Publisher's Note

In this book are some expressions and depictions of prejudices that were commonplace at the time it was written. We are printing them in the book as it was originally published because to make changes would be the same as pretending these prejudices never existed, and that the author didn't experience them.

Introduction

For many people the ‘Swinging Sixties’ was a myth predicated solely on the charmed young rock stars, artists, actors, errant debutants and models who sashayed down the King’s Road and Carnaby Street, and made headlines with their wild antics. Or at least that’s what I thought until I read Barbara Blake Hannah’s memoir, *Growing Out: Black Hair and Black Pride in the Swinging Sixties*, a gorgeously exuberant account of her decade living it up in London as a young woman.

A middle-class journalist back home in Jamaica, when the opportunity arose for her to travel to England as part of a film in which she’d been given a minor role, she jumped at it. Single, confident, carefree and ambitious, she was soon moving in aristocratic and artistic circles, among people who wanted to change the world. The young creatives of her acquaintance probably had no idea what the future held for them: the Australian Germaine Greer soon became Britain’s leading feminist writer; Richard Eyre would one day become the Director of the Royal National Theatre; and the film-makers James Ivory and Ismail Merchant were then at the start of their legendary Merchant Ivory Productions.

Parties, politics, nightclubs, restaurants, concerts, films, openings – Blake Hannah made sure she was at the centre of the

happening scene, aware of her exotic status as a black woman and the fashionable kudos she conferred on her white suitors when she walked into rooms draped on their arms. Living in rented accommodation, sometimes sharing, sometimes on her own, she spent many years ensconced in a garret right in the heart of London's West End.

While Blake Hannah couldn't avoid the pervasive discrimination faced by people of colour, including an awful strip-search as soon as she landed from Jamaica, it's interesting to read about her disconnect from the majority of Caribbean people who, at that time, struggling to make their way in the not very maternal 'Motherland', were far too preoccupied with cultural adjustment and survival to be swept up in the waves of a cultural revolution. When she first encounters the run-down city districts like Ladbroke Grove, where most of them lived, she describes their 'loose, threadbare suits, heads covered by narrow-brimmed hats, feet shod in broken-down shoes – all wearing an air of suffering or sadness, of total dejection'. The class and lifestyle divide is never more apparent and her gaze on her fellow immigrants makes stark the difference between the now well-recorded Windrush era narrative of struggle and her own rather more glamorous sojourn as a girl about town.

Blake Hannah is clearly beautiful, and we get a strong sense of her lively and engaged personality. Her conversational writing tone feels as natural and vivacious as if she were sitting opposite you chatting. Through a high-society friend she found secretarial and eventually other white-collar jobs, and she wrote features for major publications such as the *Sunday Times* and *Cosmopolitan*,

before, amazingly, becoming Britain's first black television journalist at the ripe old age of twenty-five.

When Thames Television recruited Blake Hannah as a reporter for their early evening news and magazine programme, headed by Eamonn Andrews, who went on to become a famous figure in British broadcasting, her appointment made the papers and turned her into a celebrity, but it also rankled with the outraged racists who crawled out of their slimy sewer pipes and wrote ceaseless letters of complaint to her bosses. Nonetheless, for a brief period she was sent on assignments nationwide, interviewing among others Prime Minister Harold Wilson and the actor Michael Caine, but a mere nine months in her bosses shamefully bowed to pressure and she lost her job. A second television gig ended in the same way.

Blake Hannah writes about this past with stoicism, but reading about her experiences reminds us how hard it was for her generation to make their way all those years ago when raw racism – bottom-up, top-down – was such a barrier to achievement. We can trace the paucity of representation of marginalized communities in so many fields today back to these earlier roots of systemic discrimination. This talented young woman who was bright, personable, aspirational, capable and willing could have had a long career in television, perhaps ascending to the heights of top commissioning and directorial positions, but instead her career was crudely, heartlessly and unjustly chopped off at the knees.

She returned to Jamaica, where she joined the Rastafarian religion and communities, a spiritual homecoming she describes as

a wonderful 're-birth, the start of a new life in a Jamaica I had never known before, never even knew existed'. This set her on course for a very different and ultimately more fulfilling future, building up a career as a film-maker, arts curator, consultant and the writer of many books, and she made history as the only Rasta to ever sit in the Jamaican Parliament, doing so as a non-political independent.

Growing Out as a title is symbolic of the journey the author undertook during this period of her life. Black women and hair is an important pairing addressing cultural affirmation, symbolism, self, social acceptance and bias. The author's own hair journey begins with the straightened curls of her youth, with their close approximation to whiteness, and progresses through to the long dreadlocks of her religion, tied up in a headwrap according to its conventions.

