

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# George & Rue

George Elliott Clarke

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*For Geraldine Elizabeth Clarke (1939–2000),  
David Johnson,  
Joan Mendes,  
and Angus “Sock” Johnson:  
four siblings of Three Mile Plains, Nova Scotia.*

*For William Lloyd Clarke,  
artist, of Halifax, Nova Scotia.*

*And for Geeta,  
indomitable intellectual,  
wilful wife.*

# **GEORGE & RUE**

**GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE**

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## **DISCLAIMER**

Though based on several actual persons and one actual crime, this novel employs facts not found in mere trial transcripts—the scratchy songs, the mouthed bits from blues. George and Rufus Hamilton always lived outside boundaries (including knowledge, including history, including archives). They are “encompassed” here only by unrestrained imagination. That is the only truth in this novel, whose English ain’t broken, but “blackened.”

*Un être absent de sa beauté est deux  
fois plus beau.*

—VIOLETTE LEDUS

*What avails it to recall Beauty back to  
us?*

—COUNTEE CULLEN

A WHITE devil moon haunts the black 1949 brand-new four-door Ford sedan when a black hammer slip out a pocket and smuck the taxi driver's head, from the side. Not just a knock-out blow, the hammer was a landslide of iron. It crashed down unnervingly.

It'd been a turny road, sliding all over, where they'd been, outside Fredericton—cold, colourless city—on January 7th, 1949. The moon's whiteness was cold—some pure hydrochloric acid blackening pines and spruce. Bad nerves, inconsiderate nerves, a jittering hand got that hammer smashing down. Its wielder couldn't see straight; it was like his head was sunk underwater. The hunger in his gut was, he figured, much worse than any maybe pain he did. The slugged guy's breath was a groan that almost drowned out the radio glowing with night's crooners. The hand that'd held the hammer now dropped it clunkily on the floor. As far as the hitter knew, he'd scored moolah, a real win-win situation for any True Crime fan. (In funny papers, people who aren't made of steel are made of water: nothing hurts them. Strike a man with a hammer and he just gets a big white bump on his head and jumps up and slugs you with a bigger hammer.)

Sick of his victim's moans, the double-dealing passenger picked up the hammer and clipped the man again. Hard, bloody action. The struck-down man breathed less and less—like he was calmly asleep. Not right in the eye of God, it was, but the batterer didn't feel shameful or dirty. There was blood splashed on his face and clothes, blood all over the car seat, and black blood on the dying man's face. The car floor was sticky with blood; stains speckled the window.



Moonlight daggered into that country 'n' western radio car as if to zero in on this crime scene. The fare began to think about rifling the zonked man's pockets, stabbing into them to haul out coins, bills. The bond between him and the snoozing man was a wound. Then the front door snapped open and another man appeared, a dark silhouette: Soon, two men feasted on the taxi driver's property.

# WHIP

*If something is not done, we shall be the  
murderers of our children.*

—THOMAS JEFFERSON



# I

ASA FUMBLED in his shirt for a cigarette; the sweet vice he needed with a new un being born. He sure loathed the fact of a fourth mouth now. Christmas 1926 hovered like an Angel of Destruction. Winter was the stench of oil lugged home. Or it was lugging snow into the kitchen to make tea. Or it was trying to battle oppressive rain, that forceful misery soaking up the newspapered floor. Or it was a crop of rats. The sloughs were laced with ice; a crust of crystal formed in the waterpail. And no bite of even bad meat anywhere. Flour bags got scissored and sewn into shirts, bleached underwear got milled from the Five Roses flour company. They had to make bread using potato water instead of milk.

Asa'd had enough. Now Cynthia got the new un comin, comin, her screams scarin even crows off the night-blackening fields. Where was the slow-as-cold-molasses midwife already? Him was tired, Cynthia was wore out.

