

# **It can happen**



**Isaac Gordon**

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**Hackney Reading Centre**

**Centerprise**

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*For my family  
and the people who said  
“Write another book.”*

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## Introduction

In 1979 Isaac Gordon's book, "Going Where The Work Is" was published. This book was written by Isaac talking to his tutor, who wrote down what he was saying. Then they both read through the writing, and rewrote it until they were happy with it. This is how Isaac and Jud, the tutor, described the way they worked:

I am telling Jud about my life  
and she just write it down.  
(from: "Going Where The Work Is")

Lots of people read "Going Where The Work Is", and sometimes they said Isaac should write another book. But Isaac felt he wanted to be able to write by himself:

I did promise myself I would not write another book  
until I can write it myself.

At the end of 1981 Isaac returned to Jamaica for his first visit in 20 years. He was very shocked at the changes in the country, but also pleased to see his family and friends. After he returned, he began to write about his visit, and to describe how things had changed and who he met. He was also writing about other times in his life. The big difference now was that Isaac was writing by himself. When he had written a bit, he would bring it in to the Reading Centre, and he and his tutor would read it together.

By this time, Isaac had become interested in *the way* he was writing as well as in *what* he wrote. This meant not only thinking about what were the best words to use, but also thinking about how his writing would sound to a

reader. In *How I came to write this book* (the first section of "It Can Happen"), Isaac tells how the lady at Kenwood changed his writing into "Proper English", but it did not sound like him anymore, or like the way he speaks.

At times Isaac felt that parts of his writing had not really expressed what he wanted to say. He and Julia, his tutor, went over these parts of his story, rewriting and rearranging. For example, the sections describing his visit to Jamaica were considerably reworked, and Isaac and Julia decided to include the actual words spoken by the people he met, rather than Isaac reporting what they said. In those sections there are two types of language: firstly, Isaac saying what happened, and secondly, the words that people spoke. So in writing down his thoughts and descriptions, Isaac's language has changed from the way he would speak if he was telling what happened.

By October 1984 there was a large amount of writing, some of which had been rewritten, while some remained as Isaac had originally put it down. Isaac, Chris and Jean began to put all this material together and to re-read it all, to see it as one whole piece of writing. Sometimes we moved bits around, or left a piece out because it was repeated elsewhere. Meanwhile Isaac still continued to write: re-reading something he had written months or even years ago often stimulated him into expanding what he had said. And by Christmas 1984 we had the text of the book.

Isaac decided to write this book. It was very important to him that he wrote it by himself. With "Going Where The



Work Is" it provides a record of one student's development as a writer and reader. But it is also more than that, for it contributes enormously to the bulk of working class autobiographical writing. Personally and historically, "It Can Happen" is an important piece of writing. We hope you enjoy it.

Jean Milloy  
Chris O'Mahony

February 1985

## **How I came to write this book**

First I must say I don't remember how long I am learning to read and write, but I can say it is a long time, around nine year since I am learning to read. I feel more intelligent in myself, because I make more friends and know more people. Plenty of people spoke to me about my first book. Everyone says to me to write another one. A lady writing to me about my book and I don't know her, but when I receive her letter I feel happy and proud of myself.

On 24th July 1983 I was at work. A lady was running. I was leaning over a fence. She came up to me and said she liked my first book. We was talking a long time about the book. She was encouraging me to write another. She is the

one gave me more idea, with all what I got from other people. So, after a while I was thinking a great deal about it. I did promise myself I would not write another book until I can write it myself, but everybody spoke to me: "Write another one." So that's why I decide to make up my mind and have a bash. Well, you know, there wasn't any classes, it was summer, and I asked the lady to look at it for me, and she take it and was checking it over. But how she check it, she check it more so into Proper English, and my teacher didn't really please about how she put it into "Proper English", and I agree with my teacher, too, in that way, for I remember most of the other book, everybody like how I speak, and that is how the teacher wrote it down. I wrote it just like how I feel everybody would like it, that wanted to read it, and be proud of it, and I want to be proud of it myself. I just want to wrote it my way, how the public told me they like it, the Jamaican, you know. I want to wrote it that way. I wrote a lot of it, I wrote at home in the afternoon, when I come from work and I sit in the car outside by myself. You know, you keep on writing and writing, you're working away, you remember things more and more. Writing it down, I just remember the things and wrote them down. Might be that part might not finish, but I just leave that one and go on to the next one, and when I finish that one, I come back to the first one. When I bring it into the teacher, she had a little look at it to put it into the right proper order.

I hope my good people who will read it them happy with the book. I did want when my good people them reading the book, they feel it into them heart, but I don't know if I succeed. I am asking everybody to forgive me if the book

don't have any taste, because I am a learner. A learner must make mistakes. I don't like to make a mistake, but that's the way you learn. I did want to be feeling great with myself about the book, but I always want to do better. When I first wrote the book I did not happy with it, but now it is all together I am very proud of it.

Isaac Gordon

## 1. Growing up

I was born in 1936 in a district called Scarborough. It was a very great district although we did not have any electricity or decent roads. But I can say it was one of the best districts because it had decent fruit trees. And also vegetables and plenty of flowers in front of the yard.

When I was a young man grow up, I suffer a lot because my father did not married to my mother. I never know my mother until I must be around eight years old. I grow up with my step-mother. The lady my father married to treated me like I did not belong to the world. She treat me like a tree stump out in the open field. She did not treat me like a lovely step-mother. As we all know, women never treat a other woman child like her own child. She used to treat me a lot different. I used to wet my bed a lot and she used to beat me a lot with the belt. I never got any good clothes. I cannot speak about shoes.

She see to it her children them go to school. Everyone of them can read because their mother see to it that they go to school. She used to send me to school but I would not go. I did not have the sense to know what education could do for me. Sometimes, a morning time when she sent me to school, I cry and throw away my lunch money and also hide from school. Is after a while I really was on the wrong side of the road when I see the other children them going and coming from school in evening time. I really should be with them playing and laughing and jumping up with them but I just know I made a big mistake. Sometime when I see the other children them playing and

I cannot, I feel like I could kick myself. The worst part of it is on holiday time when I see the truck them and buses loaded up with young and old people going on outing, especially going to fair and I cannot go. Sometime I feel like I don't belong to the world.

When I am not going to school I stay in the coffee walk picking what we call rot cut. It's coffee the rot cut off the tree and it fall on the ground and children pick it up and dry it to sell it to buy Christmas presents and also bread.

When I saw the other children them go home, I go home. When I reached home in the eventime I change my clothes and go in the garden and start to dig some potatoes and wash them to boil it for the pig them. After I dig it I start to pull some grass to give to the pigs and also the rabbits. When I finish it I have to go and look for some wood to boil the pigs' feed. In the night I have to stay in the kitchen to boil the feed every night. When my step-mother hear I am not going to school at morning time she told my father. My father give me a old hoe and say to me, "Start from one end of the coffee walk and start weeding the grass."

