AUSTIN C. CLARKE
(1932)

Griff!

Griff was a black man from Barbados who sometimes denied he was black. Among black Americans who visited Toronto, he was black: 'Right on!' 'Peace and love, Brother!' and 'Power to the people!' would suddenly become his vocabulary. He had emigrated to Toronto from Britain, and as a result, thought of himself as a black Englishman. But he was blacker than most immigrants. In colour, that is. It must have been this double indemnity of being British and black that caused him to despise his blackness. To his friends, and his so-called friends, he flaunted his British experience, and the 'civilized' bearing that came with it; and he liked being referred to as a West Indian who had lived in London, for he was convinced that he had an edge, in breeding, over those West Indians who had come straight to Canada from the canefields in the islands. He had attended Ascot many times and he had seen the Queen in her box. He hated to be regarded as just black.

'Griff, but you're blasted black, man,' Clynn said once, at a party in his own home, 'and the sooner you realize that fact, the more rass-hole wiser you would be!' Clynn usually wasn't so honest, but that night he was drunk.

What bothered Griff along with his blackness was that most of his friends were 'getting through': cars and houses and 'swinging parties' every Friday night, and a yearly trip back home for Christmas and for Carnival. Griff didn't have a cent in the bank. 'And you don't even have *one* blasted child, neither!' Clynn told him that same night.

But Griff was the best-dressed man present. They all envied him for that. And nobody but his wife really knew how poor he was in pocket. Griff smiled at them from behind his dark-green dark glasses. His wife smiled too, covering her embarrassment for her husband. She never criticized him in public, by gesture or by attitude, and she said very little to him about his ways, in their incensed apartment. Nevertheless, she carried many burdens of fear and failure for her husband's apparent ambitionless attitudes. England had wiped some British manners on her, too. Deep down inside, Griff was saying to Clynn and the others, *godblindyougodblindyou!*

'Griffy, dear, pour your wife a Scotch, darling. I've decided to enjoy myself.' She was breathing as her yoga teacher had taught her to do.

And Griffy said, *godblindyougodblindyou!* again, to Clynn; poured his wife her drink, poured himself a large Scotch on the rocks, and vowed, *I am going to drink all your Scotch tonight, boy!* This was his only consolation. Clynn's words had become wounds. Griff grew so centred around his own problems that he did not, for one moment, consider any emotion coming from his wife. 'She's just a nice kid,' he told Clynn once, behind her back. He had draped his wife in an aura of sanctity; and he would become angry to the point of violence, and scare anybody, when he thought his friends' conversation had touched the cloud and virginity of sanctity in which he had clothed her: like taking her out on Friday and Saturday nights to the Cancer Calypso Club, in the entrails of the city, where pimps and doctors and lonely immigrants hustled women and brushed reputations in a brotherhood of illegal liquor. And if the Club got too crowded, Griff would feign a headache, and somehow make his wife feel the throbbing pain of his migraine, and would take her home in a taxi, and would recover miraculously on his way back along Sherbourne Street, and with the tact of a good barrister, would make tracks back to the Cancer and dance the rest of the limp-shirt night with a woman picked from among the lonely West Indian stags: his jacket let loose to the sweat and the freedom, his body sweet with the music rejoicing in the happy absence of his wife in the sweet presence of this woman.

But after these hiatuses of dance, free as the perspiration pouring down his face, his wife would be put to bed around midnight, high up in the elevator, high off the invisible hog of credit, high up on the Chargex Card, and Griff would be tense, for days. It was a tenseness which almost gripped his body in a paralysis, as it strangled the blood in his body when the payments of loans for furniture and for debts approached, and they always coincided with the approaching of his paycheque, already earmarked against its exact face value. In times of this kind of stress, like his anxiety at the racetrack, when the performance of a horse contradicted his knowledge of the Racing Form and left him broke, he would grumble, 'Money is *naught* all.'

Losing his money would cause him to ride on streetcars, and he hated any kind of public transportation. He seemed to realized his blackness more intensely; white people looking at him hard—questioning his presence, it seemed. It might be nothing more than the way his colour changed colour, going through a kaleidoscope of tints and shades under the varying ceiling lights of the streetcar. Griff never saw it this way. To him, it was staring. And his British breeding told him that to look at a person you didn't know (except she was a woman) was *infra dig*. *Infra dig* was the term he chose when he told Clynn about these incidents of people staring at him on the streetcars. The term formed itself on his broad thin lips, and he could never get the courage to spit it at the white people staring at him.

