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Came Before
He Shot Her

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What Came Before He Shot Her

Elizabeth George



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What
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He Shot Her

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Chapter

L Joel Campbell, eleven years old at the time, began his descent towards murder with a bus ride. It was a newish bus, a single decker. It was numbered 70, on the London route that trundles along Du Cane Road in East Acton.

There is not much notable on the northern section of this particular route, of which Du Cane Road is but a brief part. The southern section is pleasant enough, cruising near the V & A and past the stately white edifices of Queen's Gate in South Kensington. But the northern part has a list of destinations that reads like a where's where of places in London not to frequent: the Swift Wash Laundry on North Pole Road, H. J. Bent Funeral Directors (cremations or burials) on Old Oak Common Lane, the dismal congeries of shops at the turbulent intersection where Western Avenue becomes Western Way as cars and lorries tear towards the centre of town, and looming over all of this like something designed by Dickens: Wormwood Scrubs. Not Wormwood Scrubs the tract of land circumscribed by railway lines, but Wormwood Scrubs the prison, part fortress and part asylum in appearance, place of unrelenting grim reality in fact.

On this particular January day, though, Joel Campbell took note of none of these features of the journey upon which he was embarking. He was in the company of three other individuals, and he was cautiously anticipating a positive change in his life. Prior to this moment, East Acton and a small terrace house in Henchman Street had represented his circumstances: a grubby sitting room and grubbier kitchen below, three bedrooms above, and a patchy green at the front, round which the terrace of little homes horseshoed like a collection of war widows along three sides of a grave. It was a place that might have been pleasant fifty years ago, but successive generations of inhabitants had each put their mark upon it, and the current generation's mark was given largely to rubbish on doorsteps, broken toys discarded on the single path that followed the U of the terrace, plastic snowmen and rotund Santas and reindeer toppling over upon the jutting roofs of bay windows from November till May, and a sinkhole of a mud puddle in

the middle of the green that stood there eight months of the year, breeding insects like someone's entomology project. Joel was glad to be leaving the place, even if leaving meant a long plane ride and a new life on an island very different from the only island he'd so far known.

"Ja-*mai*-ca." His gran didn't so much say as intone the word. Glory Campbell drew out the *mai* till it sounded the way a warm breeze felt, welcome and soft, with promise gilding its breath. "What you t'ink 'bout *dat*, you t'ree kids? Ja-*mai*-ca."

"You t'ree kids" were the Campbell children, victims of a tragedy played out on Old Oak Common Lane on a Saturday afternoon. They were progeny of Glory's elder son, dead like her second son although under entirely different circumstances. Joel, Ness, and Toby, they were called. Or "poor lit'l t'ings," as Glory had taken to referring to them once her man George Gilbert had received his deportation papers and she'd seen which way the wind of George's life was likely to blow.

This use of language on Glory's part was something new. In the time the Campbell children had been living with her—which was more than four years and counting this time around and looking to be a permanent arrangement—she'd been a stickler for correct pronunciation. She herself had been taught the queen's English long ago at her Catholic girls' school in Kingston, and while it hadn't served her as well as she'd hoped when she'd immigrated to England, she could still trot it out when a shop assistant needed sorting, and she intended her grandkids to be able to do some sorting as well, should they ever have the need.

But all that altered with the advent of George's deportation papers. When the buff envelope had been opened and its contents perused, digested, and understood, and when all the legal manoeuvring had been engaged in to prolong if not to thwart the inevitable, Glory had shed over forty years of God-save-the-current-monarch in an instant. If her George was heading for Ja-*mai*-ca, so was she. And the queen's English wasn't necessary there. Indeed, it could be an impediment.

So the linguistic tone, melody, and syntax morphed from Glory's rather charmingly antique version of Received Pronunciation to the pleasant honey of Caribbean English. She was going native, her neighbours called it.

George Gilbert had left London first, escorted to Heathrow by immigration officials keeping the current prime minister's promise to do

something about the problem of visitors overstaying their visas. They came for him in a private car and glanced at their watches while he bade Glory a farewell thoroughly lubricated by Red Stripe, which he'd begun to drink in anticipation of the return to his roots. They said, "Come along, Mr. Gilbert," and took him by the arms. One of them reached into his pocket as if in search of handcuffs should George not cooperate.

But George was happy to go along with them. Things hadn't really been the same at Glory's since the grandkids had dropped on them like three human meteors from a galaxy he'd never quite understood. "Look damn *odd*, Glor," he'd say when he thought they weren't listening. "Least, the boys do. S'pose the girl's all right."