When I finish it I start to go with him where he has his farm. My first job when I reach the farm at morning time to go in the hut and get a kerosene tin, and go to the nearest house by the farm for the water and fire. After I fetch the water and fire I go and look some brush woods to make up the fire. After that I either go to the hill or the common to carry yam sticks or bushes. If not, weed the grass or digging holes for corn or peas or prepare land to plant other things when the time come.



Coming home from the field

Around 11 o'clock my father will come down from the hills and prepare something to eat. He will dig yam and potato or pumpkins and corn pork. We would put it into a kerosene tin because we don't have a saucepan in the bushes. We cook it and drink the broth and sit down for half an hour and back to work again.

Three o'clock we will come down and have some sugar and water, then back up to the hill again. If the old man don't come down, I bring him some water if he is farther way from the hut.

As you all know, in the field we don't have a watch, especially we poor class people in the West Indies. We always listened out for a bus coming from Kingston. Every evening going to Brown's Town it reached a certain spot and blow its hooter and we know it 4 o'clock. If not, we notice the sun in the sky.

When I finish in the eventime I am tired like a dog and still have to carry woods or cornbushes for the pigs them. At that time when I reached home the government parish tank close. If it's dry time when I reached home, I still have to go and beg for water anywhere I can get it. Sometimes I have to walk over five miles for the water, to the near tank, and sometimes it so dark I can hardly see to walk. So when I tell you I tired like a dog, I really tired.

When I go in the kitchen and put the pig feed on the fire to boil and sit down and have my dinner, I fall asleep before I finish eat. Sometimes when I wake up it around four o'clock, so I don't go inside the house, I just stay in the kitchen. Sometimes is when my old man wake up to

go to work he came in the kitchen and see me and he waken me up and curse me. Sometimes I never have a wash.

The neighbours them used to say I work too hard and strain myself. I know I did start to work too young, and do too much hard work, because I never saw other child of my size work so hard. My brothers, them never work, especially the lawful one, them.

And that continued every day and night is after I turn a big young man. I know one of my cousins, Amy, so I run away at her house. I still continue to work in the daytime with my father, but I don't go home with him.

When I at my cousin things were very good with me. I could stay in bed late on Sunday morning time. I was contented at my cousin and I was very happy here. If we could be born again and I get the chance, I would go back at my cousin again because milk and honey are here. When I say milk and honey are here I mean I know I was very happy there, especially when I started to learn to ride a bicycle.

I know the bicycle was master more than me because it threw me more than I can remember and the pedal tore my trousers leg them as often as I can go on it, but I was determine to ride it when I get the chance. The bicycle was belong to elderly man used to came to the yard. And I always showing off when I am on it, especially when I saw any of my friends them who cannot ride. Sometime when I came back to the yard the man is already go home — because it's late and dark where he live the road was very



bad. Sometime I go to bed around three o'clock because I was out riding late and I determined to ride perfectly. So that why I go to bed too late — and I has to get up six o'clock.

Also I had to take my cousin baby out every morning for her morning breeze. Everybody used to said to me, "You are walk out with your baby, daddy." I used to be proud of myself. After I go back to the yard I set the baby bath and bath her, powder her, dress her, feed her. Soon as I feed her she will drop off asleep. That continued every morning, so meanwhile I am looking after the baby her mother will be doing the housework. When I am at home she don't have anything to do with the baby because she know I love babies and I looked after them just like a mother, but I wasn't too good with the washing. She always call me nurse.

Most of the time I have to stay at home to look after the baby, because her mother goes to market. They have to leave early Friday afternoon because the market is far away. The mother came home Saturday night around ten o'clock. Her husband work with the government and he don't come home until every two weeks. Sometime she go away for all week so I have to stay at home with the baby. Mostly everybody came to the yard call me nurse, I was proud of it, but to tell you the truth I still did not know the full meaning of a nurse because I don't know the full meaning of what work nurse do, I never go to hospital to see what they do.

Sometime in the morning when I have finished looking after the baby, my father will be passing the gate where

we lived, going to the farm, and I will follow he behind. If he reach here before me he will start to curse me and give me the hardest work he can, and he will also beat me sometime, and in the evening time, when we are going home, he will give me a load to carry home so that I cannot go to my cousin. I take the load home and go back to my cousin. When my father and step-mother are looking for me I am not there. He get fed up with me and leave me in peace.

In no time I heard he was going to England. When I heard he was going to England I feel like I was over the moon with joy, how glad I was he was leaving. Is after my father came to England so I had the chance to do what I like, I could go where I want.

When I want money I could go and work with anybody for it. When I was with my father and want money I used to steal corn and peas and egg to sell it. So when he came to England I was so glad because I could go and work for my money, and go up and down on the truck, no one to stop me. When he was in Jamaica I could go nowhere. I did not have a girlfriend, because I could not get the chance to go out, I didn't know anything about girls. It like I was surrounded with fear. Is after he leave and came to England, I know the world out there were so big and have plenty of life in it. I also travel from one district to another. I also went to America. I stayed in America for 3 months. Then I spend around 9 months in Jamaica, and about a year and a half after my father leave, I came to England.

## 2. Coming to England

I came to England in 1960. I was not happy, everything was change to me. Even the tree them was bare, no leaves on them. I did think they die. When I arrive at the airport I take a taxi to Tollington Park where my brother live. The landlord was my cousin Herbert. He came to the country around 1950. He have two young brother, the two young brother stop with him.

When I arrive in the afternoon my brother was at work. When I arrive at the yard, the landlady and landlord was there. The landlady make me a cup of tea and I sit in the dining room until my brother came home from work. When he come I went upstairs with him into the room and sit and talk about Jamaica. The first word he ask me if everybody is all right. The second word he ask me if I would like here. I say, "I don't know". I say to him, "Why they have plenty dead tree in the country?" He say, "They don't dead, they just drops leaves in the winter." I just shake my head.

Things did look strange to me, because of the tall building them and the houses have chimney point up on top of it, and smoke coming out of it. The shops were joined together, and plenty streets and plenty cars and plenty different things like factories, like seeing more white people. The language did sound different to me. It is the same language we speak but sound different.

When I came to England I stop with my brother and youngest cousin Peter. My brother and cousin did have

one room with two bed in it. After a few months Peter moved to his own house. Three weeks later my brother moved and left me at the house. I stayed there in one little room. You could not spin a cat in it, it was so small — no table — just a little single bed and one chair.