When he lost his money, his wife, after not having had dinner nor the money to buy food (the landlord locked the apartment door with a padlock one night while they were at a party), would smile in that half-censuring smile, a smile that told you she had been forced against the truth of her cir-

instances, to believe with him, that money was 'not all, at-all'. But left to herself, left to the ramblings of her mind and her aspirations and her fingers over the new broadloom in her girl-friend's home, where her hand clutched the tight sweating glass of Scotch on the rocks, her Scotch seeming to absorb her arriving unhappiness with the testimony of her friend's broadloom, or in Clynn's recreation room, which she called a 'den'; in her new sponge of happiness, fabricated like the house in her dreams, she would put her smile around her husband's losses, and in the embrace they would both feel higher than anybody present, because, 'Griffy, dear, you were the only one there with a Master of Arts.'

'I have more brains than *any one* there. They only coming-on strong. But I don't have to come on strong, uh mean, I don't *have* to come on strong, but . . .'

One day, at Greenwood Race Track, Griff put his hand into his pocket and pulled out five twenty-dollar bills, and put them on one race: he put three twenty-dollar bills on Number Six, on *the fucking nose—to win! Eh?* (he had been drinking earlier at the Pilot Tavern); and he also put two twenty-dollar bills on Number Six, *to show*. He had studied the Racing Form like a man studying his torts: he would put it into his pocket, take it out again, read it in the bathroom as he trimmed his moustache; he studied it on the sweet-smelling toilet bowl, he studied it as he might have studied laws in Britain; and when he spoke of his knowledge in the Racing Form, it was as if he had received his degrees in the Laws of Averages, and not in English Literature and Language.

And he 'gave' a horse to a stranger that same day at Greenwood. 'Buy Number Three, man. I read the Form for three days, taking notes. It *got* to be Number Three!' The man thanked him because he himself was no expert; and he spent five dollars (more than he had ever betted before) on Number Three, to *win*. 'I read the Form like a blasted book, man!' Griff told him. He slipped away to the wicket farthest away; and like a thief, he bought his own tickets: 'Number Six! Sixty on the nose! forty to show!' and to himself he said, smiling, 'Law o' averages, man, law of averages.'

Tearing up Number Six after the race, he said to the man who had looked for him to thank him, and who thanked him and shook his hand and smiled with him, 'I don't have to come on strong, man, I *mastered* that Form.' He looked across the field to the board at the price paid on Number Three, and then he said to the man, 'Lend me two dollars for the next race, man. I need a bet.'

The man gave him three two-dollar bills and told him, '*Any* time, pardner, any time! Keep the six dollars. Thank *you*!'

Griff was broke. Money is *naught* all, he was telling the same man who, seeing him waiting by the streetcar stop, had picked him up. Griff settled himself back into the soft leather of the new Riviera, going west, and said again to the man, 'Money is naught all! But I don't like to come on strong. Uh mean, you see how I mastered the *Form*, did you?'

'You damn right, boy!' the man said, adjusting the tone of the tape-deck. 'How you like my new car?'

The elevator was silent that evening, on the way up to the twenty-fifth floor; and he could not even lose his temper with it: 'This country is uncivilized—even the elevators—they make too much noise a man can't even think in them; this place only has money but it doesn't have any culture or breeding or style so everybody is grabbing for money money money.' The elevator that evening didn't make a comment. And neither did his wife: she had been waiting for him to come from work, straight, with the money untouched in his monthly paycheque. But Griff had studied the Racing Form thoroughly all week, and had worked out the laws and averages and notations in red felt-pen ink; had circles all the 'long shots' in green, and had moved through the 'donkeys' (the slow horses) with waves of blue lines; had had three 'sure ones' for that day; and had averaged his wins against heavy bets against his monthly salary, it was such a 'goddamn cinch'! He had developed a migraine headache immediately after lunch, slipped through the emergency exit at the side, holding his head in his hand, his head full of tips and cinches, and had caught the taxi which miraculously had been waiting there, with the meter ticking; had run through the entrance of the racetrack, up the stairs, straight for the wicket to be on the Daily Double; had invested fifty dollars on a 'long shot' (worked out scientifically from his red-marked, green-and-blue wavy-line Form), and had placed 'two goddamn dollars' on the favourite—just to be sure!—and went into the clubhouse. The favourite won. Griff lost fifty dollars by the first race. But had won two dollars on his two-dollar bet.

