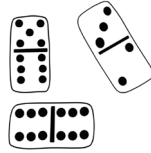


1



Delroy Alfonzo Taylor was fifty-six years and twenty-two days old. That was old for a man in his profession, which was the profession of breaking men's balls – otherwise known as security and protection for Mr Cuttah – but that had been his calling ever since Mr Cuttah had discovered what Delroy's hands could do. Retirement had, so far, been out of the question.

He felt every single one of his years on that Sunday morning when he woke up on the kitchen floor, briefly unaware of where he was. He heard his aching body speaking to him: *How much longer, Delroy?* In answer, he chucked his guts up, no time to reach the bathroom. The contents of last night's dinner – the salt of the roti and oil of its gravy, the sour taste of the beer – seeped into the crevices of the tiles. His nose bled too, and he wasn't sure why because, feeling it, his nose was intact. As he tried to get up, blood dripped onto his string vest; he felt heavier than he'd ever felt in his life.

The room spun. Everything he looked at danced – the dish rack with the two clean plates, the little glass table and all the items on it: a can of Special Brew, a full glass of water, and Mr Cuttah's gun . . . ? From the room next door, he heard the muffled sound of the TV – some waffle about the Kingsbury oil terminal, threats of fuel protests and Great Britain being brought to its knees. He fumbled for his pager in his trouser pocket, but it wasn't there; his keys were though. He raised his throbbing head to look at the clock above the washing machine. It said 10.37. He called out: 'Mr Cuttah . . . ?'

Now, hours later, with the rain pelting down on the top of his head, he stood on Miss Hortense's doorstep. He couldn't tell you exactly

what time it was because, as he had discovered in the pharmacy, he'd forgotten to put on his Rolex. He was about to do something he hadn't done in decades – ask for something. For as long as anyone could remember, Delroy Alfonzo Taylor did not ask. He took orders and acted upon them, without hesitation. Charging, fists at the ready, strutting with those hands Mr Cuttah said were more dangerous than any man-made machine. Ordinarily, Delroy was the one lurking around the corner or suddenly coming up on you. Yet now, as he glanced over both shoulders, it was him worrying about who or what was coming his way. As he swayed on Miss Hortense's doorstep, nausea rising again, a white car with blacked-out windows drove slowly past. Not since September of 1967 could he remember feeling so scared.

The front door opened. He looked down at the old woman in front of him: five foot three at the most, solid square shoulders, hair neatly pinned back – and that scrutinising face. She was the only person who could save him now.

'Miss Hortense?' he said. 'You have to come quick. It's Mr Cuttah. He's dead . . . ?'

He felt her watching him from behind those glasses teetering on the end of her nose. 'Dead?' she said. 'Cuttah? Now, that can't be right.'

'He's dead,' said Delroy. He was unaccustomed to having to repeat himself.

She looked at him and said, 'And what is it you want from me?'

'You've got to do what you did before, find out who did it – before it's too late.'

'Not today,' said Miss Hortense. 'Me have guests fe feed.'

She began to close the door, but he put his right foot in the way and flashed the gun in his trouser pocket at her. He stepped inside the house, traipsing mud along the vinyl carpet runner.

The smell of a Sunday dinner assaulted his senses: the fiery pepper of Scotch bonnet, the lingering aroma of peas that had been soaked for hours. His stomach rumbled but he knew he couldn't eat. Instead, he heard his bones speaking to him once again: *How much longer, Delroy, mate?* And he saw Mr Cuttah flash in front of him – half his brains blown out.

The lace net curtains hanging in the passageway tickled his head as he lumbered past. He slapped them away before turning left and into Miss Hortense's lounge, where she had company. Five pairs of eyes peered at Delroy as he sat down in the armchair nearest the door. The cushioning huffed under his weight as he discreetly deposited a brown envelope deep into the corner of his seat.

He scanned each of the five bodies in turn, looking for potential threats. Aside from Miss Hortense, there were three women and two men in the room; four were sat at a table. Of the women, the older, fair-skinned one with a scarf wrapped round her neck and a full face of make-up, was harmless. She got up briefly, knocking over her drink, and he saw her big feet, which, as well as the stoop in her stature, would make it difficult to run.

He recognised the two other women from a funeral he had recently attended. Mother and daughter. The younger, fleshier one with a broad forehead, eighteen at most, twisted around in her chair to stare at him. She had big eyes and pouting lips and looked petrified.

