? She was still talking... hadn't even noticed what must have been a very loud bang.

...

During my primary school years, she's up early getting my breakfast ready. These school day breakfasts are massive, sizzling, fry-up feasts of eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, luncheon meat, baked beans... enough to keep me going for a couple of hours.

Then she dashes off to work.

...

It's Saturday afternoon.

She's decided not to make me take laxatives today. It's a Saturday sans Senna Pods, the bowel-cleaning beverage that usually leaves me housebound for half the day.

Instead, I'll go with her to Brixton Market.
We'll meander through the crowded arcades.

She'll bargain and banter with Lenny the Butcher and tell him he's cheeky... and he'll wrap up a couple of freebie chops or briny pink pigtails and hand me the bundles.
We will move on past Merlin's Caribbean hair products stall with lustrous curly wigs displayed on long-necked white styrofoam dummy heads... on the way to the fishmongers for some salt-mackerel and jackfish... the fishmongers, who is, surprisingly, one of the handful of original businesses that will survive future uber-gentrification.

EP06 [03:59.340] - Main Voice

If Esther were around years later, her bright eyes would boggle seeing what became of *her* Brixton market, with its hipsters and tripsters, themed eateries, local-brewed craft beers and brunches... and vegan cuisine.

In her day, there are just a few perfectly fine, greasy cafes, where donkey-jacketed working men could get a nice eggs-bangers-and-bacon sandwich... with the butter threatening to seep through the paper-white processed bread. And wash it down with a mug of sugary milky tea.
We'll squeeze through the crowd to the fruit and veg stall for yams as big as thighs, okras, plantains... green bananas.

Then Irma's stall... where we'll pick up sundry groceries, not forgetting the cornmeal, indispensable for porridge, Jamaican-style pudding, crispy fried fritas, turn cornmeal — the Caribbean cousin of Palenta...

Then we'll head back home.
She'll sit soaking her poor, cracked, and calloused feet in a large white enamel basin in my pee... my pee that she has been carefully storing in a bottle during the week. She believes, like other West Indians, that child pee has special healing properties. It's also less smelly than adults.

EP06 [05:25.600] - Main Voice

Here's a photo of Esther. It's only a little larger than a passport photo.
The colours are muted, veering towards Sepia. I'm guessing it's from the '60s.

She wears a dark brown, short-sleeved, knitted top with extra-broad collars spreading all the way out to the shoulders.

Over her arm, she carries a thick, pale blue and cream-striped cardigan.
At the bottom edge of the photo, the extremely wide waistband of the top of her skirt is visible.
She stands, head slightly angled to one side, smiling.

Behind her is some grand monumental residential building, Westminster-ish.

I'm curious about who captured this instant.
She's presumably on her way to or returning from work.

She works for a paltry weekly pay-packet. She does not yet show the signs of wear and tear... of depletion, damage, deterioration, depreciation, or consumption. Consumption is yet to come.

This is another item from my mother's things that I ended up holding on to. A creased, crumbling, brown with age, black-and-white TV licence payment receipt from March 1970 for £6, valid for only one year... but among her papers 40 years on.

Can't be too careful, can you? You never know what might come in handy the minute or decade you've thrown it away.

She's kept these outdated bills, receipts, and prescriptions for decades, folded and wrapped in thin transparent food sachets.

EP06 [07:05.410] - Main Voice

Every piece of paper. Every piece of clothing that has spent any time in her bedroom is impregnated like a signature with the clovey heady fragrance of her Morgan's hair pomade.

I once bought her an accordion folder, but the concept was far too organised for her. It would have made it too easy for nosey parkers to go through her papers to methodically learn all her secrets.

Instead, she prefers her own organised disorder.

Her filing system consists of piles of plastic bags and sachets bursting with papers scattered around the room occupying every surface.

She dissimulates booby-trap notes. Her scattery handwriting scrawled messily on scraps of paper or the backs of envelopes amongst her papers, advising the finder, my brother or his father, that they would be better off reading the bloody Bible or doing something useful around the damn house... or just going to hell.

...

The day will come when my brother and I will have to wade through the ocean of papers, but some of the booby trap notes will make us smile.