'I didn't want to come on strong,' he told the man who was then a stranger to him. The man could not understand what he was talking about: and he asked for no explanation. 'I didn't want to come on strong, but I worked out all the winners today, since ten o'clock last night. I *picked* them, man. I can pick them. But I was going for the 'long shot'. Hell, what is a little bread? Fifty dollars! Man, that isn't no bread, at all. If I put my hand in my pocket now, look . . . *this is* bread! . . . five *hundred* dollars. I can lose, man, I can afford to lose bread. Money don't mean anything to me, man, money is no *big* thing! . . . money is *naught* all.'

His wife remained sitting on the Scandinavian couch, which had the habit of whispering to them, once a month, 'Fifty-nine thirty-five owing on me!' in payments. She looked up at Griff as he gruffed through the door. She smiled. Her face did not change its form, or its feeling, but she smiled. Griff grew stiff at the smile. She got up from the couch. She brushed the anxiety of time from her waiting miniskirt ('My wife must dress well, and look *sharp*, even in the house!'), she tidied the already-tidy hairdo she had just got from Azans, and she went into the kitchen, which was now a wall separating Griff from her. Griff looked at the furniture, and wished he could sell it all in time for the races tomorrow afternoon: the new unpaid-for living-room couch, desk, matching executive chair, the table and matching

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'You're a blasted . . . boy, do you lose *just* for fun or wha'?' Clynn sputtered. 'Why the arse you don't become a *groom*, if you like racehorse so much? Or you's a . . . a *paffological* loser?'

'Uh mean, I don't like to come on strong, or anything, but, money is *naught* all . . .'

'Rass-hole put down my Scotch, then! You drinking my fucking Scotch!'

And it rested there. It rested there because Griff suddenly remembered he was among men who knew him: who knew his losses both in Britain and Canada. It rested there also, because Clynn and the others knew that his manner and attitude towards money, and his wife's expressionless smile, were perhaps lying expressions of a turbulent inner feeling of failure. 'He prob'ly got rass-hole ulcers, too'! Clynn said, and then spluttered into a laugh. Griff thought about it, and wondered whether he had indeed caused his wife to be changed into a different woman altogether. But he couldn't know that. Her smile covered a granite of silent and apparent contentment. He wondered whether he hated her, to the bone, and whether she hated him. He felt a spasm through his body as he thought of her hating him, and not knowing about it. For so many years living together, both here and in Britain; and she was always smiling. Her constancy and her cool exterior, her smiles, all made him wonder now, with the Scotch in his hand, about her undying devotion to him, her faithfulness, pure as the sheets in their sweet-smelling bedroom; he wondered whether 'I should throw my hand in her arse, *just* to see what she would do.' But Clynn had made up his own mind that she was, completely, destroyed inside: her guts, her spirit, her aspirations, her procreative mechanism, 'Hysterectomy all shot to pieces!' Clynn said cruelly, destroyed beyond repair, beneath the silent consolation and support which he saw her giving to her husband; at home among friends and relations, and in public among his sometimes silently criticizing friends. 'I don't mean to come on strong, but . . .'

'You really want to know what's wrong with Griff?' Clynn's sister, Princess, asked one day. 'He want a *stiff* lash in his backside! He don't know that he's gambling-'way his wife's life? He doesn't know that? Look, he don't have chick nor child! Wife working in a good job, for *decent* money, and they don't even live in a decent apartment that you could say, well, rent eating out his sal'ry. Don't own no record-player. *Nothing*. And all he doing is walking 'bout Toronto with his blasted head high in the air! He ain' know this is Northamerica? Christ, he don't even speak to poor people. He ain' have no motto-car, like some. Well, you tell me then, what the hell is Griff doing with thirteen-thousand Canadian dollars a year? Supporting race-horse? No, man, you can't tell me that, 'cause not even the *most* wutless o' Wessindians living in Toronto, could gamble-'way thirteen thousand dollars! Jesuschrist! that is twenty-six thousand back in Barbados! Think o' the land he could buy back home wid thirteen-thousand Canadian dollars. And spending it 'pon a race-horse? What the hell is a race-horse? *Thirteen thousand*? But lissen to

me! One o' these mornings, that wife o' his going get up and tell him that she with-child, that she *pregnunt* . . .' ('She can't get pregnunt, though, Princess, 'cause she already had one o' them operations!') 'Anyhow, if his wife was a diff'rent person, she would 'ave walked-out on his arse *long ago*! Or else, break his two blasted hands! and she won't spend a *day* in jail!'

