

KEEPING MUM

*January, present day: the front room of Emelia's house, decorated in pristine classic West Indian style, circa 1970: patterned carpet; patterned wallpaper; a dralon sofa and matching armchair; sideboard; side-tables and glass cabinet.*

*December - March 1962/3: a 1960s bedsit, cramped and drab. A small crate/lidded stool; one upright chair; a rocking chair; a small kitchen table; a boarded up fireplace; a curtain behind which lies a bed and a bassinet. This is a liminal space, co-existing with the front room and visible to EM and JAY but not to CYN.*

*Both spaces are simultaneously present and visible to the audience throughout, although lighting should be used to bring each space into relief, as necessary. The present day action takes place over one day. The 1962/3 story takes place over three months, Boxing Day to mid March.*

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1. *Outside. Darkness. Snow falling. JAY stands alone.*

JAY            After. After the dark. White swirling round my head dancing in my eyes shimmering twisting like to trick me. Then a noise like moaning whistling clinking I take no notice think it is outside the outside doing what it is doing nothing to do with me. Then clinking starts clunking like it is in with me inside me and shaking shoving everything shuddering and heavy still going forward but not because of me just gliding sliding slowing can do nothing not stop then not start. So I look for a marker a landmark to know the place by because I nearly know know I am near can *feel* I am nearly there but not sure nothing is sure like this no shadows no edges only light light white and then –

*EM emerges out of the snow, coatless, hatless, wearing one slipper.*

EM            **/I seen her**

JAY            I see her, sort of **/stepping**

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EM Walking over a bridge, a lady

JAY Out of the white

EM And I thought

JAY I think that is not **/right**

EM Same like the one up town

JAY No coat

EM Seen the price

JAY No hat, **/I think**

EM I thought, good

JAY Not good. What if / **that is**

EM Yes man, can afford that

JAY Could be my own

EM Tiny tiny **/perfect**

JAY Perfect

EM Feet, tip tapping over a bridge

JAY Like I am put / **here**

EM Put up a shilling a week till I had the set

JAY And she is all

EM White and blue, edged in silver

JAY Head down

EM Every detail picked out

JAY Not looking at anything

EM **/ Never seen anything so pretty**

JAY Never see anything so pretty, her legs, making holes in the **/white**

EM White and blue and silver.

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JAY I say, /Lady?

EM You need nice things, make a place a home.

JAY May I?

EM My mother said, never buy on the never-never.

JAY Mother, may I?

EM My mother said, put something aside for best.

*Beat. Beat. Lights up. They are in the front room of Emelia's house.*

JAY Is this the place?

EM Where's my lady?

JAY This is your home, yes?

EM [Where's] my Willow? *(Beat)* Where's Cynthia?

JAY Is Cynthia my lady?

EM My hands, my feet.

JAY Your lady is outside?

EM I'm freezing.

JAY It is cold outside.

EM I was outside? In the snow?

JAY Snow.

EM Why was I in the snow?

JAY You do not know?

EM I don't remember. Where's Cynthia? Cynthia always comes

Saturday.

JAY Lady –

EM She supposed to be here, it's Saturday, where is she?

JAY Sssh now. It is all right.

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*He helps her to her armchair.*

EM           Where's my slipper? One shoe off, one shoe / **on**.

JAY           On.

EM           My toes. They're blue.

JAY           They are very pretty. White and blue and –

*He touches her bare foot.*

EM           G'WAY WITH YOUR MONKEY PAWS. How you get in my house?

JAY           I came with you.

EM           Get out my house.

JAY           You were outside.

EM           How's that your business? I tell you you could come in here?

JAY           You said 'take me home.'

EM           *(Pause)* I said that? *(She tries to remember)* Why was you out there?

JAY           I was stopped. I saw you.

EM           Yes. *(Pause)* What's your name?

JAY           I am... Jay.

EM           J? Like J for John?

JAY           Just J.

EM           What kind of name dat?

JAY           What's your name?