...

Also among the few documents I kept is an employer's annual certificate for the year 1983. It's a carbon copy on pale green paper that the employee has requested to keep indefinitely...

EP06 [08:36.120] - Main Voice

It's stamped the "Savoy Hotel Laundry".

At the top right-hand corner is printed "Do Not destroy".

Ironically, this is the place where Esther's health is ultimately destroyed. She's paid a pittance for working in pitiful conditions with almost no respect for health and safety. By the time we discover the true cause of her joint pains and weak spells, tuberculosis, the white plague, has already spread from her lungs to her bones.

We don't know if Esther caught the disease before or while working at the hotel laundry, but we do know the harsh sweatshop-like conditions have taken a toll on her health.

Another nail!

She'll soon become a regular patient at the local hospital's haematology departments and test the staff's patience to the limit.

A specialist doctor's letter, or fan mail, as she calls the hospital's correspondence, regularly landing on the doormat, in 2003, reads...

*CT Abdo, Pelvis, Pre and post-IV,
Contrast-enhanced scans of the abdomen and pelvis were performed.
The kidneys were imaged in two phases.*

EP06 [09:51.070] - Speaker 2

There is posterior cortical scarring and calcification affecting the left mid-kidney.

There is a speck of calcium in the spleen.

There are calcified right paraeortic abdominal nodes. Conclusion.

The overall appearance suggests old TB.

EP06 [10:06.830] - Main Voice

The only words that matter are old TB.

EP07. OUT FROM AFRICA

EP07 [00:00.680] - Main Voice

People sometimes ask me where my Jamaican ancestors actually came from.

Well... since my Great Aunt Mel, remember her? was born in 1904... and my grandmother, Maudrianna Lenorah Parkes (who I never knew), was her older sister... logically, grandmother Maud would have been born 1900 or earlier.

Anyway... the bottom line is that her ancestors, and Esther's ancestors, and thus my ancestors, would have been enslaved Africans, initially the *Akan* people, including the *Ashanti*, from the Gold Coast, present-day Republic of Ghana.

They were followed by an even greater number of Igbo people, mainly from Nigeria.

So how did Africans end up in Jamaica anyway?

Well... in May 1494, Christopher Columbus sets sail for the *East Indies*... winds up in the *West Indies*... lands in Jamaica, and claims the island for Spain.

The original inhabitants of Jamaica were Taino Indians from South America who had named the island *Xaymaca*, meaning land of wood and water.

EP07 [01:16.320] - Speaker 2

Columbus had heard about Jamaica from Cubans who described it as the land of blessed gold.

EP07 [01:21.900] - Main Voice

He and his men beat, rape, and torture the natives in their crazed search for, as it turns out, nonexistent blessed gold.

EP07 [01:29.390] - Speaker 2

The Spanish grossly mismanaged the island, and the natives are completely wiped out by brutal treatments and diseases...

EP07 [01:39.020] - Main Voice

...And are replaced with my ancestors' ancestors, stolen from Africa.

*Land of wood and of water,
of alluvial and wetlands on coastal plains.
A tree grows in the rainforest,
shrouded in the mist.*

The next major upheaval comes in 1655 when the British capture Jamaica from the Spanish.

EP07 [02:05.590] - Speaker 2

The British also import enslaved Africans to maintain their newly acquired sugarcane production industry.

So there you go... a shortish answer to the question of where my ancestors came from.

EP07 [02:20.070] - Main Voice

Let me tell you about another of my early childhood memories from Jamaica. It's one that keeps returning like a recurring dream...

Fade in.
I'm in the woods near the house.
Slingshots are aimed.
Stones swoop.
A bird is struck.

EP07 [02:38.050] - Speaker 2

Zoom in.

EP07 [02:39.060] - Main Voice

It falls to the ground.
Noiseless shouts.
Birds roasting.

Smoke... dampness.

EP07 [02:44.840] - Speaker 2

Fade out.

EP07 [02:50.710] - Main Voice

Fade in.

I'm in the woods near the house.

Slingshots are aimed.

Stone swoop.

A bird is struck.

Zoom in.

It falls to the ground.

Noiseless shouts.