Asa went back into the shack to give Cynthia the wooden spoonhandle to clench. He found it and put it between her gritting, gnashing teeth. He wet a cloth at the washstand and dabbed the sweat on her brow. Him say, "Ain't no fuss, now, Cinthee. Alisha be here soon; keep calm." She took his big, scarred, rough hand in hers, and nodded. She was pure pretty, with her tan face and waist-length black hair, part Mi'kmaq Negress, and her eyes sweet like rum. She grunted, smiled, nodded, the big quilt humped up over her belly, beautiful-beautiful.

Asa looked away. Why did birth hurt so? Because it was the first proof life'd go hard. Times the baby come out and the mother just droops dead; times both of em perish; times the baby sighs, dies, and the mother just gets bigged up

again. At least two-year-old Georgie was up his grandfolks' up Green Street. Good God. One less trouble tonight.

Asa walked out the back room and to the front door. Look like Alisha, the conjure woman, proachin now. Clip-clop of horse hooves percolatin down the hill ferryin a black shape cloaked up blackly against the pooling gloom. It be Alisha, for sure: thin scarecrow-witch shape, old pointy face. That same moment, Asa look askance at Alisha cause he's a-scared of her. Her face is so ugly, Asa thinks her mama could've been jailed for keeping a private dump.

But Alisha don't care for no man: can any man equal the power and grace of a woman delivering new life, just nine months from the start and all set to go? A man bossin a woman be silly; Alisha see, it's the woman who take all the risk in the business and who make all the profit. What some man bring to it but a big mouth and a bigger gut?

And who could doctor like her? She'd served chicken-shit tea to remedy ulcers, whisky tea to carry away a chill. (This remedy'd make ya feel sweaty, dizzy, and good.) She also conjured up sarsaparilla for colds, tansy for arthritis, camel's root for thrush, and burdock leaves for fever. She made tonics for measles, and boiled roots, herbs, to doctor the mumps. She stuck rickety babies in warm water to straighten out their bones. Healing needed only cow-turd plasters, fumes of lime, and spoonfuls of molasses. She could deliver Cynthy's chile, convictedly a boy, with no fuss a-tall. Unless God drove things different.

Cynthy screamed again. "Christ Almighty, it's comin!"

And then Alisha, busy, sable wasp, was there, leapin off the horse, tossin the reins to Asa who finally had something he could do, and she be bustlin—warm, loud—into the yellow-lit kitchen, then into the back room, with the muddy newspaper floor, rats hidin, waitin for the light to fail, and with Cynthy moanin, rockin, buckin. Alisha set down her big black doctor's bag, brimming with her own homemade magic as well as the sterile items Dr. Keddy give her. (The

doc travelled by horse and wagon, Alisha only by horse.) Alisha pulled up a stool beside Cynthia and commenced her salvation work. She prayed. She manipulated. She prodded. She fussed.

Cynthia moaned and sang, “Sweet Jesus, Sweeeeet Jesus, Sweeeeeeeet, Christ, Sweeeeeeeet Jeeeeeesus.”

Asa heard the cries, but started to drool, thinkin of rum.

Smoking, Asa looked up at the smoked-out stars. He thought of Cynthia Croxen the way she was when she and he was in love way back then. Her ebon, chestnut hair, her onyx and honey eyes, her Black Watch tartan skirt, her legs—smooth as cool wood, her red-brown skin, just her overpowering beauty down by Gibsons Woods, that oasis of nice-looking people who were always throwing all-night parties. He’d snatched her up to him right there, at a dance, harmonica blazing and fiddle sizzling and too much rhythmic clapping. He’d not been fortified with a beer when his eyes caught, snagged, on that dreamy face, too alarmingly splendid. Blossoms were just jettisoning off the apple trees in pastures up, down, the Annapolis Valley—fifty miles of apple blossoms, sir, pink-white-ivory-cream-rose blossoms, delicate to look at, fragile to touch, and the dance was in a barn just off some tan man’s pasture. Blossoms was a-crizzle on the trees. Cynthia’d not said no when he’d up and asked her to dance. So he took her up—small as she was, light, well, light like light—and twirled her about the impromptu dance floor, some planks flung down among the stacked hay, some lamps for light, some beer for flavour, and some apple blossoms for scent. His hand on her waist, ah, it was like holding a plate of petals. They danced. They got all hugged up in a corner. Cynthia was sheathed light: her skin was sheer copper-brass-gold.

