



**ALL THE
LONELY
PEOPLE**

Also by Mike Gayle

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Non-fiction

The To-Do List

MIKE GAYLE



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PEOPLE

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To Mum and Dad
for everything.

The loneliest moment in someone's life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.

– F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I

Now

Moments before Hubert met Ashleigh for the first time, he had been settled in his favourite armchair, Puss curled up on his lap, waiting for Rose to call. When the doorbell rang he gave a tut of annoyance, waging it was one of those damn courier people who were always trying to make him take in parcels for his neighbours.

‘Would you mind accepting this for number sixty-three?’ they would ask.

‘Yes, me mind a great deal!’ he would snap. ‘Now clear off!’ and then he would slam the door shut in their faces.

As he shifted Puss from his lap and stood up to answer the door, Hubert muttered angrily to himself.

‘Parcels, parcels, parcels! All day, every day, for people who are never in to receive the damn things! If people want them things so much why them no just buy it from the shops like everybody else?’

With words of scathing condemnation loaded and ready to fire, Hubert unlocked the front door and flung it open only to discover that the person before him wasn’t anything like he’d been expecting.

Instead of a uniformed parcel courier, there stood a young woman with short dyed blond hair. In a nod towards the recent spell of unseasonably warm April weather she was wearing a pink vest top, cut-off jeans and pink flip-flops. Holding her hand was a small child, a girl, with blond hair, also wearing a pink top, shorts and pink flip-flops.

The young woman smiled.

‘Hi, there. I’m not disturbing you, am I?’

Hubert said nothing but made a mental note that should he need to contact the police he could tell them that the woman spoke with a funny accent. To his untrained ear it sounded Welsh or possibly Irish, though he couldn't be entirely sure it was either.

She held up her hand as if in surrender.

'It's okay. I'm not trying to sell you anything or nothing. I just came round to say hello really. We've just moved in next door.'

She pointed in the direction of the block of low-rise flats adjacent to Hubert's property.

'We're new to the area and don't know a single soul. Anyway, this morning I was saying to myself, "Ash, you're never going to get to know anyone around here unless, you know, you start talking to people." So I called round to see the couple in the flat below but I think they must be out at work. Then I tried the family across the hallway but they didn't open the door, even though I could hear the TV blaring away. So then I tried all the other flats and got nothing – all out or busy, I suppose – so I got Layla ready and took her to try the mother and toddler group at the library but it's just closed due to funding problems apparently so . . . ?

She paused, looking at him expectantly, perhaps hoping for a smile or a nod of comprehension, but Hubert remained impassive.

The young woman cleared her throat self-consciously but then continued.

'My name's Ash, well it's Ashleigh really but everyone calls me Ash. And this little madam here . . . ? She glanced down at the small child. '. . . is my daughter, Layla.'

The little girl covered her eyes with both hands but peeked up at Hubert through the cracks between her fingers.

'Layla,' said Ash, her voice warm with encouragement, 'say hello to our lovely new neighbour Mr . . . ?

Ashleigh looked at him expectantly but Hubert continued to say nothing.

'I think she's a bit shy,' said Ash, returning her attention to Layla. 'You won't believe it to look at me but I used to be dead shy too when I was a kid. Wouldn't say boo to a goose, me. My

mam was always saying, “Ashleigh Jones, you won’t get far in life being shy now, will you?” and my nan would be like, “Oh, leave the poor child alone, Jen, you’ll give her a complex.” Then Mam would say, “I just don’t want her to get set in her ways, like,” and then Nan would say, “She’s only a babby, she’s too young to get set in her ways.” Then Mam would roll her eyes like this . . .’

Ashleigh paused to illustrate. She did it so well that for a moment Hubert thought her pupils might have disappeared for good.

‘. . . and say, “Like she isn’t set her ways . . . she already hates vegetables,” and then Nan would shrug and say nothing. The thing is, though, Mam was right, I hated vegetables then and I can’t stand them now. Hate the things.’

She smiled hopefully at Hubert.

‘I’m going on, aren’t I? I do that. I think it’s nerves. In new situations I just start talking and I can’t stop. Anyway, I suppose what I’m trying to say is that it’s nice to be neighbourly, isn’t it? And this . . . well, this is me being exactly that.’

She thrust out a hand for him to shake and Hubert noted that her nails were painted in bright glittery purple nail polish that was chipped at the edges. Then from inside the house Hubert heard his phone ringing.

‘Me got to go,’ he said urgently, and without waiting for her response, he shut the door and hurried back to his front sitting room to answer the call.

‘Rose?’