The girl's mother was in her early forties, he surmised – difficult to be accurate because it was a black woman – and wearing a headwrap. She was more dangerous. He guessed her first priority would be to protect her daughter.

Of the men, he recognised the Pastor straightaway. Delroy had been in his church services a few times, scoping out certain members of his congregation. Delroy didn't trust men of God. This one had a podgy belly and was short-necked. Definitely no threat there; soft men built like the Pastor weren't meant for war.

But the other man, who raised himself from his seat as soon as Delroy had entered the room, was tall and lean. Despite being well into his seventies, he was getting ready to fight – Delroy could sense it. He'd come across this man before too: square jaw, a balanced stance, built like a boxer, name of Fitz. He was narrowing his eyes at Delroy, who felt the tingles in his fingers. Delroy licked his lips, ready to begin.

'Now,' interrupted Miss Hortense, stepping in front of him, 'you come into my yard, without invitation, requesting my help. What is it you want?' She crossed her arms. He looked around the room, at the others gawking back at him. The time for asking was over.

‘You’re gonna come with me,’ he said to Miss Hortense, and rose. He felt all the eyes raising with him. ‘And we’ll take her with us too.’ He nodded at the girl.

‘No,’ said Miss Hortense, widening her stance. ‘If I choose to come, I will come alone.’

‘Not possible,’ said Delroy. ‘You understand.’ He tapped the side of his trousers where she’d seen the gun.

‘Then I’ll go,’ said the woman with the headwrap, putting herself between Delroy and her daughter. Delroy sucked his teeth, then nodded once. He only needed one body after all.

‘Me a come too,’ said the boxer, stepping away from the radiator. Delroy looked over at him, the tingles returning to his fingers.

‘Yes,’ said Miss Hortense. ‘I won’t go without Fitz.’

Delroy didn’t answer.

The woman in the headwrap and the boxer moved towards the door.

‘Cooee,’ said the yellow woman with the big feet and the scarf around her neck, raising her hand at the table, ‘I could come too, because . . .’

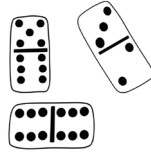
‘No, Blossom, you cannot!’ Miss Hortense snapped back. ‘This is not no blasted busman’s holiday. I’m getting me handbag.’ She slipped into the passageway before Delroy could stop her.

He looked at those left behind in the room, open-mouthed now. ‘If anyone has any ideas . . .’ He looked at the woman in the headwrap behind him. ‘Well . . .’ Delroy didn’t need to finish his sentences. His silences spoke for themselves.

‘Uno fe stay here and nyam. Eat up!’ said Miss Hortense, returning and poking her head back into the room, rotating her arms in a cloud.

There was only the slightest quiver in her voice and only someone who knew her very well would detect it. She hoped to God that Blossom wasn’t listening closely and wouldn’t try to follow them. Neither she nor anyone left in the room had any idea what this man was capable of.

2



The Donkey, as Miss Hortense called Delroy Alfonso Taylor, shoved a compact disc into the player on the dashboard of Cuttuh's car. The synthesiser of 'Silly Games' by Janet Kay pulsed around them. He was driving a car he knew well, fast. It was a gold classic Mercedes-Benz 190 E with manual transmission and shiny rims. It had taken a few turns of the ignition to get started, but it was running smoothly now. The exterior paint had gleamed at them in the afternoon sunlight as the Donkey rushed Miss Hortense and her companions in. The paintwork said that this car was well kept and well loved. It was the type of car that shouted money. As the Donkey shifted easily between gears with his fat sausage fingers, the engine purred responsively, which to Miss Hortense probably meant it had been recently serviced. Oh, how Miss Hortense wished the damn thing would break down.

The car sat too low on the road for her liking. The Donkey had to insist three times before she got in. Did he know that this was the type of car a woman of a certain age might not be able to get herself out of again?

Miss Hortense's seat was pushed back such that Fitz, who had been told to sit behind her, had to crumple up his long legs. The convenience was all for her. But it didn't feel like any kind of convenience to Miss Hortense. She felt like a prize goose, the seat almost totally reclined, forcing her to sprawl out when all she wanted to do was be ready to reach into her handbag when the time was right.

The seats were brown leather and slippery – not made to facilitate a sudden lunge or movement to her right. The passenger footwell, where Miss Hortense tried to ground her wide-fitting court shoes, was a place she could barely reach. She looked down at the footwell on

the driver's side. It was caked with mud, as were the Donkey's black Gucci shoes and the hem of his baggy trousers. And what was that sticking to the bottom of his right leg? Several little spores of furry green – the Velcro-persistence of sticky weed also known as *Galium aparine*, goosegrass or sticky willy.