Birds roasting smoke.

Fade out.

...

Fade in.

Fade out.

Speaking about that memory has reminded me of a dream-like night in Jamaica... one I haven't thought about in ages.

I must have been, what, five?

It's dusk, and night is falling fast. Winkies, fireflies twinkle and blink like stars against the darkening sky. I'm in a field, or is it someone's yard?

The glow of flaming torches attached to stakes stuck in the ground flutter in the breeze... lighting up the faces of people chatting, chanting, swaying... milling around. There's some ceremony going on.

A heady cocktail of odours, roast breadfruit, rum punch, molasses pervades the air.

A hand pats me on the head... pats my springy hair.

A bunch of men are carrying what looks like a carved tree trunk above their heads.

I hear people speak of what sounds like Nigh Night, and I later realised they were saying *Nine Night*, a funerary tradition originating from Africa, an extended wake, a celebration of a lost loved one, allowing the deceased spirit, which needs to be protected to move on.

EP07 [04:18.410] - Main Voice

On the ninth night after death, the deceased person's bed and mattress are leaned up against a wall to encourage their evil shadow, their duppy, to leave the house forevermore and enter the grave.

Let me give you a few tips. Some do's and don'ts when it comes down to dealing with duppies.

Cover all mirrors in the dead room to prevent the dead from seeing the reflection of the living.

EP07 [04:41.660] - Speaker 2

...This prevents the living from pining away.

EP07 [04:44.380] - Main Voice

If you place 10 coffee beans in the dead room, no duppy can enter.

EP07 [04:49.280] - Speaker 2

...Because duppies can only count to nine.

EP07 [04:51.100] - Main Voice

Make sure all family members say goodbye to the corpse and that every child is lifted and passed over the coffin while their name is being said.

EP07 [04:59.060] - Speaker 2

...Otherwise, the spirit of the dead will return to haunt the family members.

EP07 [05:04.130] - Main Voice

Do not let tears fall on the body.

EP07 [05:06.790] - Speaker 2

...Otherwise, the ghost will return to haunt the mourner.

EP07 [05:10.810] - Main Voice

Do not allow the body to be kissed.
Otherwise, the teeth of the kisser will rot.

You must, must... you *must* sew up the pockets of the dead.
Otherwise, their ghost will fill their pockets with stones from limbo to lapidate the living.

When you leave a wake, simply touch a person who is to leave with you. Do not announce it.
Otherwise, the duppy will follow you home.

As a precaution, you should also walk backwards and turn around three times because a duppy can only walk in straight lines.

EP07 [05:49.710] - Speaker 2

Jamaican Patois is an English-based Creole language with West African, Taino, Irish, Spanish, Hindi, Portuguese, Chinese [...]

EP07 [05:59.950] - Main Voice

With my Jamaican-born relatives, I always spoke Patois.

It contains many loan words, mostly of African origin, mainly from the Igbo people... such as *Duppy*, is from the word dupon for cotton tree root, because of the African belief that malicious spirits originate in tree roots... and *Obeah* for witchcraft.

Our accents soften up over the years, but we can exaggerate it when we don't want outsiders to understand what we're saying.

EP07 [06:27.910] - Speaker 2

1966.

EP07 [06:29.400] - Main Voice

In a South London hospital, my half brother, Stephen, is born.

His Barbadian father, Hunter, is as heartless as they come.

My mother will be forever convinced he stole some of her hair to work bad Obeah on her... to make sure she can never get rid of him until he is ready to move on.

She also wonders how she ended up with this small island man in the first place.

EP07 [06:53.220] - Speaker 2

In the hierarchy of the islands, Jamaicans, who tend to regard Jamaica as superior to Barbados, refer to it disparagingly as *Small Island*.

EP07 [07:01.390] - Main Voice

Hunter has other children, back home in Barbados and in England, but supports none of them or their mothers properly.

On the contrary, he shamelessly sniffs out and steals housekeeping money my mother has hidden in crooks and crannies.

She wonders, perhaps seriously, if he hasn't trained himself to detect the odour of money like a tracker dog. In a lighter moment, she demonstrates how she imagines him, nose in the air, sniffing around the room when we're not around.