"You hush up 'bout them," was Glory's reply. Her own children's blood was thoroughly mixed—although less so than the blood of her grandkids—and she wasn't about to have anyone comment on what was as obvious as burnt toast on snow. For mixed blood was not the disgrace it had been in centuries past. It no longer made anyone anathema.

But George blew out his lips. He sucked on his teeth. From the corners of his eyes, he watched the young Campbells. "They not fitting good into Jamaica," he pointed out.

This assessment didn't deter Glory. At least that was how it seemed to her grandchildren in the days leading up to their exodus from East Acton. Glory sold the furniture. She boxed up the kitchen. She sorted through clothes. She packed the suitcases, and when there were not enough to include everything that her granddaughter, Ness, wished to take to Jamaica, she folded those garments into her shopping trolley and declared that they'd pick up a suitcase on the way.

They made a ragtag parade weaving over to Du Cane Road. Glory led the way in a navy winter coat that hung to her ankles, with a green-and-orange turban tied round her head. Little Toby came second, tripping along on his tiptoes as was his habit, an inflated life ring round his waist. Joel struggled to keep up third, the two suitcases he carried making his progress difficult. Ness brought up the rear, in jeans so tight it was hard to see how she was going to manage to sit without splitting them open, teetering along on four-inch heels with black boots climbing up her legs. She had the shopping trolley in her grip, and she wasn't

happy about having to drag it along behind her. She wasn't happy about anything, in fact. Her face dripped scorn and her gait spoke contempt.

The day was cold the way only London can be cold in January. The air was heavy with damp, along with exhaust fumes and the soot of illegal fires. The frost of morning had never melted, instead turning into patches of ice that threatened the unwary pedestrian. Grey defined everything: from the sky to the trees to the roads to the buildings. The entire atmosphere was hopeless writ large. In the fading daylight, sun and spring were an empty promise.

On the bus even in a place like London, where everything that might possibly be seen had already been seen at one time or another, the Campbell children still garnered looks, each for a reason peculiar to the individual. In Toby it was the great bald patches across his head, where his half-grown hair was wispy and far too thin for a seven-year-old boy, as well as the life ring, which took up too much space and from which he resolutely refused to be parted even so much as to remove it from his waist and "bleeding *bold* it in front of you, for God's sake," as Ness demanded. In Ness herself, it was the unnatural darkness of her skin, obviously enhanced by makeup, as if she were trying to be more of what she only partially was. Had she shed her jacket, it would also have been the rest of her clothing beyond her jeans: the sequined top that left her midriff bare and put her voluptuous breasts on display. And in Joel it was, and would always be, his face covered by the tea-cake-size splotches that could never be called freckles but were instead a physical expression of the ethnic and racial battle that his blood had gone through from the moment of his conception. Like Toby, it was his hair as well, in his case wild and unruly, springing from his head like a rusty scouring pad. Only Toby and Joel looked as if they *might* be related, and none of the Campbell children looked like someone who might belong to Glory.

So they were noticed. Not only did they block most of the aisle with their suitcases, shopping trolley, and the five additional Sainsbury's bags that Glory had deposited around her feet, but they made a vignette that begged for consideration.

Of the four of them, only Joel and Ness were aware of the scrutiny of the other passengers, and they each reacted differently to the glances.

For Joel, each look seemed to say *yellow-arse bastard*, and each hasty movement of a gaze away from him to the window seemed to be a dismissal of his right to walk the earth. For Ness, these same looks meant lewd evaluation, and when she felt them alight on her, she wanted to tear open her jacket and thrust out her breasts and shriek as she often did in the street: "You wan' it, man? *This* wha' you want?"

Glory and Toby, however, were in worlds of their own. For Toby this was his natural state, a fact that no one in the family cared to dwell upon. For Glory this was a condition prompted by her current situation and what she intended to do about it.

The bus lurched along its route, splashing through puddles from the last rainfall. It swerved into the kerb and outward again without regard for the safety of the passengers clinging to its poles within, and it became more crowded and more claustrophobic as the journey went on. As is always the state of public transport in the winter in London, the heat in the vehicle was on full force, and since not a single window—aside from the driver's—was actually operational, the atmosphere was not only balmy but also thick with the sort of microorganisms that spew forth from unguarded sneezes and coughs.

