Adrian Clarke

School

AT EIGHT YEARS OLD I HATED SCHOOL. The only person I knew who felt the same way was Frupse, who left school at fourteen because he said that school couldn't "learn" him a thing.

On mornings I did everything I could to procrastinate — misplaced a sock, spilled tea on my shirt – or not to go to school at all.

Dear Aunt would warn, "Look, Trevor, try and hurry up at that table, ya hear, befo' I come and light a fire under ya lil behind with this belt."

Little Roses Preparatory School, the private school I attended, was in Fairchild Gardens, a good ways from Foster Village. On mornings I had to take the bus. The bus stop stood twenty yards from the top of the hill, twenty yards from the Junction where the Main Road, the Cross Road, Windmill Road and Foster Hill met — the busiest intersection in the village. Here were the rumshop, Miss Waterman's dry goods' shop, and the standpipe ten yards away from her door. At eight in the morning people were going here and there, gathering water at the standpipe, and on Miss Waterman's step an old woman named Mrs. Callender was already sitting at her fruit and vegetable tray. The bus stop was crowded, and more people stood on the sidewalk at the Junction itself. The bus would come down the Main Road and turn left down the Hill, and as it stopped or slowed at the corner the people would jump on.

I heard it before I saw it, a rattling red woodpecker, open at the sides like a tram. I heard the engine singing all the way up the Main Road. When it got to the corner the people jumped on, and at the bus stop they climbed on too, filling the rows to bursting. People squeezed into the tiniest of spaces, made spaces where there were none before, lifted children onto their knees. In every row, bags and feet and baskets cluttered the floor. I stood back, watching, not eager to get on, not caring if I was left behind. I would catch the next bus, whenever it came, even if it meant I got to school late. If I was lucky, the next one would be just as full, and the next, and I would be so late I wouldn't have to go to school at all.

The conductor wore a khaki uniform and cap, brown leather purse over his shoulder. I watched as he stood on the sidewalk helping people on, hoisting bulky baskets over his head, pacing the sidewalk to see that every crevice was filled.

"Size down, size down," he called. "My lady, see if ya could size down a lil bit there."

A woman joked, "Where ya want we to size down and go, Sobers? We pack in here like sardines a'ready. Want we to size down and go out the other side o' the bus?"

I knew her. Her name was Muriel. She got a chuckle from the swollen bus.

When Sobers was satisfied that no one else would fit, that every hole was plugged like a leaky roof, he stepped onto the running board and called to the driver, "Move!"

I was happy. I stepped back to make myself invisible against the wall, to be lost amid the handful of stragglers left on the sidewalk. But Muriel noticed me.

"Wait!" she called. "Don't move yet, Headley! Don't go nowhere yet. Let this lil boy here get on. Can't just leave he there and let he get to school late. Must find room for he. Come, lil boy. Come and try and squeeze in here."

I went. I had to. All eyes were turned my way.

The conductor helped me up, and hands reached out and pulled me in.

"Come, lil boy," said Muriel. "Squeeze in here. My lady, go 'round a lil bit and give the lil boy a scotch."

She did, and I scotched in, sitting on the edge of the seat between the two women's hips. I put my bag on the floor and sat forward, my hands on the seat in front.

"Move!" Sobers called again, and the bus started down the hill.

Headley was my favorite bus driver. When Gregory and I played Bus on the shedroof window I always pretended to be him. He was tall and dark and thin. Under his collar he wore a white kerchief, his cap was pulled down and tilted to a side, and he was ever chewing on a stalk of grass. He sat upright in the seat, right hand on the steering wheel, left hand on the knob at the end of the long, bent gearstick that slanted up from the floor. I liked to watch him drive, liked to watch the way he manipulated the stubborn gears, the bus whining and lurching and whimpering like a hard-ears child. On afternoons, whenever I could, when the bus was empty, I sat in the conductor's seat across from him, watching him, his eyes straight, chewing on the grass, tugging and shoving at the gears. He seemed so important and necessary, and at the same time he was courteous too. On afternoons he drove the additional forty yards past the bus stop on the Cross Road to put people off at the Junction, saving them the walk, and if you were late on mornings and he saw you coming, he stopped the bus and waited for you. He looked at once so contented and important behind the wheel of a bus, as if it were the most enviable thing. So I copied him. And for a time I wanted to be a bus driver, too.