When we were all living together I never do the cooking. My cousin most do the cooking. So, after they leave, I did find it a little bit difficult living on my own because I did not used to it. I could remember the first evening when I came home from work. I just sitting in the room looking around and looking through the window, I did not know what to do. It take me a long time before I could go in the kitchen and in the bathroom. First I wash the bath out. While the bath running, I pour some rice into a plate and pick the dirt out of it and wash it. I put some water into a saucepan and put a little piece of butter in it and some salt, and cut up a little piece of onion and put it on the fire. When it started to boil up, I turn the gas down and straight in the bath. By the time I finish bath, it finish cook. After I done, I dish it out, I leave it on the table and go into the little box what they call bedroom for bottle of guinness and put it on the little cupboard and go back to the kitchen for the plate with the food, and sit on the bed nearby the window and eat it and look out of the window, seeing the traffic going by. After I done eat, I go into the kitchen and wash up the dishes them. After I done wash the dish, I go in the bathroom and clean my teeth. After I finish, I go back in the room and sit on the bed. Looked out for my friends them, but they did not turn up. I still sit there listening to the wireless set. When I about to go to bed I pour out a glass of guinness and drink it.

I used to go to my friends their house at evening time, but soon their girl friends come up to England they stop coming at me, so I stop going to their home as well too. So when I come home from work at evening time, I just tidy myself and look after something to eat and sit down and listen to the radio until bed time.

I remember one Saturday morning I was still laying down in bed. I heard a big banging at the door. When I opened the door it was the landlord, Herbert. He said, why did I puncture his car tyre? I said I did not puncture it. He said somebody saw me puncture the four wheels. This Saturday morning he was going to a wedding. I have a feeling that his wife did not want him to go to the wedding, so she put up her brother to puncture the tyres. The wedding Herbert was going to is his brother's friend. The brother and the friend bought a house together.

The landlord's wife did not like anybody, especially her husband's side of the family. She prefer her own side of the family. Her husband is my cousin. From he said I puncture his car tyres, I don't speak to either him or his wife from since I left there. I never go back there to see if any letter is there for me. I did have a feeling mail was there for me because my young ladies from Jamaica used to write to me there. I never look through that gate from the day I leave there.

That's one of the reasons why I leave, because he said I puncture his car tyres and I did not puncture it. The second reason was his wife — she did not like any of Herbert's family there. The third reason is, after a while I understand when the gas board people them clear the meter, they only take out the amount of money for what

gas you've used and leave the rest. We never get back any of the money. I always put money in the meter every weekend. The landlord always call the gas board to clear the meter because it always fill up before the time for it to clear. That never happened in all the other places I lived.

### 3. Looking for a job

When I came here in the 60s I did not particular what kind of job I got because I did think that all the job them pay the same money. I wasn't thinking we get pay for different kind of job, all I was thinking of was to get a job and earn a big pay packet. I never refused a job yet. Out of all the place I have been, I take the first one that is offer to me. I did not know if the one I take did high pay or low pay because all I did need is to get a job. Up till now I don't know if I did get one with good wages because I never really sit down and talk with anybody about my job.

At first I stop with my brother and cousin in Tollington Park. My cousin was working in the Post Office and he use to do shift work. I remember the first place he took me. It was a building site in Manor Park. I don't remember what the foreman say, if he say "Sorry," or he say "Full up," but I did not get the job. After we leave there we walk and go to some factories. We did not get nothing. We go back home because my cousin did want to sleep. He does work night. We walk around three week before I go to the Labour Exchange to sign on.

At that time it was not so very hard to find a job. I must have spend around seven to eight weeks before I find a job. When I say "find a job," I did not find it myself, the Exchange sent me. I went to the Labour Exchange and sign on for around four to six weeks.

I can tell you it was a big moment for me when I went to the Labour Exchange one Wednesday morning and they

send me to a job. I know I could not do it but I could not dare turn it down. That job was the job in a shop. When I went to the shop, the shopkeeper gave me a form to fill out, but I could not fill it out because I could not read it. I told him I cannot fill it out. He said, "You no good to me."

When I go to other places asking for a job they never give me any reason why I didn't get the job. When they say, "Sorry," I feel uncomfortable because I only want a job. I did feel fed up sometimes walking up and down on the street looking for a job. It was that bad sometimes, but all I was interested in is to get a job.

I was on the road every day looking. As you all know I am a stranger in a strange country and also shy. I don't go out like other single man, and as you know reading was part of my weak point. It was very difficult for me to get around the place to get a job because of my reading. It's like a mother having children and cannot go out. If I saw a building I wouldn't know if it is a factory or a house. Up 'til now I still don't know my way around London because it's too many streets.

The Labour Exchange sent me where they buy scrap metal and also vehicle engine. I work on the machine cutting up the scrap metal. One morning I have to help load a lorry with some of the engine. After I load the lorry with the engine, I feel my stomach start to hurt me. I did not know the rule of the country when you sick you should go to the doctor and get a certificate. The next morning I went to work. The governor say to me, "Go and help load the lorry with those engine over there." So those engine



were very heavy because those engine are lorry engine. I say to the governor, "My stomach are hurt me." He say, "Pick up your card on Friday evening." It was on a Tuesday morning he say pick up your card. I was out of work for four week before the Labour Exchange send me to a job in Caledonian Road.

The job was to clean up after the builders finish. I was there on my own every day. One evening I came home from work. My cousin say to me my old governor send for me. I went back on the Saturday morning and on the same morning I have accident with the machine and my fingers. I lost two fingers. I was out of a job around six month to seven month. After I feel better I go back to the Labour Exchange to look for a new job. They told me to go back where I was working. I went back. The governor say he didn't have anything else for me except the same job. I told him I cannot work on it. So I go back to the Labour Exchange.

They send me to Kenwood. I am still working at Kenwood. I am there from 1962.



Trees at Kenwood

#### 4. Looking for a room

After I leave work at evening time, sometime I don't go home and have a bath and something to eat. I walk around looking for a room and ask any coloured I see friendly. Saturday and Sunday I spend all my time on the street looking. A friend tell me about one. I went and look at it. I know it did not have any conveniences, but I take the first one I get because I did wanted to leave my cousin house. Anyway, I spent a few week there.

Meanwhile I was there I was still looking for somewhere suitable. Other friend give me address where I must go. I might luck to get a room. I went, and the landlady show me the room. Before she show me the kitchen and the bathroom I like it. If I really wanted a house for myself and family I would move there, because the landlady and her husband they was so friendly — they treat me like one of the family. When you come to the house, you don't know if I am tenant or son to the landlady. I was live there around four year. I can tell anybody I was very happy there. It was a three floor house. The top floor has two rooms and a married couple did have that floor. The second floor has two rooms and bathroom and also w.c. and kitchen and the landlady's niece has one room and another girl has the other room. The first floor has three rooms and kitchen and also w.c. I has one of the room at the back. Me and the landlady used that floor. The landlady have two young children. The conveniences did not too bad and me and the landlady used everything.

I did not know if I was charge too much rent at those time.  
Is after I leave there I know I jump out of the fried pan  
straight in the fire. The reason why I left, because I was  
buying a house.