All of this gave Glory the excuse she was looking for. She'd been keeping a keen eye on where they were along the route anyway, sifting through all the possible reasons she could give for what she was about to do, but the atmosphere inside the vehicle was enough. When the bus ventured along Ladbroke Grove in the vicinity of Chesterton Road, she reached for the red button and thumbed it firmly. She said, "Out, you lot," to the kids, and they shoved their way down the aisle with all of their belongings and clambered into the blessedly cold air.

This place, of course, was nowhere near Jamaica. Nor was it within shouting distance of any airport where a plane could take them in a westerly direction. But before these facts could be pointed out to her, Glory adjusted her turban—pushed askew as she'd struggled down the aisle—and she said to the children, "Can't be heading off for Ja-mai-ca wit'out saying our good-byes to your auntie, now can we?"

"Auntie" was Glory's only daughter, Kendra Osborne. Although she lived a single bus ride away from East Acton, the Campbell children had seen her only a few times in the time they'd lived with Glory, on the obligatory Christmas and Easter Sunday get-togethers. To say that

she and Glory were estranged, though, would be to misrepresent the matter. The truth was that neither woman approved of the other, and their disapproval revolved around men. To be present in Henschman Street more than two days a year would have required Kendra to see George Gilbert lounging unemployed and unemployable around the house. To pay a call in North Kensington might have exposed Glory to any one of the string of Kendra's lovers—taken up, then quickly discarded. The two women considered their lack of physical contact a truce. The telephone served them well enough.

So the idea that they might be tripping over to bid farewell to their aunt Kendra was greeted with some confusion, surprise, and suspicion on the part of the children, depending upon which child's reaction to this unexpected announcement was being examined: Toby assumed they'd arrived in Jamaica, Joel tried to cope with an abrupt change in plans, and Ness muttered, "Oh, right," under her breath, an unspoken notion of hers having just been confirmed.

Glory didn't deal with any of this. She merely led the way. Like a mother duck with her offspring, she assumed her grandchildren would follow her. What else were they to do in a part of London with which they were not altogether familiar?

Thankfully, it was not an overlong walk from Ladbroke Grove to Edenhall Estate, and only on Golborne Road did they attract attention. It was market day there, and while the number of stalls was not as impressive as it might have been had they been walking along Church Street or weaving through the environs of Brick Lane, at E. Price & Son Fresh Fruit and Veg, the two elderly gentlemen—father and son, although truth to tell, they looked much more like brothers—remarked upon the untidy band of interlopers to the women they were serving. These customers were themselves onetime interlopers into the area, but the Prices, father and son, had learned to accept them. They had little choice in the matter, for in the sixty years they'd operated E. Price & Son Fresh Fruit and Veg, the Prices had seen the inhabitants of Golborne Ward—as the area was called—alter from English to Portuguese to Moroccan, and they knew the wisdom of embracing their paying customers.

But the little group trudging along the street were clearly not intent upon making any purchases from the stalls. Indeed, they had their

sights fixed upon Portobello Bridge, and soon enough they were across it. Here, a short distance along Elkstone Road and well within the unremitting roar of the Westway Flyover, Edenham Estate was plopped down next to a meandering park called Meanwhile Gardens. Central to this estate was Trellick Tower, and it presided over the landscape with unjustified pride, thirty floors of Grade II listed concrete, with a west-facing aspect of balconies by the hundreds, sprouting upon them satellite dishes, motley windbreaks, and flapping lines of laundry. Its separated lift shaft—joined to the building by a system of bridges—gave the tower its single distinction. Otherwise, it was similar to most of the postwar high-density housing that encircled London: enormous, grey, vertical scars on a landscape, well-meant intentions gone wrong. Spread out beneath this tower was the rest of the estate, comprising blocks of flats, a home for the elderly, and two lines of terrace houses that backed onto Meanwhile Gardens.

It was in one of these terrace houses that Kendra Osborne lived, and Glory shepherded her grandkids to this place, dropping her Sainsbury's bags upon the top step with a sigh of relief. Joel set down his burden of suitcases and rubbed his sore hands along the sides of his jeans. Toby looked around and blinked as he fingered his life ring spasmodically. Ness shoved her shopping trolley into the door of the garage, crossed her arms beneath her breasts, and cast a baleful look upon her grandmother, one which clearly said, *What's next, bitch?*

Too clever by half was Glory's uneasy thought as she beheld her granddaughter. Ness had always been several steps ahead of her siblings.

Glory turned from the girl and resolutely rang the bell. Daylight was fading, and while time was not exactly of the essence, considering Glory's game plan, she was becoming anxious for the next part of their lives to begin. When there was no response, she rang a second time.