The bus gathered speed down the hill – a clattering of wood and metal and loose bolts. At the stop near the bottom we passed people, slowed and turned right, and passed people at another stop. On the straight road we picked up speed again, bumping and rattling along. On the running board Sobers, the conductor, was a monkey on bars, swinging from pole to pole, collecting money, clipping and giving tickets, making change. At each row he wrapped his elbow around the pole, the

ticket puncher in his palm and the thick bunch of tickets between his fingers, the wind whipping at his shirt and face. Behind him the trees, poles, houses and people were a blur. When Gregory and I played Bus in the window neither of us wanted to be the conductor. It seemed too dangerous.

At the end of the road was a traffic light, and the bus started to slow. The engine decelerated loudly, and you could see the trees and the houses at the side of the road more clearly now. Ahead of us was a lorry, its rickety wooden tray empty. The light turned red and the traffic in front of us stopped, but we didn't. The bus kept rolling slowly on.

Headley shouted, "Oh, Jesus Christ, No brakes!" He raised both hands in in the air and we bumped into the back of the lorry, sending it forward. "No brakes!" And we bumped it again.

Immediately there were rumblings and a lot of anxious movements in the bus. No one was hurt — we were going too slow — but right away a crack appeared on the windshield, stretching halfway across it like a smile, and a shot of steam erupted from the metal bonnet that had dented like a condensed milk can. Headley got out to look and the lorry driver got out too.

"Sobers!" Headley called after a minute. "Tell the passengers to get off. Bus ent moving from here no time soon."

Sobers was already standing on the curb. He did as he was told and the mumbling started again.

"What we going do?" people were wondering aloud. "How we going where we going now?"

I didn't care. The smile on the windshield matched the one across my heart, and I wished we might stay here all day. In the road the traffic squeezed by, people slowing and stopping to look. A bus passed, and another, both packed with people like sand. Maybe this day I would get lucky and wouldn't go to school at all.

Headley squatted on the curb, elbows on knees, hands limp, head bowed, thinking. I had never known him to have an accident before. He might have been in some kind of shock.

Muriel asked, "Wha' ya going do, Headley?"

He took off his cap and looked at it, turning it this way and that. He spat out the frazzled stalk of grass and plucked a fresh one. On his haunches he searched the cap as if for an answer, while we waited to know what we were to do. Finally he replaced the hat, tilted it, and got up.

Across the road was a shop, a sign saying "Durant's Grocery" at the front.

"Sobers," Headley called, "go there by Miss Durant and beg she for a phone message, tell them send another bus. Same time call the police."

My spirits fell, even though that day I got to school a half an hour late.

There were twelve of us at Little Roses. Classes were held in the dining room and the garage. In the dining room, the dark mahogany furniture was pushed aside to make room for our desks and chairs and I always felt it was Miss Rose herself, or Skeete, her small dry housekeeper, who hauled the heavy furniture across the room. Both of them were stern, unsmiling and overly mean. Skeete prowled the kitchen and the yard with an apron on and a spoon or mop or some other implement

in her hand, looking for children to break any one of the countless rules at the school. She was thin and hard, wore her hair in a dozen short graying plaits like horns, and seemed to sense whenever you were doing wrong. Just as you started scribbling with your pencil on the desk or the wall or were preparing to jump from the step in the yard, you saw her small, hard eyes appear.

"Look! Miss Rose ent want none o' that in here," she snarled, bending over and shaking the implement in your face as if it was all she could do to keep from smashing it over your head.

She was a fearsome woman, barefoot, bottom jaw jutting out and her teeth long and brown and slanted outward like a dilapidated fence. She put me in mind of Sharky, the squat ill-tempered mutt at the top of Windmill Road whose bottom jaw protruded, too, like a crooked drawer, and who ran at you, head lowered, teeth bared, snapping and snarling at your heels when you passed.

Miss Rose, though, was even more fearsome, for it was she who wielded and used the thick black strap. She kept it closeby, coiled snakelike around her hand or draped over her shoulder or the back of her chair, ominous, disconcerting, and all too often I felt its bite.

"Come here, Trevor," she would snap. "Come and stand up here."

She sat facing the class, tall, knees crossed, in a tall, straight mahogany chair. She held my exercise book folded open on her lap. I went and stood in front of her, not wanting to get too close.

"Not there. Here. Come *here*. Come and stand up right here."