When Griff heard what Princess had said about him, he shrugged his shoulders and said, 'I don't have to come on strong, but if I was a different man, I would really show these West Indian women something . . .' He ran his thin, long, black fingers over the length of his old-fashioned slim tie, he shrugged the grey sports jacket that was a size too large, at the shoulders, into shape and place, wet his lips twice, and said, 'Grimme another Scotch, man.' While Clynn fixed the Scotch, he ran his thumb and index finger of his left hand down the razor edge of his dark brown trouser seams. He inhaled and tucked his shirt and tie neatly beneath the middle button of his sports jacket. He took the Scotch, which he liked to drink on the rocks, and he said, 'I don't have to come on strong, but I am going to tell you something . . .'

The next Friday night was the first day of fête in the long weekend. There hadn't been a long weekend in Canada for a long time. Everybody was tired of just going to work, coming home, watching CBC television, bad movies on the TV, and then going to bed. 'There ain' no action in this fucking town,' Clynn was saying for days, before the weekend appeared like raindrops on a farmer's dry-season head. And everybody agreed with him. It was so. Friday night was here, and the boys, their wives, their girl-friends, and their 'outside women' were noisy and drunk and happy. Some of the men were showing off their new bell-bottom trousers and broad leather belts worn under their bulging bellies, to make them look younger. The women, their heads shining like wet West Indian tar roads, the smell from the cosmetics and grease that went into their kinky hair and on their faces, to make them look sleek and smooth, all these smells and these women mixed with the cheap and domestic perfumes they used, whenever Avon called; and some women, wives who husbands 'were getting through', were wearing good-looking dresses, in style and fashion; others were still back home in their style, poured in against their wishes and the better judgement of their bulging bodies; backsides big, sometimes too big, breasts bigger, waists fading into the turbulence of middle age and their behinds, all poured against the shape of their noisy bodies, into evil-fitting, shiny material, made on sleepy nights after work, on a borrowed sewing machine. But everybody was happy. They had all forgotten now, through the flavour of the calypso and the peas and the rice, the fried chicken, the curry-chicken, that they were still living in a white man's country; and it didn't seem to bother them now, nor touch them now. Tonight, none of them would tell you that they hated Canada; that they wanted to go back home; that they were going 'to make a little money, first'; that they were only waiting till then; that they were going to go back before the 'blasted Canadian

they wouldn't tell you tonight that they all suffered some form of racial discrimination in Canada, and that that was to be expected, since 'there are certain things with this place that are not just right'; not tonight. Tonight, Friday night, was forgetting night. West Indian night. And they were at the Cancer Club to forget and to drink and to get drunk. To make plans for some strange woman's (or man's) body and bed, to spend 'some time' with a real West Indian 'thing', to eat her boiled mackerel and green bananas, which their wives and women had, in their ambitions to be 'decent' and Canadian, forgotten how to cook, and had left out of their diets, especially when Canadian friends were coming to dinner, because that kind of food was 'plain West Indian stupidness'. Tonight, they would forget and drink, forget and dance, and dance to forget.

'Oh-Jesus-Christ, Griff!' Stooly shouted, as if he was singing a calypso. He greeted Griff this way each time he came to the Club, and each time it was as if Stooly hadn't seen Griff in months, although they might have been together at the track the same afternoon. It was just the way Stooly was. 'Oh-Jesus-Christ, Griff!' he would shout, and then he would rush past Griff, ignoring him, and make straight for Griff's wife. He would wrap his arms round her slender body (once his left hand squeezed a nipple, and Griff saw, and said to himself, 'Uh mean, I won't like to come on strong about it, but . . .'; and did nothing about it), pulling up her new minidress above the length of decency, worn for the first time tonight, exposing the expensive lace which bordered the tip of her slip. The veins of her hidden age, visible only at the back of her legs, would be exposed to Griff, who would stand and stare and feel 'funny', and feel, as another man inquired with his hands all over his wife's body, the blood and the passion and the love mix with the rum in his mouth. Sometimes, when in a passion of brandy, he would make love to his wife as if she was a different woman, as if she was no different from one of the lost women found after midnight on the crowded familiar floor of the Cancer.

'Haiii! How?' the wife would say, all the time her body was being crushed. She would say, 'Haiii! How?' every time it happened; and it happened every time; and every time it happened, Griff would stand and stare, and do nothing about it, because his memory of British breeding told him so; but he would feel mad and helpless afterwards, all night; and he would always want to kill Stooly, or kill his wife for doing it; but he always felt she was so fragile. He would want to kill Stooly more than he would want to kill his wife. But Stooly came from the same island as his wife. Griff would tell Clynn the next day, on the telephone, that he should have done something about it; but he 'didn't want to come on strong'. Apparently, he was not strong enough to rescue his wife from the rape of Stooly's arms, as he rubbed his body against hers, like a dog scratching its fleas against a tree.