EM           Mrs Emelia Gordon, State Registered Nurse.

JAY           Mrs Emelia Gordon, State Registered Nurse, your feet are cold. May  
I?

*EM nods. He rubs her feet warm. She relaxes.*

EM            You talk funny. You a immigrant? Sound like a immigrant. Where you from?

JAY           Outside.

EM            Outside where?

*He shrugs.*

EM            *(Grumpy)* Don't tell me. Place full up of foreigners. You hardly meet a English person these days. Used to be England was a English country, people speak the King's English. Then come the Queen's English... but it was always some royal kin' a English. Now you can't understand a word people say. Sleep in the parks, beg on the streets, no shame. Next minute they take over the corner shops then you see them on telly. Years black people had to wait before we get on telly. Now people come over here, act like they own the place. When we came we knew our place. Didn't expect no handouts, come to work. Everything was black and grey, grey, grey, everything dirty and broken. Is we brought colour to this place. Yellow and red and green, brought life! Yes man. We looked good, worked hard. Worked like dogs, built up this country from rubble... Save a few pennies, buy a few things, buy a house, make a home. Make it nice. You need nice things make a place a home. *(Pause)* Oh, that's nice. That's lovely.

JAY           Lovely?

EM            My feet. Better. Warmer.

*A mobile phone rings on the table beside EM'S chair. She ignores it.*

JAY           What is that?

EM            What?

JAY           That...

EM            Cha, noisy nonsense. Can't remember what to do with it. Is Cynthia give me. Always bringing something different.

*The phone stops.*

EM            I tell her, I like what I got, don't want your new things, got my own things.

JAY            Lots of things.

EM             Things I worked hard for. Paid for, not on the never-never.

JAY            What is never-never?

EM             You know, when you buy something expensive, a settee or a sideboard or something. You take it home but you aren't paid for it yet. Pay a little bit off the debt each week. Time you finish paying for it, the thing mashes up.

JAY            Mash up.

EM             Mash up and you're ready for a new one. You never really get the pleasure of it. It's yours but it doesn't feel like yours. My mother said 'don't do it' / **Never**.

JAY            Never.

EM             So everything I buy, I pay for outright.

JAY            They are better, warmer.

EM             What is?

JAY            Your things. Nice. Lovely.

*A telephone rings, off stage. EM sighs and extricates her feet.*

EM             *(Rising)* I best just...

*She exits. JAY looks around the room, examining EM'S ornaments etc. She returns, wearing slippers, holding a cordless phone.*

EM             It's Cynthia. Her train got cancelled, she won't be here for hours. I wasn't supposed to tell you that.

JAY            Why?

EM             I told her you was here. Told her you got me from outside. She says to make you leave.

JAY            You want me to leave?

EM             I told her, he leaves who'll look after me? She wants to know what kind of man you are.

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JAY           What kind of man am I?

EM             A real looker. I told her, hurry up, see for yourself. She's single, poor thing. Can't keep a man. She'd like you.

JAY           Do you like me?

EM             Fishing for compliments. *(Suddenly remembers)* She said to give you the phone, she wants to speak to you.

*She hands JAY the telephone, gesturing for him to put it to his ear but the connection has been cut. He hands the phone back.*

EM             What? Oh, she's gone. Must of rung off. She always here by now. Maybe that's why I went outside. Looking for she.

JAY           Your Lady?

EM             Who?

*The phone rings. EM presses the answer button and hands it to him.*

JAY           Hello. Jay. *(Pause)* Yes, in the snow. *(Pause)* No, I was coming this way. *(Pause)* No trouble. No, no rush. *(Pause)* But. But. But. *(Pause)* Yes, I can leave. *(Pause)* I will leave. Yes. No need to stay. You will be here very soon. *(Pause)* Yes, Mum is fine.

*Pause. He hands EM the phone. She turns away, listens, nodding, then:*

EM             Cyn? Hello? *(Pause)* Battery must'a dead.

*JAY shivers.*

EM             She says I must tell you thank you very much. She says, God knows what would'a happen if you weren't passing.