A Feu Orange traffic-light air freshener swung back and forth between her and the Donkey, like it was keeping conversation with both of them. Miss Hortense couldn't stand the overpowering artificial smell, which still couldn't mask the musty stench of cigars, Cuttah's signature scent. She scrunched up her nose several times and demanded to open the window, but the Donkey ignored her requests.

In the centre console was a half-eaten packet of Trebor Extra Strong Mints, a receipt, a tub of Vaseline and about a pound's worth of change. In the door compartment next to Miss Hortense was a screen de-icer (made of plastic, much to Miss Hortense's chagrin), an unopened packet of tissues, a packet of Marlboro Lights, wet wipes and some paracetamol.

With her right hand, Miss Hortense was gripping her handbag on her lap. She'd emptied some of its contents just before she left—items she wouldn't be needing on this trip. She retained the needle – made sure it was there and full of the muscle relaxant solution she injected to cause momentary paralysis – but would be careful of its use. She could do something now, but the outcome was unpredictable in a slippery seat with her feet barely touching the floor, in a car that was travelling too fast. That would endanger all of the lives in the vehicle, including the young woman, Camille, who sat behind the Donkey, plus any unknowns on the street in front of them. Miss Hortense looked at the gun-shaped bulge in the Donkey's pocket as he yanked the gearstick into fourth. His big floppy cauliflower ear shouted a warning – he wasn't a man afraid of blunt-force trauma to the head. She knew what the Donkey was capable of, which was why Miss Hortense was having a wordless conversation with Fitz. She had managed to reach her left arm around the back of the seat, and when she saw Carter Street coming up, she tapped gently once for Fitz to look up.

Fitz tapped back one, two, three. He poked a long finger into the back of her seat. *You going use the needle?* was how she read it.

She pointed towards Camille and shook her hand, meaning, *Not yet, I'm worried about her, the innocent in the car.*

The Donkey had been chewing on his jaw. The silence was suddenly pierced by his rough sandpaper voice.

'It's been nearly forty years I've been in Mr Cuttah's employment.'

Miss Hortense scoffed because she didn't see how what he did for Cuttah could be considered a proper job.

'I just wish today could've started off different.' His voice was coarse and grating. 'D'you know what I mean? Ever wish for one of them days that could just begin again? I wish that I'd gotten up early and made him a fry-up. Watched him leave the flat as he was accustomed to do, when he went on his usual walk to Nightingale House and sat in the playground for a bit. I wish he'd come back and put on the TV, read the newspaper, and I would have made him a cuppa. Given him his lunch. I had fish in—'

'Sounds like domestic bliss to me,' said Miss Hortense, cutting him short. She'd never fully understood the relationship between this donkey and Cuttah. As far as she knew, the Donkey lived in the same place as his boss, cooked his meals, it seemed, and did all of his dirty work. She hadn't quite removed the sarcasm from the word 'bliss'.

Her arm was still uncomfortably hooked behind the seat and Fitz briefly touched it: *Watch out na man.*

As Janet Kay reached the highest note, Miss Hortense scrunched up her hand. She would damn blasted and well say anything she wanted to, notwithstanding that there was a gun bulging out of the Donkey's pocket next to her.

The Donkey suddenly swore. He glared at the rearview mirror as they approached the Carson roundabout, which they went around far too fast. When they didn't exit, Miss Hortense put her hand up on the dashboard to steady herself as she began to feel dizzy. On their third time around the same roundabout, the Donkey pulled his gun out of his pocket, let it hover there in full view for a few moments, then turned it at a right angle and directed it towards Miss Hortense's head. She looked at the barrel of the gun and then back to see the blur of a bright yellow car; the girl Jasmine, Camille's daughter, hunched forward driving it. Miss Hortense could see Blossom sat next to her,

her hands raised in the air, plus the top of Pastor Williams's round shiny head. Miss Hortense's stomach did somersaults.

The Donkey exited the roundabout on the fifth time around. Needless to say, the yellow car did not follow. He put the gun on his lap.

'You'll want to know how I found him,' the Donkey continued when they turned the corner on Wellington Avenue. 'It was about 2 p.m. I was having a lie-in and I woke up late.' He scratched his nose. 'I heard a noise on the landing. *That's not normal*, I said to myself. I called out for Mr Cuttah several times. Got no response.'