## 5. My family

I leave Jamaica in 1960, and came to England to just spend around five years but I find I could not make the grade so after the five years I decide to send back for the lady I love so much. So she joined me five years later and soon as she joined me we got married and started a family. My oldest daughter was born when I was living at the friendly house as a tenant. The small daughter was born three years later at Clapton Mothers' Hospital. Her name is Sharon.

We already had a family back in the West Indies, girls and a boy. Their mother leave them with their grandmother and auntie, we know they were in good hands, but a few years later their grandmother died. So they wrote to us after a while and ask they all wanted to live with us in England. We replied back to their letter and we started to jump around like a crazy rabbit, going through all the black tapes and red tapes trying to get them in England. But I should say before we started, door been closed in our face. Everywhere we went they ask us about our sex life, and after I explained they shut the door in our face.

I feel like when you chop up garlcs because the immigration people would not let me have them and nobody in this country would help me. So when we send and told them we cannot get them up we understand they were like a mad ghost underneath a dark cellar. They were very disappointed because they were looking forward to join us and also their small sisters them.

When their young sisters them went out to visit them their older sisters and brothers, they were so delighted to see one another, but when they were about to return to England that day it was a very sad and silent day for the both of them.

## 6. Buying a house

The money I got from the accident from my fingers, I save it in the building society, and I also used to throw pardner. When I got my money I put it aside. We did have a little scheme, about twenty of us, and every week put into it and one person draw out. It just like giving money for someone to hold.

The house I was going to buy belonged to an agent. I try several agents but they did not have anything to offer with what money I have. When I went to this agent, he told me he have a house but it part vacant. I said I will like to look at it. I look at it. I did like it because it has eight rooms. The sitting tenant has three rooms — they were an old couple. They have a daughter. I asked the agent the price for it. He told me £5,000. I said, "I will have it." He asked me how much I can put down on it. I told him I will put down six hundred pounds. I gave him the money a day later. He said I could move into it until the contract complete. I move in. I wait until around eight weeks before I go back to him. He told me, "These things take time." I wait and wait and no answer. I told him, "I am going to get a lawyer." He said, "You have a lawyer already." The lawyer I did have is the same lawyer he has.

After a while, I went back to my old address. I was explaining to the landlord about it. He said I should have my own lawyer. I went the same time and get one. I explain to him about it. A week later, I went there — the agent could not be found. When I went to the office, is like a holiday camp with people waiting. His wife said she

doesn't know where he is, when we realise he has gone to America.

The agent was a crooked man. He robbed a lot of people with their little savings and run away with it. Someone tell me about him, I don't remember the person who told me about him, but it was a man. The crook was live far from me.

When I went to the house to live, I was not paying any rent. After he leave the country, his wife's lawyer said I must pay rent. I spent around five weeks there. With what money I pay, and rent, and lawyer, it over a thousand pound. The agent was a coloured man; from that I said I would do no more business with coloured people. He make the rest of the coloured people look shame especially if they were doing the same kind of business.

After I move from there, I get one room. The landlady said she don't want any children there. I did have one daughter, she around nine months. My sister-in-law has to take the baby, is only weekend we could visit the baby. Why we could only visit weekend is because she lives far away and we work long hours and we didn't have any transport for ourselves. I did not stay there long, I move to another address, the same one room. Also the conveniences was not very good. We had to share kitchen and nowhere to wash, but we were happy there. My wife used to do her washing in the kitchen, also the other lady. Is after we got the last place where we were live, we take back the baby from my sister-in-law. We did not have any conveniences, but we did miss the baby and every evening I am looking forward to come home from work to play



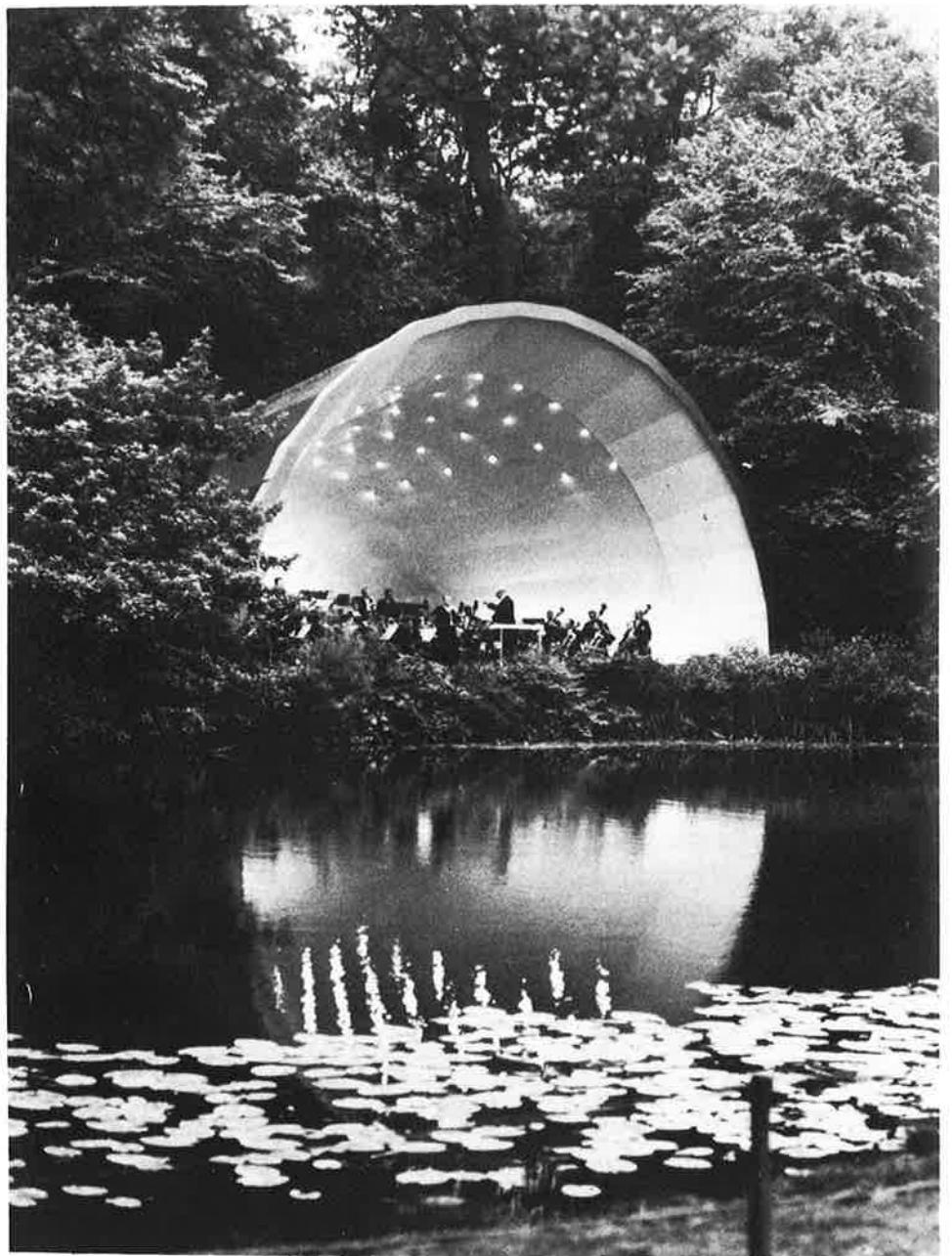
with her. We could not manage in one room because it was no conveniences, that's why we did try and get somewhere for ourselves. My wife used to wash the clothes in the kitchen at night-time and hang them in the room at morning time to dry them. She used to work. We used to take the baby to a nanny at morning time. That kind of life did not fit for a pig to live in, but I was desperate for somewhere to live at that time, just to have my baby with me.