JAY           I was not passing.

EM             You was. You said, you was passing and you saw me –

JAY           I was stopped. A noise. Clink.

EM             Clink?

JAY           Then clunk.

EM             You mean your car?

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JAY            My car.

EM             You broke down?

JAY            Broke.

EM             But you've got cover?

JAY            Cover?

EM             Breakdown cover. When we had a car, Gabriel always got cover.

JAY            I have got cover.

EM             You've got to, 'specially in this.

JAY            This?

EM             Snow.

JAY            Specially.

EM             And you called the breakdown people?

JAY            Yes.

EM             Then I better let you go.

JAY            You want me to go?

EM             Only so you don't miss them. The breakdown people.

*He shivers, violently. She touches his face.*

EM             You're cold. Cold as ice.

JAY            Could not stop then could not start.

EM             The engine? So you've got no heater.

JAY            I have got nothing.

EM             Then what we need is soup. Proper Jamaican soup with hard food and dumplings. And a nice knuckle bone. Cynthia left me a big pot. Stay and keep warm, she won't know. Call your breakdown people, tell them fetch you from here. I'll warm the soup.

*She exits. JAY surveys the room with satisfaction.*



JAY            *(Slowly, discovering the words as he speaks)* Diddle diddle  
dumpling, dum dum dum. Went to bed with his trousers on. One  
shoe off and one shoe on.

*EM enters. She walks past JAY and enters the bedsit.*

2. *The bedsit. Valentine's Day 1963. FRANK holds the baby. He hands it to EM.*

EM            *(Chants)* One shoe off and one shoe on.  
Diddle diddle dumpling –

FRANK        I just saying, if you need more paraffin I can get it for you. This  
Trini fella at the Garage, typical small island boy –

EM            Don't trouble yourself. Gabriel **/sorting everything**.

FRANK        It's no trouble. This fella yesterday, he's selling stockings and scent  
for Valentine's. Last week was a stash of Players cigarettes. Week  
before, towels. Thick, white like the snow, every last one stamp  
'ilton 'otel! I don't even like to think where he gets the paraffin. If is  
even paraffin. Could be siphoning fuel off the bus but this'ya  
weather –

EM            Gabriel will sort it.

FRANK        *(Pause)* You make your bed, then?

EM            I make my bed.

FRANK        And seen what happens when you rock the boat.

EM            Boat, bed, either way I'm in it.

FRANK        You sure?

EM            See the ring ya?

FRANK        I mean, sure you don't want me to get the paraffin?

*She hands him the baby.*

EM            Only one thing you need to do, baby brother.

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FRANK        Likkle nostrils flare up like a bull. Pickney! What a set o' nose holes you got. Smile for Uncle. Trying to smile, look.

EM            Ahhh! The doo-doo face.

*FRANK attempts to return the baby.*

EM            Uncle! Yu 'fraid a likkle baby doo-doo?

FRANK        I just eat.

EM            Is your nappy I used to change, you know. Big ole doo doo / **you used to do.**

FRANK        Milly.

EM            And 'tink!

FRANK        I just eat!

EM            I would hold my nose and say, is all right Em, one day Frank will pay you back.

FRANK        You want me to pay you back?

EM            Yes.

FRANK        When you are old and turn fool, I solemnly promise to change your nappy.

EM            Me, turn fool? You turn fool. *(Takes the baby)*

FRANK        *(To baby)* Man aint supposed to change nappy, is it? *(To EM)* Is really me the chile favour.

EM            Rubbish! Is pure Gabriel.

FRANK        Cha, look the eyes, the mouth, even the hand. Self same. Going to grow up strong like yu Uncle, and drive a big red bus. Brrrmm!

EM            Not if we don't sort it out.

FRANK        Sort out by then, don't worry about it. Brrrmm!

EM            Stay for dinner, Franky.

*Beat.*

FRANK        You take the pickney outside yet?

EM            I didn't tell you? We fell down in the snow.