‘Yes, it’s me, Dad. Are you okay? You sound a bit out of breath.’

Breathing a sigh of relief, he settled back down in his chair.

‘Me fine. Just someone at the door, that’s all. But you know me, me dealt with them quickly. No one comes between me and my daughter! So tell me, Professor Bird, what have you been up to this week and don’t leave anything out, me want to hear it all!’

It had been almost twenty years since Hubert’s daughter Rose had relocated to Australia and rarely a day went by when he didn’t wish that she lived closer. He’d never say this to her, of

course; the last thing he wanted was to prevent her from living her dreams. But there were moments, usually when he least expected, when he felt her absence so intensely he could barely draw breath.

Still, she was a good girl, calling every week without fail, and while it wasn't the same as having her with him, it was the next best thing. Anyway, international calls had moved on from when Hubert used to ring his mother back home in Jamaica. Gone were the days of hissing static, crossed lines and eye-watering phone bills. With today's modern technology, the cost was minimal and the lines so crystal clear it was almost like being in the same room.

Without need for further prompting, Rose told him about the faculty meetings she'd chaired, the conferences in faraway places she'd agreed to speak at and the fancy meals out she'd enjoyed with friends. Hubert always loved hearing about the exciting and glamorous things she'd been up to. It made him profoundly happy to know that she was living such a full and contented life.

After a short while, Rose drew her news to a close.

'Right then, that's more than enough about me. How about you, Pops? What have you been up to?'

Hubert chuckled.

'Now tell me, girl, why does a fancy, la-di-dah academic like you want to know what a boring old man like me has been doing with his days? You a glutton for punishment?'

Rose heaved a heavy but good-natured sigh.

'Honestly, Dad, you're like a broken record! Every single time I call you say: "Why you want to know what me up to?" and I say, "Because I'm interested in your life, Dad," and you say something like, "Well, on Tuesday me climbed Mount Everest, and on Wednesday me tap-danced with that nice lady from *Strictly* and then I say, "Really, Dad?" and then finally you laugh that big laugh of yours and tell me the truth. It's so frustrating! For once, can you please just tell me what you've been up to without making a whole song and dance about it?'

Hubert chuckled again. His daughter's impression of him had

been note perfect, managing to replicate both the richness of his voice and the intricacies of the diction of a Jamaican man who has called England his home for the best part of sixty years.

‘Me not sure me like your tone, young lady,’ he scolded playfully.

‘Good,’ retorted Rose. ‘You’re not meant to. And if you don’t want to hear more of it, you’ll stop teasing me and tell me what you’ve really been up to this week!’

‘Me was only having a little fun, Rose, you know that,’ relented Hubert. ‘But me consider myself told off, okay? So, what have I been up to?’

He slipped on his reading glasses and reached for the open notepad on the table next to him.

‘Well, on Tuesday me take a trip out to the garden centre, the big one on Oakley Road, you know it? Me buy a few bedding plants for the front garden – make the most of this mild spring we’re having – and then me stayed on there for lunch.’

‘Sounds lovely. Did Dotty, Dennis and Harvey go too?’

‘Of course! We had a whale of a time. Dotty was teasing Dennis about him gardening skills, Dennis was play fighting with Harvey in the bedding plants section, and all the while me trying to keep that rowdy bunch in line!’

Rose laughed.

‘Sounds like a good time. I wish I’d been there. How’s Dotty’s sciatica by the way? Still playing her up?’

Hubert referred to his notepad again.

‘Oh, you know how these things are when you’re old. They come and they go.’

‘Poor Dotty. Give her my love, won’t you? And how about Dennis’s great-grandson? How did he get on with his trials for . . . who was it again . . .?’

Once again Hubert referred to his notepad, only this time he couldn’t see the entry he was looking for.

‘Me think . . . me think it was Watford,’ he said panicking.

‘Are you sure? I would’ve remembered if you’d said Watford because that’s where Robin’s mother’s family are from. No, last

time we spoke you definitely said . . . West Ham . . . that's it! You said it was West Ham.'

Hubert frantically flicked through his notebook and sure enough there were the words 'WEST HAM' underlined next to 'Dennis's great-grandson'.

'Actually you might be right about that,' he said eventually. 'But really Watford or West Ham, what does it matter? Him not my great-grandson!'

Rose chuckled heartily, clearly amused by her father's charming indifference to details.

'No, Pops, I suppose he isn't. But how did he get on anyway?'

'Do you know what?' said Hubert abruptly. 'Me didn't ask Dennis and him didn't bring it up.'