Once, a complete stranger saw it happen. Griff had just ordered three drinks: one for his wife, one for himself, and one for Stooly, his friend. Griff looked at the man, and in an expansive mood (he had made the 'long shot' in the last race at Woodbine that afternoon), he asked the stranger, 'What're you drinking?'

'Rum, sah!'

'I am going to buy you a goddamn drink, just because I like you, man.'

The stranger did not change the mask on his face, but stood there, looking at Griff's dark-green lenses. Then he said, 'You isn' no blasted man at all, man!' He then looked behind: Stooly was still embracing Griff's wife. It looked as if he was feeling her up. The man took the drink from Griff, and said, 'You is no man, sah!'

Griff laughed; but no noise came out of his mouth. 'Man, that's all right. They went to school together in Trinidad.'

'In *my* books, you still ain' no fucking man, boy!' The stranger turned away from Griff: and when he got to the door of the dance floor, he said, 'Thanks for the drink, *boy*.'

The wife was standing beside Griff now, smiling as if she was a queen parading through admiring lines of subjects. She looked, as she smiled, like she was under the floodlights of some première performance she had prepared herself for a long time. She smiled, although no one in particular expected a smile from her. Her smiling went hand in hand with her new outfit. It had to be worn with a smile. It looked good, as usual, on her; and it probably understood that it could only continue to look good and express her personality if she continued smiling. At intervals, during the night, when you looked at her, it seemed as if she had taken the smile from her handbag, and had then powdered it onto her face. She could have taken it off any time, but she chose to wear it the whole night. 'Griffy, dear?' she said, although she wasn't asking him anything, or telling him anything, or even looking in his direction. 'Haiii! How?' she said to a man who brushed against her hips as he passed. The man looked suddenly frightened, because he wanted his advance to remain stealthy and masculine. When he passed back from the bar, with five glasses of cheap rum-and-Cokes in his hands, he walked far from her.

Griff was now leaning on the bar, facing the part-time barman, and talking about the results of the last race that day; his wife, her back to the bar, was looking at the men and the women, and smiling; when someone passed, who noticed her, and lingered in the recognition, she would say, 'Haiii! How?'

A large, black, badly dressed Jamaican (he was talking his way through the crowd) passed. He stared at her. She smiled. He put out his calloused construction hand, and with a little effort, he said, 'May I have this dance, gal?' Griff was still talking. But in his mind he wondered whether his wife would dance with the Jamaican. He became ashamed with himself for thinking about it. He went back to talking, and got into an argument with the part-time barman, Masher, over a certain horse that was running in the feature race the next day at Greenwood. Masher, ever watchful over the women, especially other men's, couldn't help notice that the calloused-

and Jamaican was holding on to Griff's wife's hand. With his shark-eyes he tried to get Griff's attention off horses and onto his wife. But Griff was too preoccupied. His wife placed her drink on the counter beside him, her left hand still in the paws of the Jamaican construction worker, whom nobody had seen before, and she said, 'Griffy, dear?' The man's hand on her manicured fingers had just come into his consciousness, when he wheeled around to give her her drink. He was upset. But he tried to be cool. It was the blackness of the Jamaican. And his size. Masher knew he was upset. The Jamaican reminded Griff of the 'Congo-man' in one of Sparrow's calypsos. Masher started to laugh in his spitting kee-kee laugh. And when Griff saw that everybody was laughing, and had seen the Congojamaican walk off with his wife, he too decided to laugh.

'It's all right, man,' he said, more than twice, to no one in particular, although he could have been consoling the Jamaicancongo man, or Masher, or the people nearby, or himself.

'I sorry, suh,' The Jamaican said. He smiled to show Griff that he was not a rough fellow. 'I am sorry, suh. I didn't know you was with the missis. I thought the missis was by-sheself, tonight, again, suh.'

