

A Hurricane for Irene

Daddy's Supper
(Excerpt)

When she's six months pregnant with me, Irene's family invites her to a fete at Mamma's house in Mt. Rose. They are celebrating the purchase of land on Pointzfield Estate. The land, like most of the estates on the island, is owned by Mamma's white family, the DeGales. After her father died, the property went to her brothers and sisters. He'd removed her from his will when she married a black man.

For months, the land has been up for sale. Though several potential buyers had pursued it, Mamma's family was given the first preference to purchase. The DeGales had delayed the sale until Mamma's family was able to raise the money. Now, several of Mamma's children and extended family has come up with the money to jointly purchase it. Uncle Roy, Mamma's last son, had recently purchased several acres of land from the DeGales. For several years, he's worked for the DeGales, managing their estates in the north. He'd secured an agreement with them that had allowed him to purchase land on Mt. Rose Estate. The DeGales has asked Uncle Roy to coordinate the sale of land on Pointzfield Estate, while they visit their original family home in England.

Irene and Lincoln had planned to attend the festivities. On the last minute, Lincoln is unable to attend. He has too much work to do on his job, but Irene and the children should go; after all, she's not seen her family since she moved to Gouyave. Perhaps, he'd join her later in the week. He'd get Uncle Toe to drive her there.

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She agrees to go for a week; she'll make sure he still gets his supper every evening. He wants to know how she plans to do that. She says she'll send it to him by *Easy Going* around evening-time each day.

Easy Going is a lumbering wooden bus that runs a daily route along the northwest coast. The bus itself reflects the personality of its owner and driver, Mr. Lee, a middle-aged, spindle-legged man who wears a felt hat, slacks and dress-shoes, no matter what the weather. He's an excruciatingly slow, methodical driver, who refuses to be rushed for any reason. Few people bother to call him Mr. Lee. He's just *Easy Going*, after the name of his bus. Passengers who take *Easy Going* are never in any hurry. If you have an interview or an appointment, *Easy Going* is not the bus for you.

Easy Going is more than a passenger bus. Along the way, he picks up and drops off an odd assortment of items, from letters and small packages, to bags of groceries, household supplies, large appliances and furniture. There would be twenty five-pound bags of flour, fifty-pound bags of brown sugar, plantains, bunches of green bananas, potatoes, nutmeg, cocoa, charcoal, sometimes even a refrigerator or gas stove. The delivery of these items is free; only passengers pay. If you have no bus fare, you could always offer *Easy Going* a plate of curry chicken, a shot of River Antoine rum after his last trip, or just agree to pay him when you get paid at the end of the month. If he trusts your cooking, he'd accept a chunk of black cake, but he doesn't want it too strong with prunes and black wine; that might give him *operation* while he's driving, and he'd be forced to 'put it down' in the bush, somewhere.

With the matter of Lincoln's supper settled, Irene piles the children into Uncle Toe's Land Rover and heads for Mt. Rose. She spends the day catching up with her relatives, enjoying the food and festivities. At night, after the party is over and everyone has gone home, she sits

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alone in the moonlight under the hibiscus tree. She muses about her youth, about the secrets the hibiscus tree could tell; of hiding in its thick foliage as a child, gazing over the houses, pretending she could fly; of evenings spent just sitting on the bench; of sweeping under that tree, waiting for Lincoln to come by on his bicycle. She could almost hear his bicycle bell, could almost see his flawless hair and smiling face emerging from the hill.

Uncle Toe notices her faraway look. He's one of her favorite uncles, somewhat of a rebel, with a great, hearty laugh and a laissez-faire manner. She tells him it's been a long time since she spent a night away from home, she didn't mind visiting, but she'd rather not spend the night. She looks so sad that Uncle Toe feels compelled to offer her a ride home.

She thinks it'll look bad if she leaves so soon; besides, it's after ten O' Clock, and the children are already asleep. He doesn't think she should worry about what people think or don't think, if she wants to go home, he'll take her home; the children could sleep in the Land Rover; she could make up a nice bed for them in the back and they won't even know what hit them. Anyway, he's headed to Gouyave to see his girlfriend; but, if he can't find her, Irene could find him a nice girlfriend for the night, and they'd call it even.

She laughingly agrees to find him a girlfriend. They round up the children, settle them comfortably in the back of the vehicle, and set off for home.