'Oh, Dad,' chided Rose, 'what are you like? You really should take an interest in your friends, you know. They're good for your health. I came across a very interesting study the other day that said people with a small group of good friends are more likely to live longer.'

'Well, with friends like Dotty, Dennis and Harvey, even if me don't live for eternity it will certainly feel like it!' Hubert laughed and then cleared his throat. 'Now, darling, that's more than enough about me. Tell me more about this conference you're going to in Mexico. You're giving a big speech, you say?'

They talked for a good while longer, covering not just her trip to Mexico but also the new book proposal she was working on and the plans she had to finally landscape the garden so that she could make the most of her pool. Hubert relished every last detail she shared with him and could have listened to her talk all day. And so, as always, it was with a heavy heart that he realised their time was coming to an end.

'Right then, Pops, I'd better be going. I've got to be up early in the morning as I'm picking up a visiting professor flying in from Canada. What are your plans for the rest of the week?'

'Oh, you know. This and that.'

'Now come on, Pops, remember what we agreed? No messing about. Just tell me what you're up to.'

Hubert flicked to the most recent page of his notebook.

‘Well, tomorrow night Dotty wants to try bingo down at the new place that’s just opened up in town. Saturday, Dennis and me have talked about going to a country pub for lunch. Sunday, Harvey is having everyone round for a big roast. And Monday me having the day to meself to work on the garden. As for the rest of the week, me have no idea, but me sure Dotty’s cooking up some plans.’

‘That certainly sounds like a packed schedule!’ said Rose. ‘I don’t know how you do it.’

‘Neither do I, darling. Neither do I. Anyway, you take care, me speak to you soon.’

Ending the call, Hubert sat for a moment contemplating his conversation with Rose. He’d nearly put his foot in it once or twice. He really was going to either have a brain transplant or at the very least get himself a better system for making notes. Picking up the pen from the table beside him, he wrote down, ‘MAKE BETTER NOTES’ in his pad, then tossed it to one side with such force that Puss, who had curled up in his lap again, woke up and stared at him accusingly.

‘Don’t start with me,’ said Hubert, trying to avoid her gaze.

Puss continued to stare.

‘You know it’s not like me enjoy doing this.’

Still Puss stared.

‘It’s not like me got a choice in the matter, is it?’

Puss gave Hubert one last disdainful glower before jumping down to the floor and stalking out of the room as if to say she didn’t tolerate liars. Because the truth was Hubert Bird was a liar. And a practised one at that. Not a single word he’d said to his daughter was true. It was lies, all lies. And he felt absolutely wretched about it.

Then: Hubert, June 1957

It was early evening and Hubert Hezekiah Bird was enjoying a glass of rum with his friend Gus at Karl's, a ramshackle shebeen that was the closest thing their village had to a bar. Karl's consisted of a shack made entirely of sheets of corrugated metal painted in a patchwork of bright colours, with a few mismatched tables and chairs outside. A stray dog lay on the ground nearby, soaking up the last rays of the setting sun.

Draining his glass, Hubert asked Gus if he wanted another and his oldest friend gestured for him to wait.

'Let me tell you my news first,' he said.

Gus reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and produced a piece of paper which he waved in the air with an exaggerated flourish.

Hubert's eyes widened.

'Is that what me think it is?'

Grinning, Gus handed the one-way ticket from Kingston to Southampton to his friend. Hubert couldn't quite believe what he was looking at.

'You're going to England?'

Gus laughed that deep laugh of his.

'Yes, man! I've been saving like crazy these past few months. Didn't you wonder why I haven't been able to stand you any drinks lately?'

Hubert laughed. 'Me just thought you were being tight with your dough!'

'I been wanting this really badly, Smiler,' said Gus. 'There's nothing for me here. You know Cousin Charlie left just last month and he wrote to Auntie that he's already got a job and

he's even managing to send a bit of money home too. He must be rolling in it!

Gus sighed and gazed over Hubert's head dreamily.

'I can't wait to have some money, get myself some nice clothes and maybe even an English girl too!'

He picked up the glass of rum he'd been drinking, downed it in one and put his arm around his friend's shoulder.

'Come with me, Smiler. You and me in England! We'll have a wild time! What do you say?'

For the rest of the evening and long into the night the two friends spoke of nothing but life in England: all the things they'd heard about and all the things Gus would see and do. It seemed unreal, like they were talking about a fantasy, but within just a few short weeks Hubert found himself standing at Kingston docks, waving his old friend off on the journey of a lifetime. As he watched the boat disappear over the horizon Hubert made the decision that he too would make this same journey.