'It's no *big* thing, man,' Griff said, turning back to talk to Masher, who by now had lost all interest in horses. Masher had had his eyes on Griff's wife, too. But Griff was worried by something new now: the man had said, '*by-sheself, tonight, again, suh*'; and that could mean only one thing: that his wife went places, like this very Club, when he wasn't with her; and he had never thought of this, and never even imagined her doing a thing like this; and he wasn't sure that it was not merely the bad grammar of the Jamaican, and not the accusation in that bad grammar, '*but language is a funny thing, a man could kill a person with language, and the accusation can't be comprehended outside of the structure of the language . . . wonder how you would parse this sentence, Clynn . . . a Jamaican fella told me last night, 'by-sheself, tonight, again, suh'; now, do you put any emphasis on the position of the adverb, more than the conditional phrase?*' Griff was already dozing off into the next day's dreams of action, thinking already of what he would tell Clynn about the accident: '*Which is the most important word in that fellow's sentence structure? "By-sheself", "again", or "tonight"?*'

'Never mind the fellow looks like a canecutter, he's still a brother,' Griff said to Masher, but he could have been talking into the future, the next day, to Clynn; or even to himself. 'I don't want to come on strong, but he's a brother.' The CBC television news that night dealt with the Black Power nationalism in the States. The Jamaican man and Griff's wife were now on the dance floor. Griff stole a glimpse at them, to make sure the man was not holding his wife in the same friendly way Stooly, who was a friend, would hold her. He thought he would be able to find the meaning of '*by-sheself*', '*again*', and '*tonight*' in the way the man held his wife. Had the Jamaican done so, Griff would have had to think even more seriously about the three words. But the Jamaican was about two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle and mackerel and green bananas. 'Some other fellow would have come on strong, just because a rough-looking chap like him, held on . . .'

'Man, Griff, you's a rass-hole idiot, man!' Masher said. He crept under the bar counter, came out, faced Griff, broke into his sneering laugh, and said, 'You's a rass-hole!' Griff laughed too, in his voiceless laugh. 'You ain' hear that man say, "*by-sheself*", "*tonight*", "*again*"? If I had a woman like that, I would kiss her arse, by-Christ, just for *looking* at a man like that Jamaikian-man!' Masher laughed some more, and walked away, singing the calypso the amateur band was trying to play: '*Oh Mister Walker, Uh come to see your daughter . . .*'

Griff wet his lips. His bottom lip disappeared inside his mouth, under his top lip; then he did the same thing with his top lip. He adjusted his dark glasses, and ran his right hand, with a cigarette in it, over his slim tie. His right hand was trembling. He shrugged his sports jacket into place and shape on his shoulders . . . '*Oh, Mister Walker, uh come to see ya daughterrrrr . . .*' He stood by himself in the crowd of West Indians at the door, and he seemed to be alone on a sun-setting beach back home. Only the waves of the calypsonian, and the rumbling of the congo drum, and the whispering, the loud whispering in the breakers of the people standing nearby, were with him. He was like the sea. He was like a man in the sea. He was a man at sea . . . '*tell she is the man from Sangre Grande . . .*'

The dance floor was suddenly crowded, jam-packed. Hands were going up in the air, and some under dresses, in exuberance after the music; the words in the calypso were tickling some appetites; he thought of his wife's appetite and of the Jamaican's, who could no longer be seen in the gloom of the thick number of black people; and tomorrow was races, and he had again mastered the Form. And Griff suddenly became terrified about his wife's safety and purity, and the three words came back to him: '*by-sheself*', '*tonight*', '*again*'. Out of the crowd, he could see Masher's big red eyes and his teeth, skinned in mocking laugh. Masher was singing the words of the calypso: '*Tell she I come for she . . .*' The music and the waves on the beach, when the sun went behind the happy afternoon, came up like a gigantic sea, swelling and roaring as it came to where he was standing in the wet white sand; and the people beside him, whispering like birds going home to branches and rooftops, some whispering, some humming like the sea, fishing for fish and supper and for happiness, no longer in sight against the blackening dusk . . . '*she know me well, I had she already! . . .*' Stooly walked in front of him, like the lightning that jigsawed over the rushing waves; and behind Stooly was a woman, noisy and Trinidadian, 'this part-tee can't done till morning come!' like an empty tin can tied to a motor car bumper. All of a sudden, the fishermen and the fishing boats were walking back to shore, climbing out of their boats, laden with catches, their legs wet up to their knees; and they walked with their boats up to the brink of the sand. In their hands were fish. Stooly still held the hand of a woman who laughed and talked loud, 'Fête for so!' She was like a barracuda. Masher, raucous and

...), and harmless, and a woman he didn't know, were walking like ...amese twins. One of his hands could not be seen. Out of the sea, now resting from the turbulent congo drumming of the waves in the calypso, came the Jamaicancongoman, and his wife.