I stood at her elbow, where I could read what she had scribbled in red ink on the page. She had a firm writing hand, and each stroke she made with the pen made a hard scratching sound. It was as if the page were my tender flesh and every time she wrote it I bled. As she went over my work she kept her head down, working her jaws silently like a cow its cud. I couldn't help but notice how both her jaws and her temples throbbed.

"Look here, Trevor. Look at this." She had a piercing voice. "Show me how you work out this sum."

Her hair was black and straight, with strands of gray, pinned into a bun. Seated, she seemed to tower over me. She spoke to me in dialect, condescending, as if standard English was a language boys from the village couldn't understand.

"Is what I does tell your mother all the time. Know what I does tell her, Trevor? Does tell her ya wouldn't take ya time and do ya work. Does tell her ya would be a good student, 'cause I know you is as bright boy, bright as anybody else at this school. But ya wouldn't take ya time and do ya work. Careless. Always in too much of a hurry. Ya never hear that hurry-hurry never done, Trevor? Nobody never tell ya that?"

Her glasses sat on the tip of her nose and she looked over them at me, all the while deliberately uncoiling the strap. It was all I saw now, thick and heavy and black. I no longer saw the book, no longer saw her pulsing temples and jaws. Lengthening in her hand, the strap was a growing, burgeoning thing. With her free hand she reached out, took my elbow and positioned me where she wanted me in front of her, one step back and a little to her left, as if on the floor was an X that only she could see.

"Look at all these mistakes, Trevor." I looked, feeling the tears rushing to my eyes. "You think this is what ya mother does send you to school for? You think it's why she paying to send you here? When you going to start to take your time and do your work properly? How many times I going to have to lick you to make you learn?"

I shook in my shoes. The strap went up and I flinched. With every lash I dug my fingers into my back, wriggling, trying to remove the fiery fangs from my flesh, as the class watched and the tears gushed from my eyes.

Mr. Forde, who taught out in the garage, had a different approach to teaching, one that was less painful but disagreeable just the same. It made me feel no better about school. He was old and bald, shoulders hunched with age. Thick black hair sprouted from his nostrils and ears, and his eyebrows were thick and black. In the hot garage he wore suits, bow ties, and in his shirt pocket he carried a pipe. At lunch and occasionally after school he sat alone in the garage and smoked his pipe.

He read to us from *The Treasury of English Poetry:*

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

He read it with relish, as if it were an edible thing. But to me it made no sense.

The sun beat down on the galvanized roof, relieved now and then by a cooling breeze that came through the open doors like a fleeting visitor and was gone. Mr. Forde took off his jacket and lay it on his desk. He wore a light-blue short-sleeve shirt, the underarms stained with sweat. The hair on his arms was thick and gray. He took a blue kerchief from his trousers pocket, wiped his brow, glanced at the 'kerchief, put it back. He cradled the thick red book as if it were an open box of chocolates in his hands.

"Repeat after me:

The Cur / few tolls / the knell / of par / ting day. . .

We repeated, like parrots.

The low / ing herd / wind slow / ly o'er / the lea . . .

It might have been a foreign tongue. No one I knew talked that way, certainly no one in Foster Village. Some of the words I had never heard. What was a "lea?" Yet Mr. Forde was not going to explain. He just stood there and read. Our brains were open lids and we were to sit there and take whatever was thrown in, in the hope that years from now when we were old and bent like him it might come to make sense to us. He raised the book to his chest, and we repeated in an uninspired drone:

The plow / man home / ward plods / his wear / y way
And leaves / the world / to dark / ness and / to me.

My eyes and mind wandered from the garage, down the bright gravel driveway to the street where the occasional vehicle passed. What was the use? Maybe Frupse was right. Maybe school wasn't going to learn me anything.

So I looked forward to the end of the day.

My mother had sent me to Little Roses not just because she trusted Miss Rose's ability but also because of the kind of children who went to private school. Before this I attended to St. Luke's Primary in Foster Village, where Miss Rose was headmistress, but when she retired to open her own school my mother didn't hesitate to send me there. It was my opportunity to rub shoulders with the island's great-kind.