With the gun now in view, Miss Hortense wrapped her arm around the seat again and tapped once on the back of it: they had taken a left at Beale Street which was an unusual way to get to the Belvedere Estate.

The Donkey eased his foot off the accelerator, and they came to a complete stop at a red light at the junction of St Alphege Road and Noxington Street. The car purred again as it was put into neutral and the handbrake applied. Of the several people crossing the road in front of them, Miss Hortense recognised a woman with her push trolley-basket shuttling past. Despite her headscarf and her heavy coat pulled up at her neck, Miss Hortense knew the miserable mouth of Mavis Buchanan immediately. She was in a hurry, it seemed, but slowed briefly when she saw the car, turned her head, and screwed up her beady eyes to look inside it. Then, when she seemed to recognise the passenger, she turned up her nose and pushed her basket across the road at more pace.

Any young person in the car could probably jump out now. But Miss Hortense wouldn't be jumping anywhere given her dodgy leg, and she suspected Fitz was of the same view, given the trouble he was having with his hip. In any case, they all heard the click as the Donkey activated the lock. The car started to move again. The Donkey continued.

'So, after I got no response, I got up and went straight to Mr Cuttah's door.'

He put his foot down harder on the accelerator. Miss Hortense tapped on the back of the seat: If he was travelling via the A334, the Cardozo Road to the Belvedere Estate, there would be another two

sets of traffic lights on their route. If either of them was red, that would be Miss Hortense's chance with the needle. She tapped twice on the chair and returned her aching arm to her lap. She had a plan.

'It was locked, Mr Cuttah's bedroom door. The only people with a key to his door are me and him. I keep mine on me at all times.' The Donkey motioned to a set of keys in his right pocket. 'I even sleep with them. It's important for protection, you see.'

The traffic light on Church Road was green and kept being green. Miss Hortense sucked in her teeth as they passed it.

'I unlocked the door with my key, pushed the door open, and he was in there. In his room. Lying on the bed.' The Donkey briefly swallowed. 'Dead.'

Miss Hortense figured that travelling at that speed, they'd be at the last set of traffic lights in just under a minute.

'Things haven't been right for a while,' continued the Donkey. 'With Mr Cuttah. About six months ago, he had a funny turn, and I had to call the ambulance. Just before that, strange stuff started happening. First, a pigeon got in the flat and drove all his cats crazy. Then a photograph of a man who was meant to be long dead, called Bobby Murphy, was pushed through the letter box. Mr Cuttah said it was a sign. I think it could have been a ghost. He said that it was somebody out to get him and that's why we got the lock put on his bedroom. He was scared, given the next time would make it nine.' He turned to look at Miss Hortense briefly and sniffed. 'After I found him, I drove straight to come and get you. It's what Mr Cuttah told me I should do.'

He paused.

'This morning, I wasn't quite meself either.'

Miss Hortense sensed from the way he was flexing his neck and gripping the gearstick that there was more to it.

They were coming up to the top of Sweet Briar Green, the last set of traffic lights. Fitz poked his finger in the back of Miss Hortense's seat again. Miss Hortense watched the gun and moved her hand as inconspicuously as she could into her handbag, where she felt for the little needle, then willed the lights up ahead to turn. *Green, green, green, green, amber, amber, yes, red!* Miss Hortense grabbed the needle and lifted

her hand, but just then the Donkey pushed his foot down hard on the accelerator, running the red light, and swerved violently in zigzags. Fitz slid into Camille, Miss Hortense into the Donkey. The wheels screeched. Cars in the other lanes beeped their horns frantically.

‘Bloody idiot!’ rang out the voice of one of the other drivers.

When the Donkey had righted the car, he said calmly, ‘I see you.’ He was looking in the rearview mirror again but this time at Miss Camille.

‘But see what I can do.’ He repeated the move, and exactly as before each of the passengers slid into each other. More horns beeped.

‘Shall I do it again?’ he warned, still looking in the mirror.

‘No, no, no,’ said Miss Hortense, trying to defuse the situation. Her heart was thumping in her chest and, what with the roundabout, it couldn’t take much more excitement. She turned back to see Miss Camille biting her lip. Miss Hortense shook her head and watched Camille remove her hand from her own bag. Miss Hortense gripped onto hers. The opportunity to stick the needle in the Donkey was gone.