She even hides pound notes between the sacred pages of her hidden Bible, and she asks God to please smite the bugger down if he goes as far as stealing from the Bible.

EP07 [07:45.660] - Speaker 2

However, he does steal from the Bible.

EP07 [07:48.500] - Main Voice

He is never struck down.

He goes on to live a long and carefree life.

EP07 [07:52.390] - Speaker 2

No Thunderbolt from the heavens strike him.

No justice.
No fire.

EP07 [07:56.220] - Main Voice

No justice.

EP07 [07:56.880] - Speaker 2

Nor brimstone.

EP07 [07:57.690] - Main Voice

There is no justice.

...

Through Obeah, recklessness, or just plain fate, my mother has a second child, Hazel, with him two years later.

After our mother's passing, my brother and I find in her belongings, a dark brown vintage leather handbag. It's stuffed with old papers and other bits and bobs, including an incongruous six-inch nail. We are fairly sure we know what, or rather who, it was meant for.

EP07 [08:30.300] - Speaker 2

The mid-1970s.

EP07 [08:35.330] - Main Voice

Over the years, Vera's absence has become increasingly present.

...

Then one autumn afternoon, *ding-dong*, it's Vera.

Double surprise. She's accompanied by a man, a man she announces she intends to marry. Her hubby-to-be is pale, shaky, and frail.

"But what damn foolishness is this?", asks Goddy May. "Vera needs a strong, solid man", she continues. "Not this weak boy who can barely stand up".

We try to convince Vera to reflect... to reconsider, but she clearly intends to tie the knot as soon as possible. There's something distinctly *secty* about the whole affair.

From this moment on, Vera will distance herself from the family even further.

EP08. GODDY MAY

EP08 [00:00.600] - Main Voice

1919 Mabel Parkes... my other mother, who you know as Goddy May, is born in the lush rural Mavis bank area, the coffee farming lands below the Blue Mountains.

Goddy May is the second of four known siblings.

The oldest and the only boy child is Altmound... Uncle Alti.

After Mabel comes Tatlis... Aunt Tat.

I've heard stories of my Uncle Alti and Aunt Tat, but I never met them. Neither of them came to England. What I know about them could barely fill a thimble.

The youngest of the four siblings is my mother, Esther.

EP08 [00:48.430] - Main Voice

The fruity vegetable scent of coffee plants fills the Mavis Bank air.

Way up yonder in the cool stillness of the John Crow mountains... lakes, ponds, pools overflow and trickle into the headwater of the Yallahs River.

The baby river traverses the Blue Mountains, winding, descending... joined by tributaries from the surrounding hillsides.

Babbling and dancing, it passes Mabel's home and meanders through the fertile valleys along the border of St Andrew and St Thomas parishes.

Picking up volume and speed, it rushes southwards to the sea.

...

After school, Mabel will push through the thickets and scamper down to the shallow part of the river with her bucket, where the womenfolk squat, scrubbing clothes against the rocks.

She'll join the other children, collecting wash water, splashing each other, gossiping... horsing around.

A lot of mixed Chinese-Jamaican children went to her school. And many of their Chinese fathers had second families back home.

The Chinese had such a monopoly on the grocery trade, Mabel's folks would simply say they were going to the Chineyman shop to refer to shopping for groceries and household goods.

The shopkeepers were willing to sell on trust, which made them popular with the locals.

EP08 [02:19.550] - Main Voice

Mabel is just Sweet Sixteen when along comes Morris... the fruit of her loins. Cousin Morris!

In her day, in Jamaica, having a child at that age, or even younger, was par for the course. And Morris' Daddy has *gone with the wind, absent without leave*, leaving mono-parent baby-mother Mabel to become yet another mode-and-median-statistic of social surveys on parenthood.

EP08 [02:41.080] - Speaker 2

A parliamentary Royal Commission report of 1938 recommends that a campaign against the social, moral and economic evils of promiscuity be organised.

This leads to the government of Jamaica initiating a mass marriage movement which successfully increases the marriage rate... but for only a few years. The illegitimacy rate is soon back to previous levels.