When they arrive in the town of Gouyave, it's after midnight. The town is mostly asleep. As always, there are a few hardy souls here and there along the Lance. On Depradine street, they spot Madge, unmistakable with her two long, braids, and odd manner of walking. Madge is the sister of Irene's best friend, Merle. Madge had fallen from a window when she was a baby. Her right leg had grown normally, while the left took on a mangled, twisted shape and never fully developed. She had an odd crawling-crouching way of walking on her hands and one good leg.

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They stop to talk to her. They exchange familiar greetings, and Irene asks her where she's going this hour of the night, didn't she think she should be home in bed.

Madge replies that she was jus' taking a stroll, the sleep couldn' come atall, and the baby loud, loud in her head, so she had to get up. An' is a good ting, because dat moonlight eatin' pin tonight.

Irene wants her to go home; Miss Olive mus'be worried.

Madge says that her mother worries too much, she's sure she's sitting in front the door right now. If they see her, jus' let her know she's coming jus' now. G'd night Mrs. Carlye, G'd night Sah, and thanks for de favor.

They get to Madge's home. As predicted, Miss Olive is sitting in her doorway, her legs resting freely on the top step, her plump frame outlined by the faded glow of the kerosene lamp in her living room.

Irene tells her what Madge said, but she seems distracted. Irene asks her for Merle, if she's already asleep.

She replies that Merle is not at home, she left since afternoon, that she said somethin' about Irene axing her to pick up Mr. Carlye's supper from *Easy Going*. But look at the hour now, an' no Merle yet. An' the chile belly eating itself, he want to nurse; she's sure Irene could hear him crying still. She sent Lorry to find Merle and he looked all down-street and on The Lance, still no sign o' Merle.

Irene is surprised. She did not ask Merle to deliver Lincoln's supper to him.

Still, as Merle's best friend, she tells Miss Olive that she did ask Merle to do her a favor, then afterwards changed her mind and decided to bring the supper home herself.

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Irene has an odd feeling about this. Something isn't right. She tells Uncle Toe to give 'er the gas, let's go home right now.

Uncle Toe says they're here already, so what's the rush. His mind is on Merle, too, he wants to know if she has a boyfriend; maybe his niece could make him known to this friend of hers. The sister wasn't bad looking, at all. If only she didn't have those funny, mismatched legs, boy.

They drive off with Miss Olive still muttering to herself that she's tired wid Merle, Merle mus' tink she have servant here, Merle don' good, at all, at all. If Merle know she can' take care o' children, she shouldn' open up she leg for man. Ay, ay.

When they pull up to her house, Irene is out of the door and up the steps before the vehicle comes to a stop. She tiptoes to the front door and peeks through the louvers.

Lincoln is in the armchair, and he has company. Her best friend, Merle.

Sitting on the floor, between his knees, laughing up into his face, shelling groundnuts and feeding it to his smiling mouth. The broken shells from the groundnuts are all over her white rug.

She turns the door knob gently, but the door is locked. She throws all pretence of stealth to the wind and bursts into a volley of fist pounds and kicks on the door, yelling for Lincoln to open the damn door at once.

Merle is instantly off the floor, the unshelled groundnuts scattering from her lap, the skirt of her white cotton dress ruffled from sitting too long. She scurries into the bedroom and slams the door, her silver bracelets composing a frenzied calypso.

Lincoln is motionless. It is one of those rare moments when he is at a loss for words. He hesitates for a moment to buy himself some thinking time. He dusts some groundnut shells from

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his white shirt, removes the loosened tie from around this neck. He stares with pseudo calm at the door, Irene continuing to pound on it. After a few moments, he stands, dusts more shells off his black slacks, walks casually to the door, and opens it.

Irene rushes past him, snatches her white rug off the floor, shaking the shells out with great fury.

He returns to sit in the armchair, leans back, crosses his legs, and addresses her calmly. He wants to know what she getting on with, what she making all that noise for, disturbing the neighbors. What she doing here, anyway, he thought she said she'd be in the country.

She fixes him in her stare like a bull does its matador. She doesn't care to answer his stupid questions, he's nothin' but a lying, dirty dog, and a wicked, conniving scamp. She can't turn her back for one minute without him doing his nastiness, and who the hell is that person who jus' run into her bedroom? That's what she'd like to know.

He tells her behave herself, nuh, stop acting like a mad woman. He don' know what she talking about, she mus'be seeing things. He wants to know if she left the children in the country.