Then we save up some more money and bought a house. I am not happy at the moment, because of the heavy lorry on the road. When the lorry them passing, then the whole of the house shake like leaves. You cannot sleep in the front rooms, or listen to the television. If my house were in different area or different road, I would be very happy young man because I have all the conveniences I need. Anyway, I must thank the Lord for what I have.

Some of the coloured people you see come to England sell their little piece of land and house and come over here and buy a house and car. We know a lot of white people wonder how the hell the coloured people have house and car and they born here don't have a house, but they don't know a lot of coloured people come to this country with money. Some of us sell a little piece of land and come to England. I know a lot of us are very sorry now to have made that mistake of selling our land and coming to England.

Most of us sell our land and come to England for five to six years to earn a little more money so we could get a bigger and better place. But it didn't work out the way we

think it would be. So some of us end up like a tramp. It's like a nightmare to some of us, when we came here, especially the earlier arrivals, they could not get a decent place to live. Some of us find it damn hard to return home because we are worse off than when we came here, especially if we hear our neighbours are doing fine, we would be feeling shame to go back with nothing. We think it will be much better, but we find it much harder.



Open air concert at Kenwood — I used to go in the pond and pull out the lillies before the concert start

## 7. My job at Kenwood

I remember the first day when I started the job I am into now. I worked with one of the supervisors weeding the grass in front of the big house, between the car park and the house in the shrubs. After that, I used one of the machines called a Dennis to cut the lawn in front of the house. After those jobs finished I just carried on with another thing. After a while I learn to drive the tractor. After I learn drive, I have to use the tractor to cut grass and pick up leaves and all any kind of rubbish.

My place of work is a wonderful place to work, reason why because you are out in the fresh air all the while and you can meet some very interesting people. They are polite, they will come up to you and ask you the different kinds of plant that grow in the garden. They also ask you the names of the trees them and what the place used to be, especially the regulars them who visited there every day. While having conversation you can learn quite a bit from them if you are interested. I myself might not learn much, but I can say I know a couple of the trees and a little about gardening. Even to cut the grass in a straight line, it's something.

There are some conservation people is doing some fabulous jobs like cleaning out ponds and making an island on the side of the pond so the ducks can make nest on it. And them also make footbridge with sleeper where it is too wet. They are also planting many trees. The thing that real fabulous about these chaps, they are very interested in wild animals like in insect, they try to see no

harm come to them. There are many birds watchers visiting Kenwood. They also would like to see the heath become woodland.

During the winter season at Kenwood it is bitter cold and foggy, some of the time, and that is the time that we started to rake up leaves. I like raking it up because it keeps me warm. The worst part of it is when gusts of wind come and blow the leaves back where I already done. I go bananas. When it raining, we clean out shed and also clean tools and repair broken tools and clean tractor. After rake up the leaves into pile we drive the tractor to each pile and pick it up and dump it into a big heap and leave it for around two or three years to rot into compost. After it is rotted into compost we remove it with the tractor and spread it in to the gardens or spread on the ground where it bare.

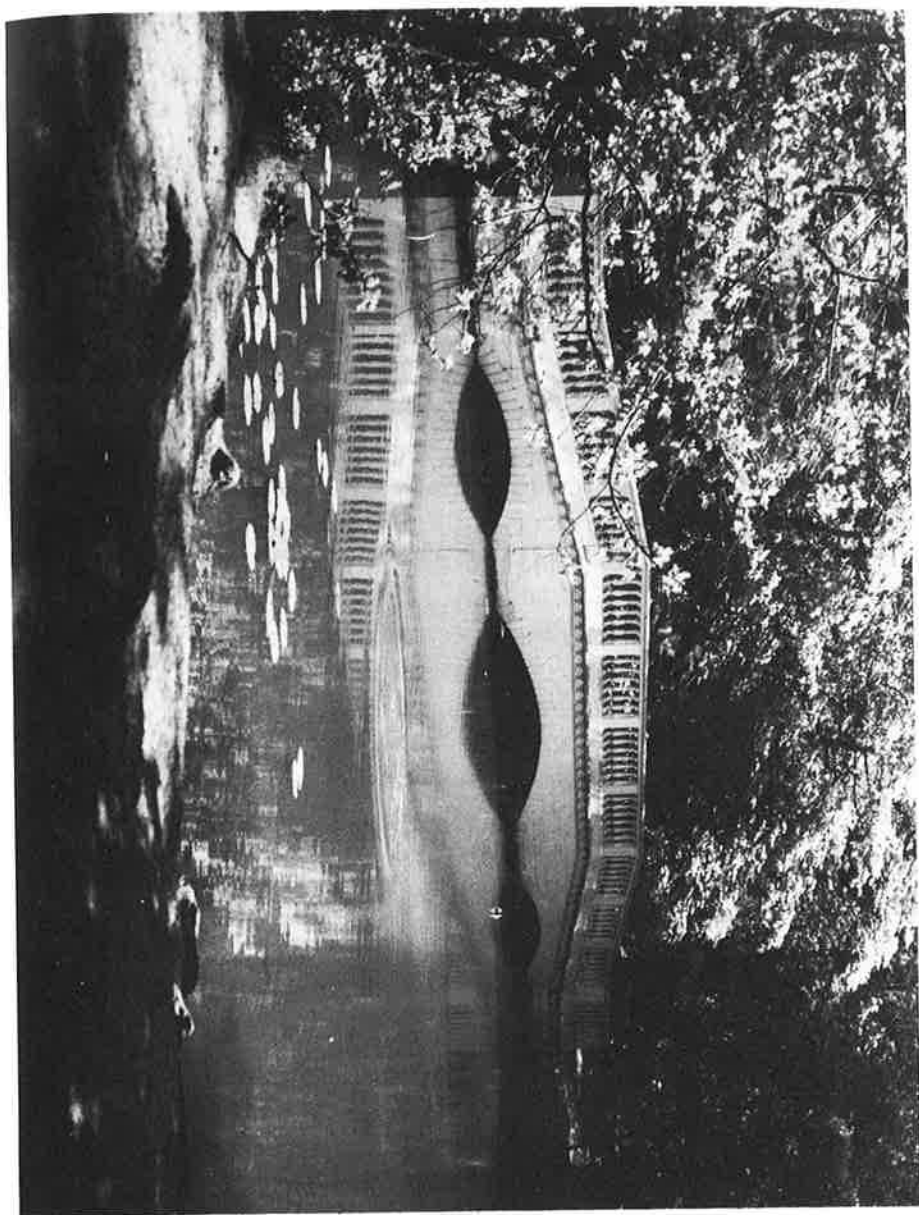
I long time work at one place. I should be in a better position or higher grade, but I cannot, because it need reading and writing and I don't have these yet. I just have to keep to the tractor. If I could read more I would be a foreman or into high grade. Certain times of year they have someone at Finsbury Park to see what you are good at, especially machinery or gardening. They call it a course. I never go because it needs writing to fill the forms out. I cannot read it to write it out, so I never go, and that also keeps me back. Many people come in after me and go up in grade. I feel bad about it, so I am trying to do something about it.