'Thank you very much, suh' he said, handing Griff his wife's hand. With the other hand, she was pulling her miniskirt into place. 'She is a first class dancer, suh.'

'Don't have to come on *strong*, man.'

'If I may, some other time, I would like to . . .' the man said, smiling and wiping perspiration from his face with a red handkerchief. His voice was pleasant and it had an English accent hidden somewhere in it. But all the words Griff heard were 'I know she well, I had she already.' . . . '*by-sheself*', '*again*', '*tonight*' . . . and there were races tomorrow. His wife was smiling, smiling like the everlasting sea at calm.

'Haiiii!' she said, and smiled some more. The Jamaicanman moved back into the sea for some more dancing and fish. The beach was still crowded; and in Griff's mind it was crowded, but there was no one but he standing among the broken forgotten pieces of fish: heads and tails, and empty glasses and cigarette butts, and some scales broken off in a bargain, or by chance, and the ripped-up tickets of wrong bets.

Masher appeared and said in his ear, 'If she was my wife, be-Christ, I tell you . . .' and he left the rest for the imagination.

Griff's wife's voice continued, 'Griffy, dear?'

Masher came back from the bar with a Coke for the woman he was with. When he got close to Griff, he said in his ear, 'Even if she was only just a screw like that one I have there . . .'

'Griffy, dear, let's go home, I am feeling . . .'

'. . . and if you was *something*,' Masher was now screaming down the stairs after them. Griff was thinking of the three little words which had brought such a great lump of weakness within the pit of his stomach.

'Masher seems very happy tonight, eh, Griffy, dear? I never quite saw Masher so happy.'

'. . . you, *boy*! you, *boy*! . . .'

'Masher, Haiii! How?'

'If it was mine,' Masher shouted, trying to hide the meaning of his message, 'if it was mine, and I had put only a two-dollar bet 'pon that horse, that horse that we was talking about, and, and that horse *behave' so*, well, I would have to *lash* that horse, till . . . *unnerstan*?'

'Griffy, dear? Masher really loves horses, doesn't he, eh?'

They were around the first corner, going down the last flight of stairs, holding the rails on the right-hand side. Griff realized that the stairs were smelling of stale urine, although he could not tell why. His wife put her arm round his waist. It was the first for the day. 'I had a *great* time, a real ball, a *lovely* time!' Griff said nothing. He was tired, but he was also tense inside; still he didn't have the strength or the courage, whichever it was he needed, to tell her how he felt, how she had humiliated him, in that peculiar West Indian way of looking at small matters, in front of all those people, he could not tell her how he felt each time he watched Stooly put his arms round her slender body; and how he felt when the strange Jamaican man, with his cluttered use of grammar broken beyond meaning and comprehending, had destroyed something, like a dream, which he had had about her for all these fifteen years of marriage. He just couldn't talk to her. He wet his lips and ran his fingers over the slim tie. All she did (for he wanted to know that he was married to a woman who could, through all the years of living together, read his mind, so he won't have to talk) was smile. That goddamn smile, he cursed. The sports jacket shoulders were shrugged into place and shape.

'Griffy, dear? Didn't you enjoy yourself?' Her voice was like a flower, tender and caressing. The calypso band, upstairs, had just started up again. And the quiet waltz-like tune seemed to have been chosen to make him look foolish, behind his back. He could hear the scrambling of men and crabs trying to find dancing partners. He could imagine himself in the rush of fishermen after catches. He was thinking of getting his wife home quickly and coming back, to face Stooly and the Jamaican man; and he wished that if he did come back, that they would both be gone, so he won't have to come on strong; but he was thinking more of getting rid of his wife and coming back to dance and discuss the Racing Form; and tomorrow was races, again. He imagined the large rough Jamaican man searching for women again. He saw Stooly grabbing some woman's hand, some woman whom he had never seen before. But it was *his* Club. He saw Masher, his eyes bulging and his mouth wide open, red and white, in joy. And Griff found himself not knowing what to do with his hands. He took his hands out of his jacket pockets; and his wife, examining her minidress in the reflection of the glass in the street door they were approaching, and where they always waited for the taxicab to stop for them, removed her arm from his waist. Griff placed his hand on her shoulder, near the scar, and she shuddered a little, and then he placed both hands on her shoulders; and she straightened up, with her smile on her face, waiting for the kiss (he always kissed her like that), which would be fun, which was the only logical thing to do with his hands in that position around her neck, which would be fun and a little naughty for their ages like the old times in Britain; and his wife, expecting this reminder of happier nights in unhappy London, relaxed, unexcited, remembering both her doctor and her yoga teacher, and in the excitement of her usually unexcitable nature, relaxed a little, and was about to adjust her body to his, and lean her scarred neck just a little bit backward to make it easy for him, to get the blessing of his silent lips, (she remembered then that the Jamaican held her as if he was her husband) when she realized that Griff's hands had walked up from her shoulders, and were now caressing the hidden bracelet of the scar on her neck, hidden tonight by a paisley scarf. She shuddered in anticipation. He thought of Stooly, as she thought of the Jamaican, as he thought of Masher, as he squeezed, and of the races—tomorrow th...