Over the weeks that followed Hubert took on all the extra work he could handle to supplement his income, and within a few months he'd scraped together the money for his passage. The day he bought his ticket, the very first thing he did was tuck it safely in the back pocket of his trousers and the second was head home and break the news to his mother.

Hubert was dreading telling his mother about his plans. The year before, when his sister Vivian had moved to Kingston to train as a teacher, his mother had been inconsolable for weeks, so he dreaded to think how she'd feel losing her eldest son. This was why he had picked a date to leave that was a little way off in the future. It would give her time to get used to the idea, for his siblings to learn the ropes around the house and, if needs be, for them to find someone to employ to help around the farm.

As he approached the home that he shared with his mother and younger siblings, Fulton and Cora, he sniffed the air. Wood smoke and the unmistakable aroma of one of his favourite meals: pork, stewed peas and rice. He tracked his mother down to the cooking shack at the rear of their one-storey wooden house that

had been built by his grandfather. She was wearing a clean white apron over an old faded blue floral dress with a yellow silk headscarf tied over her hair.

Stepping out of the shack, its walls and roof made of sheets of corrugated iron, she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. Before speaking, Hubert studied her for a moment, suddenly keenly aware that there were now a finite number of times he would see her before he left.

Lillian was tall and elegant but at the same time formidable, a force to be reckoned with. She had no time for fools or small talk but would show the greatest kindness to anyone in need. People often told him that he was the spitting image of his mother, with her high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes, but Lillian always claimed that he had a greater likeness to his late father than any of his siblings.

‘How are you, son?’

‘Me good thanks, Mother. And me have some good news. Me . . . me . . . going to England.’

His mother raised an eyebrow but he could see that she wasn’t angry or upset.

‘Are you now?’ she said. ‘And there was me thinking all this extra work you’ve been taking on was to buy me a fancy birthday present!’

She took his hand and held it tightly.

‘It’s the greatest shame your country has nothing to offer you. But that’s the thing about Jamaica at the present time: there are more dogs than bones, but in England all the bones a dog could eat.’

She took his face in her hands and kissed his cheek fiercely.

‘You go full your belly up, Hubert Bird! Go full your belly and make me proud!’

The journey to England in the January of 1958 had been rough, not least because an hour into his three-week voyage Hubert discovered that despite several uneventful trips on his Uncle

Leonard's fishing boat in his youth, it turned out that he was somewhat susceptible to seasickness. By the time the ship arrived in Southampton, however, not only had he learned the best way to combat it, which was to eat as little as possible, but he had also vowed that he was never getting on another boat again. When the time came, he decided, his return journey home would have to be by plane.

From Southampton Hubert caught the train to Waterloo and was met by Gus straight from a long shift at a telephone factory on the outskirts of the city. It had been good to see Gus after so long apart, but Hubert couldn't help but be taken aback by the change in his friend's appearance. The Gus Hubert remembered was tall, broad-shouldered and brimming with confidence, but the man standing in front of him looked thin, drawn, and tired, all of which made him seem smaller somehow. He wanted to ask what was wrong but thought better of it. Instead, as they made their way back to Gus's rented room in Brixton, he allowed his friend to grill him on the news from back home, or as Gus put it: 'Smiler, man, tell me who dead, who born and which of the girls back home miss me most?'

After a night spent in Gus's digs, sleeping top to tail in a tiny lumpy bed in a sparsely furnished freezing-cold room, Hubert made his first visit to the Labour Exchange. It was a daunting prospect made all the more uncomfortable when, despite informing the clerk that he had experience in bookkeeping and carpentry, he was instead handed a piece of paper marked 'General labourer' and told he would be starting work that very afternoon at a building site in Stockwell.

Hubert hadn't liked the work at all – it was hard, dirty and cold – but he was so determined to stick it out that it took a week and a half before Gus finally persuaded him to return to the Labour Exchange in search of something better. 'That's the beauty of this country, Smiler,' his friend had explained that evening as they sat smoking cigarettes on the steps in front of the boarding house. 'You can walk out of one job at midday and have another by two!'

This time Hubert was firm with the clerk at the Labour Exchange, a portly middle-aged man who spoke with a trace of a lisp. He was open to any work as long as it wasn't on a building site.

'Here you go,' the man had said after a short while looking through his file. 'How does warehouseman at Hamilton's department store sound?'

Hubert had never worked in a warehouse before but he liked the idea of a department store. At least it would be indoors, he reasoned, which in this country was a definite plus point.

'Very suitable,' Hubert replied gratefully.