That's where I came in, to the reading. If I could pay to read, I would pay true, because I could not read I suffer a

lot in my young life. Now I am trying very hard to make up for it. I know it a little bit too late for me, but it never too late for a shower of rain, so I am trying my best to see what I can get out of it. I know nothing much in it for me, but it cost me nothing.



Dummy bridge at Kenwood





## 8. Reading and writing

When I came to this country I couldn't sign my name. When I have a letter to read and write I have to pay a friend to read it and write it for me. I knew two brothers, they used to come where I lived every evening to have dinner. They both of them girlfriends were back in the West Indies and so was mine. We all decide to send for the three ladies so they could come on the same plane. I was unlucky because my girlfriend did not come because her mother die so she have to stay to look after her little brothers them. When the two brothers girlfriends them came up they stop come at me and I also stop go where they live except sometimes I visit them. That why I did start go to school, but I did not stay. I could give you two reasons why I did not stay. The first one is I was just starting the job I am in now. When I came home in the evening time I have to look for something to eat. Sometimes I am so tired I just cannot make it. The second one is the television. When you start to watch a programme you want to see it again so you stay at home. I didn't have anyone to push me.

I start another school six years later. After the school broke up for the summer holiday when it opening back I went back a week late. They told me in the office they full up. I never went to see the teacher. I went in the office a week later. I saw one of the girls and I told her about it. She told the teacher about it. The teacher say I should come and see her, but I did not go. I don't remember how long before I start the school I am in now but I would think around four and a half years later.

One Sunday afternoon I was sitting down at home watching the television. A programme came on about "On the Move". The lady showed how you can make up words in sentences. She said, "Hundreds of people cannot read. We are trying to help those who cannot read. We are asking you to get in touch with us." She gave us a telephone number to ring. I said I might try it. I just said it in joking.

The Monday morning when I got to work, my supervisor asked me if I watched television last night. I said, "Yes sir."

He said, "Did you see the programme on it about reading and writing?" I did not answer him. He said, "I am speaking to you."

I said, "Yes, I heard you."

He said, "Why don't you go and learn? It won't cost you anything."

I said, "Could you ring up for me please?"

He got on the phone same time and rang the lady. He told the lady he had someone in his office interested to learn to read and write.

The lady asked him where I lived. He told the lady I lived in Hackney. The lady gave him a phone number. He rang same time. He rang Sue. Sue answered the telephone. He gave her my name and address. Sue told him, "The place is 136 Kingsland High Street. A cafe bar is there and a jeweller's shop next door to it."

I could remember the first evening when I was looking for this place. I started to look from the traffic light down at Dalston Lane. I carried on straight down to Stoke Newington High Street. I reached the police station. I went into a school on the left hand side of the street, the school in



Friday afternoon at the Reading Centre

front of the Gas Board. I showed the chap the piece of paper. He did not know where it was. So I went down to the police station and showed them the piece of paper what my supervisor gave to me with the address on it how to find this place. The policeman asked me if I had a car. I said, "Yes." He said, "Go back out and turn first left and first right. You cannot turn there because it is one way. Go back down to Kingsland High Street. It starts from the traffic light." He did not know where it was. I started to walk straight up to Kingsland Waste. I went to a garage. I asked the man who worked there. He said, "Go back down to the next garage. It's next door to a jeweller's shop." It was easy to find but when you cannot read if you see your name in front of you and it's big like a loaf of bread I think you will eat your name and leave the bread behind.

When I reached the building I saw Sue standing at the shop doorway. I showed her the piece of paper. She said, "I will write you." She wrote me a week later to tell me when to come in.

The following week all of us came on a Monday evening. She wanted to talk how the teacher will work with us. She asked what day we can come. I told her, "I will come on a Friday." I could remember when she told us just one day a week, I said we will forget what we learn. A girl replied back to me, I must help myself at home.

Today I must thank every one of the teachers who helped me because I am pleased with my progress. Because I stand in front of crowd of people when my first book was

published, and read something what I write myself. I did not know that day could come that I write something that someone can read. I prove it to myself it can happen. I am thanking the Lord.

## 9. Going back home

### I. Journey home

I came to England in 1960. My first visit back to the West Indies was in '81. I and my two daughters went. We leave London Airport 29.12.81 at 12.30. Arrived in Jamaica time at 8.30 in the evening. We stop Bermuda one hour and stop at Nassau one hour. When we arrived at Jamaica airport there were many families there waiting for us.

Everybody was pleased to see one another. If the airport was in darkness it would light up with happiness and joy. How we glad to see one another, especially when we reached home and everyone meet together. It was wonderful for everyone. It was like a new born baby coming into the world with happiness. When we meet we did not want anything to drink or eat, how we are happy.

We stop over night in Kingston at one of the family house. The following morning we went to the country in Manchester where my wife came from. We leave Kingston and go through Spanish Town and Marypen and Clarendon then Manchester. We spend four days there. In Manchester there many towns. These are the names of the towns I visited: Spalding, Christina, and Mandeville.

We leave Manchester Sunday morning 9.35 and go to St Annes where I came from. It was a van load of families. Everyone was glad to see us. We stop at my auntie house.

## II. Bauxite district

The day when I reach the district where I came from, I could not believe my eyes to see the district and to see how the bauxite company has ruined it. I mean they dig up the whole district and just a few old people live in the area now. They have no shops. Some of them have to travel eight or nine miles to go to the nearest shop. It is a disgrace to see that place. There were no trees in sight and no birds. When I stood up and look and remember the place, water came to my eyes. That place used to be the capital for fruit, oranges, apples, coffee and tangerines. Some people had mangoes, season and thyme, yam and potatoes, banana and all those things. All there is now is holes, and heavy machinery to carry the soil from one place to another, and a few hills left, and plenty of dust.