She says if she's a mad woman, then she gon' act like one. Take that, you lying donkey.

She charges him, grabbing the sides of the armchair with both arms, toppling it backwards in one swift, powerful moment. He tumbles to the floor, landing in a sitting position, still in the chair. He remains like that for a moment, stunned into silence, one arm grabbing the arm of the chair, the other rubbing the back of his head. He is unable to comprehend the fuming, raging bull in front of him, too shocked to react.

Tonight, Irene is a woman possessed. A pregnant woman, all fury and no fear. A woman fuelled by the child in her belly. It isn't because, with Uncle Toe outside, this is one of those rare moments where she could fight back without fear. That didn't matter.

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Nothing did. Except the rage inside of her; the acrid taste of vengeance in her mouth. Rushing now, through her veins. Pushing against her temples, humming in her ears. Seeking an opening, needing release.

She attacks the bedroom door, realizing that Merle has barricaded it. She pushes and kicks and pounds, demanding that whoever is in her blasted bedroom had better open the door, and what they get they'll take.

Uncle Toe and Trevor hear the shouting and the furniture-tumbling. They dash up the steps, yelling don' touch my niece, ther', you know, and leave my mother alone, ah say.

Lincoln is somewhat recovered. He'd managed to pick himself off the floor, and position himself in front of the bedroom door. He's already figured that Uncle Toe is outside, that he'd driven Irene home.

Lincoln speaks to Trevor. He wants to know what he running in here like a race horse for, it's not like he could do something. If he knows what's good for him, he'd better find himself in a corner and hush up his big mouth.

Trevor looks at him with quiet defiance. He says, All 'am telling you, Daddy, is don' hit me mother. It's time for you to stop getting on like that. You could talk to her without hitting her, Daddy.

Uncle Toe says, The boy is right, Lincoln. You don' see that? Don' forget my niece heavy with you' child. You could make her lose it, if you continue like that. You take a drink, tonight? You mus' learn to control you'self, man.

Lincoln says, no, he didn' take no liquor, and he didn' touch nobody's niece, and if they look close enough, they'll see that the niece is the one beating him up. Look how she burst his head for no reason. No reason at all, Uncle Toe.

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Uncle Toe asks Irene what she getting on with, why she hit the man in his head, why she letting him chastise the man for no reason. He thought she was lonely for her husband, and all the time she wanted to bust the man head.

She laughs, sarcastically. Lonely for what. That lying, scamp. She didn' hit him in his head and 'is his fault if his head bust, she didn' tell him to sit in a chair that she was going to capsize. If he didn' want the bust head he should'a choose another chair.

Uncle Toes says, You mean to tell me you capsized a chair with a big man in it? Well you' a mad woman, in truth!

She says who told him to have a woman in her house, messing up her living room with groundnut shell, stinking woman putting nuts it in his mouth, and he grinning, grinning like a donkey-jackass. As if he never eat groundnuts in his life. He lucky all he get was a bust head. It damn good for him.

Lincoln says, You see what I am telling you, Uncle Toe? You see how she getting on? Always accusing me wrongfully, always cussing me about woman. I work too hard for that, Uncle Toe, too hard. I was here by meself from the time I got home. I got the plate of food from *Easy Going* and came right home and ate it; and this is where I been sitting ever since. Look, the dirty plate on the table ther' still. You don' see she mad! Just ask any one of the neighbors, ask Mr. Gordon. He could tell you about that woman's behavior. Look, Trevor ther'. If he wants to be honest, he could tell you how she does get on all the time.

Trevor remains silent. He stands next to his mother with his hands in his pockets. She tells him to go back outside and stay with the children. He tells her don't worry about the children, except for Bernie, they still sleeping. He's good right here for now.

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Lincoln is on a roll. Uncle Toe, what she accusing me of ther', is what she self is guilty of. Ask her about her policeman friend. Ask her. Everybody know about it. I take me own two eyes and see her coming out from the back of the police station one night. She didn' think I see her. What she don' realize is that I have friends everywhere. Right ther' in the police station. Whatever she does, I does know before I get home. Uncle Toe, I don't even think that child she carrying is mine.

Uncle Toe says, Now, don' talk stupidity, man. You know you' the father. Look here, don' put me in the middle of this. I don' want to know.