·goes at 1:45 P.M. And the more he squeezed the less he thought of other things, and the less those other things bothered him, and the less he thought of the bracelet of flesh under his fingers, the bracelet which had become visible, as his hands rumpled the neckline. He was not quite sure what he was doing, what he wanted to do; for he was a man who always insisted that he didn't like to come on strong, and to be standing up here in a grubby hallway killing his wife, would be coming on strong: he was not sure whether he was wrapping his hands round her neck in a passionate embrace imitating the Jamaican, or whether he was merely kissing her.

But she was still smiling, the usual smile. He even expected her to say, 'Haiii! How?' But she didn't. She couldn't. He didn't know where his kiss began and ended; and he didn't know where his hands stopped squeezing her neck. He looked back up the stairs, and he wanted so desperately to go back up into the Club and show them, or talk to them, although he did not, at the moment, know exactly why, and what he would have done had he gone back into the Club. His wife's smile was still on her body. Her paisley scarf was falling down her bosom like a rich spatter of baby food, pumpkin and tomato sauce; and she was like a child, propped against a corner, in anticipation of its first step, toddling into movement. But there was no movement. The smile was there, and that was all. He was on the beach again, and he was looking down at a fish, into the eye of reflected lead, a fish left by a fisherman on the beach. He thought he saw the scales moving up and down, like small billows, but there was no movement. He had killed her. But he did not kill her smile. He wanted to kill her smile more than he wanted to kill his wife.

Griff wet his lips, and walked back up the stairs. His wife was standing against the wall by the door, and she looked as if she was dead, and at the same time she looked as if she was living. It must have been the smile. Griff thought he heard her whisper, 'Griffy, dear?' as he reached the door. Stooly, with his arm round a strange woman's body, took away his arm, and rushed to Griff, and screamed as if he was bellowing out a calypso line, 'Oh-Jesus-Christ-Griff!'

Masher heard the name called, and came laughing and shouting, 'Jesus-Christ, boy! You get rid o' the wife real quick, man! As man, *as man.*' Griff was wetting his lips again; he shrugged his sports jacket into place, and his mind wandered . . . 'show me the kiss-me-arse Racing Form, man. We going to the races tomorrow . . .'

MARIAN ENGEL
(1933-1985)

Share and Share Alike

Happiness is a fragile thing, and alcohol, as I know from the house I grew up in, is dangerous to it. When, therefore, I started to drop in to the bar across the road from the office after work and drink with Max Brady, who was a good court reporter because he knew the system from the inside, I decided that there was something wrong with my life and I'd better fix it up quickly or I'd go the way of my rambunctious Aunt Edith and my father.

So I went home and confronted Jean-Louis; after a marathon talk, we agreed that we had married to spite our mothers and we could not now stand each other; that Caroline was a good kid who didn't deserve parents who went in for silent or boozy wars, and that I could have the use of our barn of a house until she was eighteen. He cleared his studio out of the top floor so I could rent it for enough to pay the taxes. It was a fairly amicable parting, though I admit I put away quite a lot of Scotch when Jean-Louis found a new woman to annoy his mother with almost immediately.

I was putting up a notice on the office bulletin board offering the flat for rent when Max's hollow voice sounded behind me. 'My wife Pol's looking for a place, too. You'd like her.'

'Why should I like her if you don't?'

'She's a woman of character like you. And Josie's about the age of your daughter.'

'Well, send her over and we'll try the girls out together.'

I liked Pol. She took the flat, and to give her her own bedroom we put Josie on the second floor next to Caroline. Since they were only children they ought not to have got on with each other, but they chose to combine not their egotism but their loneliness and became good friends for a couple of years.

I liked Pol, who was a bit older than me, more cynical, though she shouldn't have been, since I was a newspaper reporter and she was a social worker. She'd travelled more than me, and the years with Max had hardened her to circumstance; the years with Jean-Louis had only frightened me. He was an art director and his world was nothing