"Looks like we won't be saying any good-byes here, *Gran*," was Ness's acidulous comment. "Guess we best keep on going to the *airport*, eh?"

Glory ignored her. She said, "Le's jus' check round here," and she led the children back towards the street and up a narrow path between the two lines of terraces. This path gave access to the backs of the houses and to their tiny gardens, which were laid out behind a tall brick

wall. She said to Joel, "Hol' your bruvver up, luv. Toby, see is 'ere lights on inside." And then to any of them who might be interested, "Could be she up to it wiv one of her men. Dat Kendra's got a one-track mind."

Joel cooperated and squatted so that Toby could climb onto his shoulders. Toby did so obediently although the process was made difficult by the life ring. Once hoisted, Toby clung to the wall. He murmured, "She got a barbecue, Joel," and stared at this object with undue fascination.

"S 'ere lights on?" Glory asked the little boy. "Toby, lookit de *house*, darlin'."

Toby shook his head, and Glory took this to mean no lights were shining from the lower floor of the house. There were no lights shining from the upper floors either, so she was faced with an unanticipated glitch in her plan. But Glory was nothing if not a woman who could improvise. She said, "Well . . ." as she rubbed her hands together, and she was about to go on when Ness spoke sharply.

"Guess we'll just have to go on to Jamaica, won't we, *Gran*?" Ness had come no farther than the path itself, and she stood with her weight on one hip, her booted foot thrust out and her arms akimbo. This posture spread open the jacket she wore and put her bare midriff, her pierced navel, and her considerable cleavage on display.

Seductive came to Glory in a flutter, but she dismissed the thought as she often did, as she'd told herself she *had* to do, in the past few years of her granddaughter's constant company.

"Guess we jus' have to leave Aunt Ken a *note*."

Glory said, "You lot come wiv me," and back around the building they went, to Kendra's front door, where the suitcases, shopping trolley, and Sainsbury's bags all made a jumble from the steps down to the narrow street. She told the children to sit on the slab that went for the porch, although anyone could see there was little enough space to do so. Joel and Toby cooperated, hunkering down among the carrier bags, but Ness stood back, and her expression said that she was just waiting for the inevitable excuses to come pouring out of her grandmother's mouth.

Glory said, "I make a place for you. An' it take time when you make a place. So I go ahead and I send for you when t'ings are ready in *Jamai-ca*."

Ness blew out a derisive breath. She looked around to see if there was someone nearby who might bear witness to her grandmother's lies. She said, "We stayin with Aunt Kendra, then? She know that, Gran? She even round here? She on holiday? She move house? How you even know where she is?"

Glory cast Ness a look but gave her attention to the boys, who were so much more likely to bend their behaviour to her plan. At fifteen, Ness was too street wary. At eleven and seven, Joel and Toby still had a great deal ahead of them to learn.

"Talked to your auntie yesterday," she said. "She's out at de shops. She's laying on somet'ing special for your tea."

Another derisive breath from Ness. A solemn nod from Joel. A restless shifting from one buttock to the other from Toby. He plucked at Joel's jeans. Joel put his arm around Toby's shoulders. This sight warmed the one or two cockles that actually existed in Glory's heart. They would all be fine, she told herself.

She said, "I got to go, you lot. An' what I want is you kids stopping here. You wait for Auntie. She be back. She fetching your tea. You wait for her here. Don't go wanderin' cos you don't know dis place and I don't want you lost. Y'unnerstan? Ness, you mind Joel. Joel, you mind Toby."

"I ain't," Ness began, but Joel said, "Kay." It was all he could say, so tight was his throat. His life had so far taught him that there were some things it was pointless to fight, but he hadn't yet mastered not feeling about them.

Glory kissed the top of his head, saying, "You a good lad, luv," and she patted Toby diffidently. She picked up her suitcase and two of the carrier bags, and she backed away, drawing in a deep breath. She didn't actually *like* leaving them on their own like this, but she knew that Kendra would be home soon. Glory hadn't phoned her in advance, but aside from her little problem with men, Kendra lived by the book, responsibility incarnate. She had a job, and she was training for another, to get back on her feet after her last disastrous marriage. She was heading towards a real *career*. No way in hell was Kendra off anywhere unexpected. She'd be back soon. It was, after all, a bit past teatime.

"You lot don't move an inch," Glory told the grandkids. "You give your auntie a big kiss from me."