She tells Uncle Toe, Don' listen to that lying dog, Uncle Toe, he's the one with woman all over Gouyave. He's with all the women who work for him in the Pool. He's with one called Vennie; she's always beating battle with Merle for him. He has too much dirty habit. You don' know what I pass under that man. Since in Trinidad, he was with Clever Nine Toe. And when we come home to Grenada, he went back to Unida. She and her sister *plannass* me! And when I try to take them to court, he and Uncle Roy make me drop the case. As you see him ther' he don' good, nuh. Don' good, at all. And, Clever Nine Toe! That woman had nine toes, Uncle, and Lincoln still go with her! And if you see her, she pickie head and ugly. She face just like a mask, like she playing Carnival. But wait! One of these days the *dalla* will rotten and fall down from between his legs!

Uncle Toe tells her please let it not be today, that if it does fall, she'll still have to be the one to pick it up. He wants her to calm herself. Don't forget the state she's in. She must remember the baby. Where is this person she saw sitting in her living room?

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She says if she's so mad, then how come she can't go into her own bedroom, why's Lincoln blocking the damn door. That woman hiding under the bed, Uncle Toe, and she's going to drag her out and give her what Paddy gave the drum.

Trevor's wondering who's Paddy and what did he give the drum, Mammy. She says, He beat, it, Trev, he beat it.

Lincoln shrugs. The only thing under that bed is his box of books from Codrington college. If she wants to attack the books, she could go right ahead. She needs to go to the madhouse, that's what she needs.

She says, All right, then, is mad I gon' be. I guess I'll just attack the box of books; sorry books, but you gon' get it tonight.

He says, It's you' niece, Uncle Toe. Talk some sense in her head, nuh.

Uncle Toe tells him to move away from the door, he wants to see for himself. He moves and Uncle Toe strains against it for a bit and manages to get it open. He enters the bedroom, looks around and says there's no one in the room, Irene. He returns to the living room and Lincoln says, You don' see you' niece crazy.

Irene removes a delicate penknife from her pocket. She used it to peel onions and hot peppers. She had slipped it in her pocket that morning when she was packing for the trip to the country. She knew she would need it to fix his supper.

She enters the bedroom, Trevor and Uncle Toe behind her. She sees a suspicious hump in the center of the mattress. She apologizes loudly to the box of books because she is about to mash it up. She pushes the tip of the little knife into the middle of the hump, and the mattress begins to speak.

Oh God, Mrs. Carlyle. It's me, yes.

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So books could talk now? Well, wonders never cease in this world.

It's me, Merle, yes. I beg your pardon.

Merle? Who, Merle? I don't think nobody is under there at all. It's only the box of books. And books can't feel.

Please, Mrs. Carlyle. Don't kill me. I want to come out now. Please, oh God.

Come on out, you lying Judas. Face me now. You could laugh hee, hee, hee with me husband, and dirty up me good rug with your groundnut shell, but you can't face me?

Merle crawls out and stands up. Irene jerks the bed by the rails and slams it into her hips. She yelps and falls back to the floor.

Irene says, So you the penny tonight, Merle? You tell me that Vennie is with Lincoln and all the time, its you? You fighting big battle with Vennie for a man that is not even your own! I will mark you for life, Satan. You will remember me 'til you die.

She charges her with the knife, but Trevor grabs her hands and says, Oh Mammie, it's Ms. Merle oui. Spare her this time, spare her this time, Mammie.

Uncle Toe says, Yes, Irene. Pardon her. She just had a baby. Don't get you'self in trouble over this woman. He hustles Merle through the living room and down the stairs. She snivels and wipes her face with her dress. He tells her, Miss Lady, I was going to ask me niece to make me known to you. But, it look like you already joined the family. Now, please remove yourself from this house and don't ever come back here to bother these people again. You hear me?

She clatters down the steps, Irene screaming after her, calling her a damn, lucky coolie, threatening to wring the coolie hair off her head, to break up all the rotting teeth in her stink

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mouth, to kick her in that piece of cardboard she call an arse. And if she ever catches her in her house again, there will be no pardon next time for her lying arse.

My father sits on the chair, holding his head injury. She stands with both hands on her hips and observes him, shaking her head, breathing heavily. She goes to the table, picks up the lantern and slams it into the uninjured side of his head.

She says, Now you could use two hands to hold both sides of you' head.

She stalks out of the room, Uncle Toe shouting in surprise, Lord 'ave mercy, Lord 'ave mercy, and my father groaning and grabbing his second head injury for the night.