Later, four cream oxen, shimmering in spic-and-span moonlight, shimmied a cart over a puddle-pocked dirt road, nearby the squalls of apple blossoms, squabbles of pear blossoms. Cynthia’s dress rustled like a Bible page. She

looked a gold-leaf Cleopatra, smelled of Noxzema and Pond's. Asa took up Cynthia's light hand and kissed her fingers where they sat, trundled along in the cart. She looked at him, her eyes glinting as arrogant and soft as wine; then she smiled, and it was as beautiful as the moon. Her beauty was pure sugar in his mouth.

In 1923, Cynthia was sixteen and Asa was twenty-one. They went to a preacher and got attached forthwith. Asa sayin to his wife: "You lookin good in that wedding ring." The ring was only silver. Still, the dew of his kisses upon her made her own kisses wetter and freer. The only thing she wore was sunlight. They sipped Demerara rum then, then supped madly on each other. In the morning, she'd put her face on, Asa'd put the coffee on. They served each other breakfast in bed every day that first summer. The bedsprings screeched like church organs. There was hot biscuits, slabs of bacon. They buttered each other up sweetly-sweetly, gobbled each other down hotly-hotly. In each other, they had a little heaven, briefly. Maybe fried mackerel and buckwheat pancakes and berries for Sunday breakfast, maybe buttermilk and brown bread and blackstrap molasses—"bread and lally"—for Sunday supper. Now, a tall jug of ice water on the table beside the steaming-hot plates; later, a small dish of ice water on the floor beside the sweating-hot bed. Asa like the kind of love where the lovers get all sweaty.

*There's just one thing, you gotta understand.  
I say, there be just one thing, y'all mus understand:  
It takes a lovin woman to make a lovin man.*

Asa loved seeing pretty-pretty Cynthia's raining dark hair flying like a horse's, and he loved their bucking, their breaking into hoarse pants, her ebony hair flogging breath, lovely, satisfying, and fresh, her lips blushing, sobbing moans, her serious mouth, her ginger hips, his delirious

charging, charging. Dependin on light, she was tawny and mahogany and dusky and chocolate and coffee and coconut and brass and bronze and rosy. Blackness were wine, muscles, sweat, laughter, fire, gleams, amen. Cynthy'd slide into bed, eager to touch; Asa stiffened, became hard to break. Asa felt love rising up like sugar rising in the maples. He could quaff her kiss like milk with a fine relish, like a fresh pan of milk instinct with honey. They'd get down in the bed and fuck, and fuck, and fuck. Cynthy's kisses were burning liquor. So sweet as the sweat that sugar makes as rum. His lips emphasized her gold hips, her apple breasts.

That first year, Cynthy and Asa ate just three foods for three months: mackerel, bread, and rum. Only peril was, for the newlyweds, potatoes sometimes substitute for rum. Asa could've eaten a burlap sack full of cod or mackerel or herring, just by himself. But food was really secondary, when all they felt they needed was love and fresh water.

Asa figured his bestest possession be Cynthy, his wife, and wouldn't it be nice to see such pleasure bear fruit? But at first, after conjunction, she'd crush seeds of Queen Anne's lace, mix the white powder with water, and drink to keep the babies off. Still, who can forever refuse natural consequences of love? And so, Georgie happened along. Same time last year, 1925.

That's when the sweetness turned ugly, with a squalling baby, an often sick—and sickening—wife, and that was when Asa started to feel they was the accursed of Three Mile Plains. But they had no monopoly on that curse. . . .