The thing that worries me most of all is the people who were living in that district. What happened to the graves and tombs? I think it is very dangerous to leave the holes them open when it rains. They contain water and you can catch typhoid from mosquitoes, and also other diseases. I know many children don't live in the area, but it is dangerous for the few that live there. Children love to play in water, especially water in deep holes. Sometimes some of them drowned.

When the bauxite company first came to the country they go round to everyone who have a little piece of land and drill it. What they take out of it they put into a sack and take it away. After they test it they know exactly the area they are going to dig. They have some large machines, caterpillar tractors and cranes, and some large dumper

lorries to carry the soil and dump it into a heap, they have a big machine to load up the train. The train take it to a ship and the ship take it America.

My district where I born and grow up is red dirt. The nearest district to me is Clarendon, it is black dirt. The reason why the bauxite company are interested in the red dirt is because it contains aluminium.

The black dirt is very good but it's hard to work. The good thing about the black dirt is you don't have to cut bushes to spread on it. The bushes is manure for the red dirt. The black dirt is a nice dirt, it don't get dusty and dry like the red dirt, but you don't get farmers working in the black dirt because it don't grow the food like the red dirt. It don't grow corn and peas and yam and potatoes like the red dirt. And also, when it rains you cannot get it off the tools that you are using, also your feet. It's like clay, it sticks on to the fork or spade.

They dig deep down in the ground for aluminium. They send the aluminium to the United States to make kitchen equipment and ground tools. I blame the government for letting the bauxite company send the aluminium to the States. It is wrong to send it to America because Jamaica is poor. They should build a factory in the country so that the people can get a job and live much better. They should also encourage the young people them to stay and help develop the country, because when the young people them cannot get a job, as soon as they get a chance, they go abroad.



I think the government should make the bauxite company fill in the holes so that it doesn't look so bad, and plant trees so it could bring back the wild animals to the area, like the picherry and the nightingale. They sing before day every morning. They wake you about the right time every morning like a clock. So these people who live in the country areas and cannot afford a clock don't get late for work.

First, I must say, plenty of the people them were very poor, so when the bauxite company came to the district and offered them certain amounts of money for their land, they were very glad because they think it is plenty of money. In those days, what money the bauxite offered them seemed a lot, but when they are going, it's not really a lot of money because they have nothing. Every day they are spending it and in no time that money finish, so they are leave with nothing. Going through it every day, spending it, they find they made a mistake selling their land, especially the poor people. After the money finish, they have nothing else to look for, just drift from one place to another with nowhere to live. Some of them just walking around and begging. I think the wealthier people should have explained to them what would take place later on if they sell their land.

The richer people sell their land and go where the black dirt is. They have to exchange land, black dirt for red dirt, so when they sell their little piece of land they have both money and land to go to. If the land have a house on it, the bauxite company will build it back, anything at all on it, water tank, fence around it.

If you have a little piece of land and you don't sell it to the bauxite, they dig around you. So you have to sell it to them because you are in the middle. You have no choice but to sell it to them.

Later the government makes the bauxite company change, but it was too late when the government changed the laws. No more land is to be sold now, because the people were parted with their lands and left with nothing and had no proper place to live.

### **III. Smoking the ganja**

When I was in Jamaica for my holiday, I travel the country a little, and every district I go to I saw the young people them just sitting down at the roadside with nothing to do, just smoking the ganja. Some of them look very old because they have nothing to do, just sitting down and fretting.

One Tuesday morning, me and a couple of girls were walking out. The girls them were showing me around the area when we reach near some shops. We saw some chaps sitting down at the roadside. There were five of them in the group. They were well clean and shaved. They were wearing ordinary clothes and black shoes and they were smoking. One of the girls call one of them by his name. The girl introduced me to them and tell them that I just came from England, and we shook hands. I tell them I was in England twenty-two years and is the first time I come out here. One of them asked me why.

"Because I don't have the money," I said.

"Bullshit, man, you have the money," he said.

"I wish I did have it," I said, "I would come out and buy a house because I am tired of the cold now."

"You live in England twenty-two years, man," he said,

"What the hell you spend your money on?"

"I don't earn a lot of money," I said, "and what I do earn, the tax man take half of it, and what I get, I have to pay rent and electric, gas and water bills, and we pay a damn lot, especially during the winter time we use more for heating. And we have to buy everything. Over there, sometimes when my wife goes to the market and buy oranges and tangerines, some of them had rotted. Back here I notice everywhere I go I see them fall off the trees and rot, and birds and rats are eating the same fruit that we have to pay such a price for in England. So I don't think you know how lucky you all been to live in a paradise country like this. You have everything we need."

These men are not working, but some of them are in a better position than some of us in England, the ones who have a house and a piece of land. They can grow vegetables and take to the market and sell it to the tourist. Yes, some of them do live better than us because they don't pay rates or pay the rent and some of them don't have to buy food. And they don't have to buy winter clothes or winter shoes or worry about heating bills.

Another day I was at my auntie house. I was talking outside the gate with some men.

"Sometimes I don't know why the hell I leave out here," I said.

"You have your own house," one of them replied.

"Yes," I said, "but it is the money I got for my fingers. I save up and buy an old house. I also spend most of my money on old cars."

After I explain to him, he just shook his head saying, "Shit, man."

He did not understand when I told him about the tax man. I tried to explain to him a little more about it, but it was not doing much good. He just walk off around seven yards from where we were standing leaning against a building.

He was smoking the ganja and he was looking bad and wild, and puffing the smoke through his nose like a chimney and scratching his beard. To tell you the truth, I was a bit scared because of the state he was in. He kept scratching his beard and body like it was dirty and had lice. All he kept on talking about was how his ganja stayed in the field because no-one would buy it.

"Man, I planted plenty this year because I wanted to buy, even if two head of cow and chicken." As he was talking, he was puffing the smoke in the air, and so I was sneezing.

"Give me a couple of the England pounds, man," said one of the men. I didn't answer him same time. When I am walking off, one of them said, "What about the pound, man?"

"I don't have any England pound," I said. But I gave him twenty dollars.

When they ask me for the money, I did not feel different because everybody know you come from England, they are looking for something from you. I did feel different from them because I was in a better position, wear better clothes than them and have money with me, more than

them. And I know when I come back to England I will be having a job to go to. I did feel sorry for some of them. Their hair on their head long and red and it looked like it never combed from the day they born.

The men asked me what over England is like.

"England are not very good now, boy," I told them.

"Since this government in power around three million out of a job."

"Out here tough as a rock, boy," they said. "Nothing to do."

"Why don't you all go over the bauxite and get something to do?" I reply back.

"Bauxite?" one of them say, "What bauxite you talking about? The bauxite company sent everything to the States."

"The blasted government," another one say, "they should make some agreement with the bauxite to build factories for the people them to get work."