EP08 [03:09.410] - Main Voice

It is the early '50s, and Mabel, now known as Goddy May, goes to the Carib cinema in Kingston town, where the audience would respectfully stand and sing "God Save the Queen". The programme would contain Pathe newsreels extolling the virtues of the British Empire. The promise of greener grass and pleasant lands will convince her to give Great Britain a go.

EP08 [03:34.460] - Main Voice

Meanwhile, over on the northern coast of Jamaica lies the wealthy tourist town of *Oracabessa*... bathed in apricot gold sunlight,

EP08 [03:44.530] - Main Voice

Goddy May's young cousin, Sissy, has just been employed as a domestic at the surprisingly spartan house recently built nearby for a wealthy Englishman.

Sissy says Mister Englishman seems happy in his new home from home... confining himself to his study for days on end, avoiding all distractions, pecking away on his typewriter.

She reckons Mister Englishman has to be consuming at least 70 cigarettes a day and countless bottles of alcohol.

EP08 [04:14.750] - Speaker 2

His name is *Ian Fleming*, and he is finishing the novel *Casino Royale* at his holiday estate, Goldeneye. The setting and filming of his novel *Doctor No* in Jamaica will bring a wave of film tourism... a necessary evil, to the island. In Jamaica, he will write all his *James Bond* novels.

EP08 [04:36.730] – Main Voice

Goddy May, 40, has her photo taken for her 1960 passport for her move to the motherland.

The monochrome photo is oval-shaped on a white background.

She looks so much younger than her age.

Her expression is frozen. She must be holding her breath, conscientiously following the photographer's instructions to look straight into the lens and not move.

Her hair is sheeny-shiny, hot iron straightened, and curled with a parting on one side.

She wears a pale-coloured shirt-style blouse with the collar open to reveal her necklace... an unusual, elaborate affair made of some sort of polished metal (probably silver) band of slender interlocking sections and long lozenge-shaped pearls suspended from each of the sections.

EP08 [05:38.420] - Main Voice

Although they're sisters, my Mother and Goddy May address each other in a particularly old-school Jamaican way, as Miss *Esther* and as Mrs Telfer, in England.

EP08 [05:41.630] - Main Voice

Despite living a short distance apart, the sisters rarely see each other, because neither wishes to turn up empty-handed.

They will only visit if they can first make the time to cook... in which case they will bring dishcloth-wrapped Tupperware tubs of tasty dishes... rice and peas, ackee and salt-fish, oxtail stew.

Or they will arrive with plastic shopping bags bulging with random items.

With these formalities out of the way, the catching-up session can commence.

Regular topics will be:

Cousin Morris. What's he done now?

My brother Stephen... in serious trouble yet again.

Church gossip.

How wicked this world has become.

And so forth.

...

Each time I visit Goddy May in the late nineties, she's weaker, frailer, smaller... diminishing from one visit to the next.

Her hair has gone totally white. I tell her not to worry because it actually suits her. She laughs and says she knows... she had been dyeing it for ages but decided she could stop when it was evenly white all over.

EP08 [06:59.170] - Main Voice

One dark afternoon in December 2004, while at work, I received the dreaded phone call, the one that was just a matter of time, the one that makes you want to take a few steps backwards, as though you could step back into the past that way.

But no. Goddy May has gone.

For her tombstone, we inscribe the beginning of the Lord's prayer...

EP08 [07:16.690] - Speaker 2

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

EP08 [07:27.090] - Main Voice

After a short period of grieving, it suddenly occurs to me that I'm being selfish.

Would I really want her to be still here in her broken body, suffering?

No. Far better for her to be free from pain.

And so I skipped the intermediate stages of grief.

I fast forward to *Acceptance*, and from almost one moment to the next, I become happy.

Happy for Goddy May!

...

Here, let me show you this photo of Goddy May. I took it when I visited her one lazy Sunday afternoon in 2003, the year before she passed away.

It shows a corner of her council flat sitting room.

EP08 [08:16.520] - Speaker 2

It is chock-a-block with random furniture, knick-knacks and bric-a-brac collected over the years...

EP08 [08:20.400] - Main Voice

and doilies everywhere.