Asa stood there, in the doorway of his two-room hovel, yellow oil-lamp light falling on his shoulders, with his woman's giving-birth hollers hammerin his brain, and looking out, past Alisha's horse, toward Panuke Road and its dark, wheel-rutted roadbed plunging and corkscrewing down the hillside toward the blacktop provincial highway. He could see, across the decrepit fields about, houses squatted in ruin, just a bright few looking habitable. He was thinking,



there, in that blue-grey dusk, sharp tang of woodsmoke on the breeze, that this baby was a long time comin. Cynthia's second baby was takin some time. And it was gonna inherit, just like the first-born, what Asa'd inherited from a father who had only scraggly land, not even haggard love, to give. By golly, he could use some rum. But it was winter, Christmas only a couple days away, and not anything to chew on. Even weeds unobtainable now. Could there be any Pig Eating Good Cake, Scotch Cake with Scotch instead of brown sugar, rye coffee with some molasses, apples, pears, quinces, some sweet ham, roast chicken, dry herring, sausages with curry? Oh God, some roasted herring, strong ale, a bushel of cornmeal, anything that could go down good would be good. Christmas needs crackers, cheese, pound cakes, sweet potato pies, rice pudding, pumpkin pies, and mincemeat pies. But there ain' none. And no fat roast turkey, or real eggnog neither. Only the monotonously icy wind that was sheering off from the Atlantic, that desert of water, invisibly south over the gypsum hills, abandoning the dark, destructive icebergs where they lurked, and arriving as iced rain.

Asa was the fifth-generation Hamilton in Nova Scotia, and the third-generation to call Three Mile Plains home. But what a shack he'd gotten. He was now standing in the doorway where snow could come in anytime, the rain could blow out any little fire he could coax along. Unhygienic, it certainly be. The floor could flood with mud if there weren't enough newspaper tamped down, if the cracked, crooked window weren't blocked up somewhat with a plank, if the door had to groan open and off its hinges once too many times. In the front, a table, a few chairs, for gamblin, drinkin, smokin, whatnot. In the back, two beds, a dresser, and a washstand. Oil lamps took care of light, two small woodstoves hinted at heat. Yes, he complained about bedbugs and field mice. He had to take a shoe and kill the bugs on the walls, plus the

field mice frozen scared on the sink or on the kitchen table. Everything smelled of coal dust and mouldering potatoes.

Not Asa. He smelled of the blood he brought from the butchery where he worked on and off. More off now. He was a meat cutter who thought he knew the Devil. He knew everything about animals brutally shredded. He had to clean up leftover animal bits, shovel away offal and shit and vomit, and kill cows himself, bash in their skulls, slash open their throats, to hurry on cessations. A Waterloo of hogs, a Somme of cattle. Awful noise and dirt. In a blood-soaked barn, thousands of pounds of meat hacked off of still-complaining animals in a crummy barn. Too often, blood and meat pieces slid inside his shoes, forming red, comfy extra socks. Him took this violence home with him, bundled up with meat scraps. And he was tired of ice-crusted piss in the chamber pot in the middle of a winter night, and he was tired of the memory of his widow mother having baby after baby by three or four jokers who liked fucking but didn't like fatherhood.

Asa's philosophy be belt straps and bullwhips on the ass; heftin sides of beef to feed corpulent palefaces; gulpin fast-fire tastes of wine outside a whites-only saloon; soiled food; Negress singers sirenin from a turntable, their raucous voices kickin the air. He could talk about worn-out shoes, worn-down blues, comment on scuffed-up record jackets. He didn't dream about porterin on the trains and goin on up to Montreal. Killin sheep paid better than shinin shoes and launderin sheets.