The clerk wrote out some details on a scrap of paper and handed them to Hubert. 'Go to this address at 6.30 a.m. – you can't miss it, it's just off Oxford Circus – and at the service entrance ask for the foreman, Mr Coulthard. And whatever you do,' he added ominously, 'don't be late. It's not unheard of for Mr Coulthard to sack people on the spot just for being a minute behind.'

And so it was, clutching the piece of paper tightly, Hubert had returned to Gus's digs and after a meal of tinned soup heated up on the tiny range and some sad-looking ham sandwiches, he went to bed early, rising and dressing in darkness on the rainiest day of the year to board the 56 from Brixton Hill to Oxford Circus.

Taking a seat on the sparsely populated top deck, Hubert paid the conductor his fare and then slipped his ticket into his wallet. Determined to make the most of this respite from the rain, he turned up the collar on his now sodden overcoat, adjusted his trilby, its felt so saturated that he doubted it would ever return to its original shape, and rested his head against the cold hard glass of the window next to him. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself the luxury of a half-doze for the duration of his journey but within seconds, despite the savage beating of the rain against the side of the bus, Hubert was fast asleep and snoring loudly as he dreamed of the Jamaican sunshine he had left far, far behind.

Waking with a start at the sound of the bus's bell, Hubert wiped at the condensation on the window to discover that he had missed his stop. Leaping to his feet, he raced downstairs and jumped off the bus at the first opportunity. It was now raining even harder than it had been before. Such was the extent of the downpour that even those with umbrellas were sheltering in doorways for protection, but it only took one glance at the watch his mother had given him on his eighteenth birthday for Hubert to realise that he could afford no such luxury.

With one hand holding his hat in place, he ran full pelt through the pouring rain, dodging past men and women scurrying through the deluge to work, and didn't stop until he reached the service entrance of Hamilton's. He was sure he looked a mess. He was so drenched that even the suit he wore under his overcoat was clinging to his every contour and in spite of the biting February chill he was pouring with sweat, thanks to his dash across London.

Reaching up, he pressed the bell next to a door marked 'Deliveries: ring for attention' and took off his hat in preparation to greet Mr Coulthard, only to funnel rivulets of freezing-cold water from its brim down his back.

Hubert rang the bell several times more but could hear nothing in the way of response on the other side of the door. He pressed again even harder, wondering if the bell was working, and then stepped back several feet to examine the side of the building to make sure he was in the right location. Just as he was about to try walking further up the street to see if there was another entrance, he jumped with surprise at the sound of a bolt snapping back, followed by the rattle of keys. The door swung open to reveal a tall, thin man with grey hair cut short at the sides, the longer hair on top neatly combed and Brylcreemed into place. Aside from a studiously maintained pencil-thin moustache, the man was clean-shaven. Under a navy-blue warehouse coat he wore a crisp white shirt and dark brown tie. His black Oxford shoes were so polished that even in this dim light they seemed to shine.

The man stood for a moment, back held straight, unsmiling,

eyes fixed on Hubert, regarding him with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Me looking for Mr Coulthard.’

The man grimaced. This was clearly the wrong answer.

‘You are, are you? And who might you be then?’

Hubert reached into his pocket and took out the sodden, barely hanging-together piece of paper the clerk at the Labour Exchange had given him and handed it over. The man’s lips, already pursed, narrowed grimly as he alternated between studying the note and Hubert. Finally he squeezed the drenched missive into a tight ball and said, partly to Hubert, but mostly to himself: ‘That lot are bloody useless.’

Hubert didn’t know how to react to this. He assumed he was talking about the Labour Exchange but couldn’t be sure. The one thing he was positive about, however, was that if the man didn’t let him inside soon he was sure to die of hypothermia.

The man stroked his moustache pensively.

‘The lads are not going to like this. They are not going to like this at all.’

He regarded Hubert carefully.

‘You done this line of work before?’

Hubert nodded, even though he wasn’t entirely sure what the job entailed.

‘And anything new me can pick up real quick. Me is a fast learner.’

The man pulled a face. ‘I think I’ll be the judge of that. You’re West Indian, I take it?’

‘Yes, sir, from Jamaica.’

‘And you’re a hard worker?’

‘Yes, sir, my mother brought me up to always give my best.’

There was a long pause and then finally the man sighed heavily, shrugged, removed a packet of cigarettes from his coat pocket and pulled one out. Once again more to himself than to Hubert, he said: ‘What do I care? We’re already three men down as it is and I’m sick and tired of management breathing down my neck.’

He lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply, then shrugged and stepped aside.

‘Come on then, you can’t be standing around here all day. You’re late enough as it is. Come in, get yourself a warehouse coat and we’ll get you started.’