EP08 [08:23.230] - Speaker 2

The place is coated in a warm *Pantone*-pale-tobacco-tint from years of Marlborough and Pall Mall smoke.

EP08 [08:28.000] - Main Voice

Smoke, from cigarettes she sometimes sweet talked me into buying. Her diabetes and assorted ailments be damned!

EP08 [08:35.020] - Speaker 2

The room is low-ceilinged, floral-carpeted and cosy.
The wall with the window is cream, while the other is of imitation chalet panelling.

EP08 [08:44.310] - Main Voice

But what you can't see in the photo is a gas wall heater, just out of view, softly hissing. Its heat beckons Sunday afternoon slumber.

EP08 [08:55.260] - Speaker 2

In the background... a net-curtain-veiled window, our photo source of light.
To the left of the frame, an open plywood trunk. Its padlock dangles.
On top, a pile of vinyl records... some propped up and sleeveless.

EP08 [09:11.200] - Main Voice

Cousin Morris' lifelong collection.
Now in his early sixties, Cousin Morris is living with his mother again, beard a little greyer but looking good for his age.

EP08 [09:23.480] - Speaker 2

To the right of Morris' collection, a stern, high backed beige armchair, softened up by a red floral comfy cushion and colourful pieces of crochet.
And to the right of that, a small, square, stocky coffee table with a packet of cigarettes in easy reach.
Behind this... tucked into the corner, a wooden cabinet shaped a little like the front of a boat, full of

crockery and glasses. Atop, sundry ornaments, including a glazed plaster fruit pyramid sitting on pale pink and blue crinoline

Next to the cabinet, the mantelpiece covered in french lace, laden with more ornaments.

EP08 [10:02.700] - Main Voice

And there. There is Goddy May... in all her splendour.

EP08 [10:06.440] - Speaker 2

She is seated in the foreground to the right, facing inward, dressed in acrylic beige nightdress under a dark blue —

EP08 [10:14.180] - Main Voice

Midnight blue quilted house coat with huge bright flowers.

EP08 [10:17.940] - Speaker 2

Hands clasped on her lap, she looks at the camera through oversized glasses.

EP08 [10:23.140] - Main Voice

She's plumper now, her bemused half-smile evermore immortalised.

EP08 [10:28.240] - Speaker 2

Her white hair is neatly plaited

Behind her, on the back of the chair, a Father Christmas towel.

EP08 [10:34.080] - Main Voice

The rosy-cheeked Santa is smiling at us, too.

Outside the frame, the clock on the wall that can neither be seen nor heard is ticking her time away.

What's the time, Mister Wolf?

...

On what I feared could be my last visit to see Goddy May, I asked her about my father.

I'd always assumed, hoped, she could fill me in on a detail or two about him. But it turns out she wasn't around at that time. She was living in another town... and travelling in Jamaica was so bad at the time that she may as well have been in another country.

This also means she knows nothing of my sister Vera's father nor of her childhood in Jamaica.

That comes as a blow. It's rather like having kept a sealed envelope forever and finally opening it... to find it was empty all that time.

EP09. DAYLIGHT COMES

EP09 [00:00.640] - Speaker 2

Out of the blue, an airmail envelope lands on the doormat.

EP09 [00:10.170] - Main Voice

It's from cousin Morris's daughter in Jamaica to my mother.

EP09 [00:13.920] - Main Voice, Speaker 2

She hopes she is keeping well, etc.

And she is sorry to bother her, but she could do with a little help.

EP09 [00:20.090] - Speaker 2

She never hears from her father.

EP09 [00:21.470] - Main Voice

What The Hell, Morris!

EP09 [00:22.840] - Speaker 2

He's too busy living it up in London.

EP09 [00:24.570] - Main Voice

Bloody Hell, Morris!

EP09 [00:25.450] - Speaker 2

She has hungry mouths to feed and is struggling to get by.

EP09 [00:28.120] - Main Voice

Geez, Morris.

EP09 [00:28.810] - Speaker 2

Anything you can spare would be a great help.

Clothes, shoes, a little money...

EP09 [00:32.790] - Main Voice

Esther puts a parcel and a postal order together.