Now here was another bank-breaking, bottom-dollar Christmas. An unholy month of falling-down drunkenness. Nobody was gettin anything extra either. There was snow, there was rain, and it could go on like that for week after week; first, a downpour, then six feet of snow, as deep as the grave. The fresh snow collected in clumps, crannies, dark nooks. Then the winds come, heavier and heavier, unforgiving, heavy as hammers, unstoppable, refreshing,

and sordid. Hard then to navigate a piece of land, a skirt of woods, a small stand of bush on the edge of Hants County, with so much sleeting mud, bone-chilling muck, then hazards of ice. Up over the hill and back a ways, Panuke Lake might wail bitterly with the cold. It could cry operatically as if a horse were stuck beneath its ice.

Asa winced to hear Cynthia holler a slobbering, sloping cry. Cripes! A foul season was winter, a shitty time for a baby to be shitted out, and here it was happening again, second year in a row.

Asa eyeballed a puddle near Alisha's horse. The water looked up idly at the sky like a mirror. Then the horse moved a hoof and broke the image. The sky was now muddled and quivering, promising drenching, punishing, and overflowing rains. But the horse's nostrils seemed caked with ice. Then Cynthia cried out sharply, and her second son slid into the world, on a flood of blood, in that two-room shack with dirty, tabloid-yellow floors.

The horse whinnied and Asa sighed. He'd better step back inside and swaddle the youngest. And how'd dour Alisha take her pay this time? Maybe the flesh bridge between baby and mother. Maybe she'd want that, to either eat it or bury it after chantin Afric-style over it. Asa walked back to the room where Cynthia lay crying, laughing, holding a copper-iron-coloured newborn in her arms, while Alisha, with the motions of a woman who saw no mysteries, moved a white rag over Cynthia's wet brow, and Cynthia looked up at Asa, who bent to see his new flesh.

She say, "After this one, no more, Asa. No more." And she laughed.

Asa muttered, "We already got one too many," and, quick as could be, Alisha slapped the fool man, and the newborn in his mother's arms wailed bitterly. Asa swore at Alisha to scam.

"Get fuck out ma house."

Alisha spoke, spookily, “If you don’t hang God in your heart, Asa, you—or these boys—is gonna hang.”

Asa spake: “You mumbo-jumbo bitch.”

Cynthy warn, “Be kind, Asa.” He glared.

Alisha spat, “I’m takin the cord to bury.” Then she snapped up her things, snapped close her doctor’s bag, and swept out.

Asa was alone with his family, and lonely. The sides of Cynthy’s eyes glinted like aluminum in the pungent, smoky, weeping dark.

## II

WHAT NEITHER Asa nor Cynthia knew was how much their personal destinies were rooted in ancestral history—troubles. Their own dreams and choices were the passed-down desolations of slavery. African Nova Scotia and, specifically, Three Mile Plains were the results of slave trade and slave escape. Three Mile Plains, Hants County, Nova Scotia, was, in fact, five, six miles of rolling hillsides directly southeast of Windsor town, which was forty-five miles northwest of Halifax, the provincial capital. The Negro—Coloured—people come from black slaves freed by redcoats down in Maryland and Virginia, then transported, like convicts, to “New Scarcity” during the War of 1812. They bore names like Johnson, Croxen, Grey, States, and Hamilton—the surname of John, a hellish master back on hellish St. Simon’s Island in hellish Georgia. They arrived just like two thousand black others who came with nothing to nowhere, were landed with indifference and plunked on rocky, thorny land (soon laced with infants’ skeletons), and told to grow potatoes and work for ale. They was so poor, they supposedly didn’t even have history. And could they afford self-respect? Well, they paid for it with their backs, their legs and feet, their hands and arms.

The Plains people had since mixed with the Mi’kmaq, but only a few ancients knew exactly with whom and when. The results were splendid, though. These saltwater, brass-ankle Negroes had bulbous noses, sharp black eyes, curly and partly straight hair, and skin tones running from deep molasses brown-black to maple sugar cream, auburn copper to red-iron, orange, and to blue. Their black hair could be blondish in places or high red. Also mixed up with whites, they often mirrored gorgeous Gypsies, possessing long