FRANK        Wha'?

EM            M'dear. Baby strapped to me back, bag of shopping each hand, foot slide out, me gone.

FRANK        Shopping.

EM            What?

FRANK        Not Gabriel sorting everything?

EM            Don't start. I needed a few extra bits (*to baby*) so I thought we'd take our first little trip.

FRANK        An' trip fe true!

EM            Somehow I end up more on my side otherwise Lord knows what would happen to the baby... Poor mite. Put up one piece o' cow bawling. I sat right there in the snow and bawl too.

FRANK        Anyone help you?

EM            Street empty.

FRANK        Every right minded person indoors, hunched over the fire.

EM            You saying my mind aint right?

FRANK        Even if them did look out and see you, no-one would'a come.

EM            Frank, that's not fair.

FRANK        These bastards. Cold like their weather. Would step right over you in the street.

EM            Someone did help me.

FRANK        You just said the street was empty.

EM            It *was*, then someone came.

FRANK        Who?

EM            A... a red-face gentleman. Had on a bowler hat. Said we all had to pull together. Blitz spirit.

- FRANK        Then he took off in his spitfire, toodle-oo, toodle-pip. (*Hums The Dambusters' March*)
- EM            (*Talking over him*) He helped me up and –
- FRANK        (*In uber-RP*) 'Come on, Nigger, jump up.'
- EM            He never said that.
- FRANK        (*Kisses his teeth*) From the flim. *Dambusters*. I nearly dead in the picture house. Imagine people call a dog Nigger. /**A dog.**
- EM            This gentleman was nice. He let me hold on to his arm. He even carried the shopping. He didn't have to do that, did he?
- FRANK        A red face gentleman?
- EM            Yes!
- FRANK        Blitz spirit.
- EM            And what?
- FRANK        Milly!
- EM            What?
- FRANK        You and your fairytales.
- EM            Shut up. No wonder you and Gabriel can't agree, you're exactly the same.

*The baby begins to whimper.*

- FRANK        See what you done? That is a downright dutty lie and even this baby scandalised.
- EM            Oh you vexatious... (*Laughs, takes the baby*) Come. Time for nappy and milk.
- FRANK        (*Rises*) That's me cue.
- EM            You just reach. Stay, put up your foot. I'll go behind the curtain.
- FRANK        It's Valentines, remember? New lady friend expecting me for supper.

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- EM Another one.
- FRANK This one from B.G. Giving them English girls a rest, need some home comforts.
- EM You are terrible.
- FRANK Small island people funny though.
- EM B.G. is not an island.
- FRANK People mix up same way. Know what they call rice and peas? 'Course you do, you married a B.G. man. Peas and rice. Never heard such foolishness.
- EM Stay. I made rice and peas, 'specially for you.
- FRANK Sounds like rocking the boat.
- EM And stew chicken. And soup, proper soup, with dumplings and a knucklebone.
- FRANK And hard food? I'll stay if its got a bit of yam or cho-cho.
- EM That's not fair. You know we can't get hard food.
- FRANK *(Puts on his hat and coat)* Then I'll take some in a dish for tomorrow.
- EM Franky, don't make me beg. Please stay, please.
- FRANK Another time.
- EM How it going fix if you won't talk about it?
- FRANK Nothing to talk about.
- EM You know what he's like.
- FRANK The Angel ruddy Gabriel.
- EM One of you have to bend.
- FRANK His turn.
- EM I can't stand this coldness between you.
- FRANK Tell him one of your fairytales.

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EM           And me stuck in the middle.

FRANK       Say I was coming and I fell and sprained me foot.

EM           I love you both.

FRANK       Mek *him* come to *me*.

EM           I can't choose.

FRANK       Then we'll see.

EM           Don't ask me to choose.

FRANK       *(Pause. Realising)* Him say no already?

EM           Frank...

FRANK       Ooh. Him say never.

EM           Franky.

FRANK       Milly... look after yourself, y'hear.

*He kisses her, kisses the baby, exits.*