Over the years... each time out of a different blue... we will receive more letters from Morris' daughter asking for a little more help.

It gets to the point where she doesn't even bother to mention Morris anymore.

She gives him up as a lost cause.

...

Boozing, womanising, too much *Living the Life*, will be the death of Cousin Morris.

And lo, it comes to pass that on a particularly mild winter day in November 2008, the sun sets on Alan Alveda Morris Morrison. Cousin Morris collapses on the street.

He leaves this world for the next, having made no arrangements other than the verbal bequeathal of his records collection to our cousin Theodora... who goes by three different surnames, depending on who's asking.

Shortly before shuffling off, Cousin Morris, forever in need of cash, discovers that Goddy May, for fear that as a pauper, her son would be cremated and his ashes spread in some godforsaken corner of some forever forgotten Garden of Remembrance, had entrusted funds to Cousin Theodora for his burial.

Theodora had secretly promised Goddy May she would ensure Morris' burial in the allotted space in the tomb for two, and add his epitaph next to Goddy May's.

EP09 [01:57.990] - Main Voice

However, cousin Maurice hassles, harangues, and harries poor Theodora until she gives him his burial money, which he promptly pisses away at the pub with his pals.

After cousin Morris' demise, Theodora scrapes together barely enough cash to bury him. Epitaphless.

Although the idea of using Cousin Morris' gold teeth to pay for his epitaph would have been quite poetic, it didn't really enter our heads. Not much.

...

And so, October 2011, my mother passes away, and like Goddy May, she's buried in Lambeth cemetery.

I walk from Esther's grave to Goddy May's.

The path is still wet from this morning's rain.

Crows caw.

Something scuttles across my path and stops at the foot of a tree... a curious squirrel, observing me. I stop walking and we stare each other out, motionless. Neither of us speaks.

I turn and continue on my way.

I glance back a few times and see she's still there, watching me.

...

I kept a mere handful of Esther's things.

I kept her Bible, of course, and three of her shirts, her bangles that would jingle-jangle on her bony wrist. They're tucked away amongst my clothes, making sure I regularly bump into them.

EP09 [03:44.580] - Main Voice

At this point, I decide to look for my sister, Vera, whom I haven't laid eyes on for years... *decades*, to be honest.

I have to contact her. I need to let her know what has happened. So, I contact the family tracing service of the Salvation Army.

While sorting out our mother's belongings, I come across two photos of Vera, carefully hidden away. Since our mother had always studiously avoided any mention of her, it wouldn't have done to have photos of her casually lying around, would it?

In one photo, she is a happy teen, brimming with life.

In the other, she is in her twenties, less sure of herself.

At this stage, my imagination runs away with me.

In theory, Vera could be anywhere in the world, perhaps living under a false identity.

Time passes.

A year later, the Salvation Army report they have traced Vera. She had never moved away from Croydon. We would never have found her, though. She had been using her married name. We had either never known it or had completely forgotten it.

So... no Latin America, no secret life, no mystery, no hiding in plain sight.

It is the Salvation Army's unfortunate duty to inform me that Vera had died on New Year's Eve, eight years earlier, in 2004.

And thus, we fade out... and back in.

EP09 [05:17.160] - Main Voice

Back to the Gardens of Remembrance. The gardens of *auld acquaintance not forgot*, where our tale began.

The Gardens' memorial catalogue, with its outrageously priced products and services, is a great grief-killer. They've thought of everything...

EP09 [05:36.680] - Speaker 2, Main Voice

A standard memorial rose plaque, including up to six lines of text and one emblem — 500 pounds.

The lease of a bronze plaque on a bench for 15 years — two grand.

Handcrafted jewellery and glassware designed to incorporate your loved one's ashes, in the form of cuff links, pendants, earrings and paperweights — while stocks last.

EP09 [05:57.690] - Main Voice

However, I decide on an ornate little entry with courtly, cursive characters in the *Book of Remembrance* and *e-Remembrance*.

On this sombre September morning, at the outer reaches of the gardens, betwixt the silver birches and foxgloves and forget-me-nots, traces of Vera hang on the motionless air.

Stateless silence.

Daylight has come.

END