I made friends with a boy named Sterling Branford, whose father was a doctor. The only doctor I knew – or knew of — was Dr. Edgehill, who lived behind the wall in Windmill Road. I had never seen him. Being rich and white he was not the type to frequent the village. You didn't see him at the rumshop or the standpipe or Miss Waterman's shop, or strolling through the village's gaps, and when you climbed up onto the wall you saw his house in the distance, sometimes his dark-green Rover beside it, maybe his two Alsatian dogs, but not him. Even though my mother said he delivered my brother and me, people in Foster Village weren't his regular patients; when we needed a doctor we went to the free clinic in Bridgetown.

Sterling was always talking about his Dad — my Dad this, my Dad did that – as if it were the most normal thing to have a father around. The only boy I knew in Windmill Road whose father was around and lived in the same house as him was Dexter. Few boys in the gap had a father they could claim as theirs, who was there for them other than on the odd occasion, and there were houses with mothers and children but where I never saw a man enter or exit once. For me my father didn't exist, was nothing but a faded picture on the cabinet. Frupse didn't have a father, either. His father who was Dear Aunt's brother had lived in America for many years, since Frupse was small, didn't come to Barbados, didn't call, and didn't write except to send a card at Christmas with five dollars in it for Frupse. Winston's father lived in Barbados, right in Foster Village, in Cottage Road, but never came to see his son. Only when he happened through the gap on his bicycle and Winston was sitting or standing in the road did he stop to acknowledge his existence, tapping him on the head like a dog pausing for a second to acknowledge its young, reaching into his pocket to give him a cent or a penny or a quarter before getting on his bicycle again and riding off.

With Sterling I felt different and inferior. He and I played a game after school in which I was ever comparing myself to him. One of the rules at the school was that you weren't allowed to play at the bottom of the driveway where cars entering couldn't see you behind the tall gray walls. The

minute school ended Miss Rose came out to the verandah and sat like a guard, knees crossed, correcting work or sipping tea, keeping us in check with her presence. Some afternoons she gave a lesson on the faded old piano in the living room, but still there was Skeete to mind. Sterling and I waited for just the right time when Miss Rose or Skeete wasn't looking, to slip down the driveway to the edge of the road where from the house we couldn't be seen behind the wall.

Sterling was eight like me but just a little taller. He had a lighter complexion and his nose was not as broad or as crooked as mine. His hair was short and curly, brushed and parted at the side. We stood next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, at the edge of the road. I tipped my chin, raised my shoulders, started willing myself as tall as I could, to see if maybe I had grown an inch or two in the past few days. I hadn't. Next I held my elbow to his, turning it this way and that, inside and out, holding it just so to catch the favor of the sun that sifted through a yellow-poui tree across the road, to see if I had gotten fairer. I knew there was something good about being fair. Why else would my mother and Dear Aunt call me out of the midday sun all the time, warning me that I was going get "too black."

Sterling smiled triumphantly. "You not as light as me."

It was another thing I envied about him: his speech. In Windmill Road no one spoke that way, not even my mother. Sterling said *not*; in the gap we said *ent:* "You ent as light as me."

Some days Sterling said, "My Daddy not coming for me today. My Mommy coming for me," and it sounded as luscious and exotic as Mr. Forde's poetry. It might have been a different language, even though we were two small boys from the same small island attending the same small school. It was the way my mother wanted me to speak.

At home I tried it, standing in front of the mirror, walking around the yard. "You not as light as me," I would say, looking around to make sure no one was listening. "My Daddy not coming for me today." But it sounded ill fitting and wrong, as ridiculous as gold teeth in a pig's mouth. I didn't dare talk that way around Winston or Dexter or anyone else in the gap. Oh, how I wanted to talk like Sterling, to roll the English language around like a paradise plum on my tongue

"Bye-bye, Trevor," Sterling said. "I going to see you tomorrow." I looked to see his father's gray Jaguar gliding up the road. It seemed to float rather than roll on its wheels, so that it was virtually soundless.

Sterling ran up the driveway for his bag that lay at the foot of the wall. I stepped aside as the car backed into the driveway, only the sound of the gravel crunching under its wheels. Behind the closed windows the doctor was inaccessible and large. Sterling got in and closed the door behind him, snug as a handclap, and now he seemed distant, too. Through the glass I could see neither of them clearly, just the reflection of my small self against the wall. The car pulled out onto the street and whispered off. I went up the driveway for my bag, threw it over my shoulder, and headed down the road. A quarter of a mile away at Casuarina Road I would wait for the woodpecker bus.