Talking with them, how they spoke I did feel it, because they were very angry to see that they cannot get a job. Some of them could get a job from the bauxite company if they could read, but they need some experience, especially driving heavy machines.

"We cannot get a blasted job, man," one of them said, "so we are planting ganja to sell and smoke it and have a good time with the girls them. Some of the bastard girls them prefer England men because they have money and some of the men might take them over England."

One of the chaps was sitting on the ground smoking ganja. His eyes were red like blood. His name was John.



"He was smoking the ganja ... and puffing the smoke through his nose like a chimney."

"Shit, man," he said, "I was working with this white man, name Mr. Gallimore. Him have plenty cows and sheep and every morning me have to get up at 4 o'clock to milk the cows so that the milk truck can pick up the milk by 5 o'clock. Then me feed them and go into the yard and have a cup of coffee and a piece of roast yam and salt fish. About 10 o'clock me drive him blasted man to the bank and wherever him want to go."

While John was talking, his other friends were rolling ganja to smoke, so they pass it to him.

"R——, man," he said, "is better me go into woodland and chop down bush and grow ganja instead of working for three dollar a day. And the man I was working for promised to help me buy a piece of land to make the house, and every time me ask him, he say to wait. The woman a breed again and I can't see any future ahead, not even a house to live in. So me decide to leave the blasted job and go and plant ganja. Most of these houses you see around here, is ganja make them."

John said that he and a friend decided to go into the bush and plant some ganja. After about two months, they came home one evening to hear that the man from Miami who went around buying the ganja was murdered, also his bodyguard. The police were very strict and there was no one else to buy it, so the crop stayed in the field to rot.

"We was very upset over the killing of the ganja buyer," said John, "If we catch the murderer, we just chop off him r—— hand because him wicked. All this work in vain. Look how the man was helping us and now the stupid people them kill him. Is like killing the goose that lay the golden egg."

Another of John's friends said, "The police keep coming on the scene because the murder upset the government badly. They going to bring down pressure on us now because of a white man."

"We miss the ganja buyer already," replied another friend, "Also, me usually get me money without trouble. What I going to do now? We can't go abroad, it too damn cold, and me too old to travel."

He got up and walked away saying, "Where there's life, there's hope."

Everyone went their way, so I stopped to talk to my cousin, then went home. On our way home, my cousin was telling me about Nassau, where he spent three months working.

"Nassau not much good anyway," he said, "You can only spend three months there. I wouldn't go back to that damn place, man, no money there neither. You just working for a penny out there. In any case I had some trouble with a girl so I have to run out of the country."

Now he was planning to go to America to see his brother.

We reached home safely, had dinner, and sat on the veranda talking until bed time. The following morning he went to the mountain to chop some bush to plant peas.

#### **IV. Friends and relatives**

We don't like St Annes because my auntie is very miserable. We could not stay there. Thursday morning we go to St Mary where my mother live. We did not carry anything because I did not know the children them would





It like my mother house

like there, so we have to come back to St Annes for our things following day. They like grandmother and auntie very much so we go back St Mary Saturday morning and spend two week there. These are some of the town we go through on the way to St Mary: Brown's Town and St Annes Bay and Discovery Bay and Ochorios Bay.

We all like St Mary because we have place to walk. The children like there because their brother took them every day to the seaside. They went to Ochorios Bay and Portmania and us all enjoy ourselves very well. When the children them went to the seaside each day with their brother I never went with them except twice. I was too busy visiting friends and relatives. I also went with them to the fields and help them work although it was a holiday. But it was a restful holiday for me. It was one of the happiest time I have for long while.

We leave St Mary on a Wednesday morning and go back to St Annes. The children them leave me there and go back to Manchester where their auntie and sister is live. I stay until the following Wednesday morning. I go to Manchester.

The Wednesday morning when I was about to return to Manchester I had to change vehicle six time before I reached. Soon as I reached I got something to eat and drink then I took the baby out for a walk. On Thursday I went with a friend to the farm. He went to dig some yam holes. While he was digging it I was behind him fulling it with grass to cover it over.

On Friday around midday the family got a telegram from Kingston about the accident in the family so we was up and down at Kingston. The man who had the accident was driving a van going to work. He pick up some people to drop off on his way to work. He run straight into a train. His face and eyes and feet and his arm were cut up like a dead pig. Nowhere of his body did not break. He was a very lucky man, that's all I can say to him.

We were planning to return to Kingston on Thursday morning but on Monday morning instead, around 4 a.m., a mini van came and pick us up to return to Kingston. The driver drop us off at Princess Street near Coronation Market where one of the family had a shop. He took us home as soon as possible where we all got ready and go to a funeral. Although the journey was far and the burial was late we never arrived home until 8 p.m.

Because it was accident in the family I did not get the time to go to the bookshop to get some books or the time to move around, especially in Kingston.

When I was about to return to England I felt so frustrated and also did my family because they did not want me to leave and I myself was just getting back to the old Jamaican custom like the heat and the living of life. The weather was fabulous and also the people them they was so polite.

On my return journey I leave Manchester a day earlier than expected, so we stopped over night in Kingston. On Tuesday morning 8.2.82 we went to Palisades airport to catch the 11.30 flight to return to London. We stop at Nassau and Bermuda. We arrived at London Airport the

following day, the plane touch down at 9 a.m. English time and there was my wife and brother and some more family there to meet us.

### **V. Jamaica the beautiful**

I can tell you, Jamaica is a beautiful place to live. All Jamaica needs is to get rid of the dirty habits it have, like stop doing back deals, do honest things so the government can start to get rid of the old houses, and get rid of the old cars off the street what they dump on it, and start to clean the country up.

Then the government can start to bring back the tourists to the country and it would be good trade for the country. They could start to build houses and schools and churches and hospitals and roads. I know the country needs help. The government could make the bauxite companies build factories and make some of the things they are taking out from the country and send to America can stay in the country. The country need everyone to help build it back up.

It would be nice to see Jamaica get back all the people who used to visit the country, like the tourist them so that the people can get a job and get off the street, also make the people in the country stay, because most of them are leaving the country to go abroad. Jamaica can be sweet for all visitors. It is getting a little bit better now. The killings are dying down a little. The things what are improved the country a little are the houses them. They are building plenty houses, and bigger, with garage. As we all know, the thief won't be stopped so easy because it's a trade for some of them, and it's like a disease for some of them.



## **I'm still learning**

Writing a book like this I know myself better. Sometimes I think about myself as a young child. Looking back I see things in different ways. Since I start to learn to read and write I can look back and understand more what happen to me.

There is always more, a lot more to say. You never get it all down because you don't know the way to put it. But I'm still learning.

These children today have a better future because the parents tell them things. When my daughters go back home they see how we live and they know the big difference between that life and my life now.

I want a better life for my children but I like these children in this country to take note of what life was before.

## Some other books from Hackney Reading Centre

### *Going Where The Work Is by Isaac Gordon*

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