Memoir holds an important role in literature as a medium through which we transmit real life stories that cannot be dismissed as fiction. This one is a record of a black woman's journey through a Britain of half a century ago, at once unique because of the career she carved out for herself, but also unfortunately familiar because of the obstacles facing her.

Memoirs by women of colour in Britain are still quite rare, and *Growing Out* enriches our literary history while being a fascinating and hugely enjoyable read.

Bernardine Evaristo
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Prologue, 2021

There was a place in Jamaica called 'Heaven' where some of my good friends used to live. It was not a place many people could visit – the people who lived in Heaven were very choosy about who they allowed to go there.

Heaven was a colony of shacks on the hillside of Wareika, the notorious haven of criminals and the poor, where Rastafari bloomed after its escape from the razing of the West Kingston 'Dungle', or dung hill, where they had made their humble homes.

Heaven was the place the police continually busted open when they raided looking for ganja and criminals.

Heaven was a place with the most beautiful view of Kingston Harbour.

If they caught an intruder in Heaven, the residents would sometimes strip them naked and force them to walk back down the rocky pathways to 'civilization' on the main Windward Road, facing public embarrassment. But if you were a welcome guest in Heaven, you could sit and smoke a fragrant spliff and listen to the long-time residents and elders of Rastafari discuss life, the world and the greatness of God, JAH RASTAFARI.

The 'criminals' of Heaven were what one friend of mine called 'the rebel slaves of an unjust society' – men whose alternative to starvation was robbery and violence. Crime was the only means

of livelihood for those who found themselves adults and near-adults in a society in which they were not equipped to earn a living, except as manual labourers – an occupation with greater supply than demand in the Jamaican ex-slave colony.

The 'criminals' of Heaven could be identified by the sweet harmonies they produced when gathered around a guitar in a hymn of praise to Zion – harmonies perfected in the many years of confinement in the Hell of the General Penitentiary, Kingston, where they served lengthy and unjust sentences for the 'crime' of smoking, possessing and selling the Holy Wisdom Herb, or for releasing their anger and frustrations in acts of robbery or violence.

It was in Heaven that I first learned about the equality of man, the possibility of a world in which each received according to their needs, gave according to their ability and lived in love with their fellow men and women. The residents of Heaven called this philosophy 'COMMUNAL-ism' and said it came from Africa.

On moonlit nights when the shacks and houses of Heaven's hillside were clearly outlined, the residents would be lulled to sleep by the rhythms and harmonies of Nyabinghi Rastafari singing and drumming coming from the yards nearby. In the peace and love which filled the entire hillside community, men hiding in the hills from police arrest would creep gently down through the macca bushes and gather in the dark of mango trees to add their sweet harmonic voices to the concert of praise to the Creator, JAH.

Heaven! What sweet memories!

Chapter One, 1964

You know, you can't imagine something you haven't experienced. I had a picture of England which was generated by the film of the coronation of Elizabeth II, which they drove us over from Hampton, the posh boarding school in St Elizabeth, to see at the nearest cinema in Mandeville, forty miles away. We had on our best school uniforms and those of us who had Union Jacks waved them, and the English girls attending our school whose parents lived and worked in Mandeville's bauxite industry just sat and looked smug.

Another powerful image of England came from Enid Blyton's *Nature Lover's Book*, which I had read in detail, all about beech trees and lichen and sea anemones. I knew all about Trooping the Colour, and tea.

I saw England as a magic land into which I would just arrive and suddenly no longer be the awkward, unattractive beanpole I was, but a svelte, vivacious, beautiful, much-wanted woman, hugging my knees à la Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, living life to a background music of a lone trumpet playing in

the summer evening twilight – you remember that scene in *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, don't you?

Movies really blow your mind, you know. All my experience of the world was based on books, and then when I understood about movies, I used to go to them not only to live out the fantasy for two hours, but to work up new fantasies for myself. Carib was the nicest Kingston cinema. It used to have a sweet smell as soon as you got to the ticket desk.

Usually I would go on Saturday afternoons, which was when all of us teenagers dressed up in our best clothes and hoped that the boy we were currently in love with would come and sit beside us after the lights went out and put their arms around us. That was a big demonstration of commitment and kissing was as far as we girls let the boys go. It was called 'necking' and you couldn't neck unless you were sitting in the back row. Only the very brazen girls sat alone in the back row waiting for their boyfriends and kissing. We 'good girls' sat in the middle rows.

Smoking cigarettes was the big 'bad thing' to do. Sometimes you would beg a cigarette from the boy and try not to cough too loudly on the first puff. But although I wanted to be normal and have a boy come and sit beside me, I was really more interested in the movie. Once the picture started I would watch and listen to everything. I didn't like Westerns unless the hero was good-looking, like Tab Hunter or Richard Egan or Fernando Lamas. He was married to Esther Williams, the swimming star, who was my heroine.

Once I wrote to Fernando Lamas for a photo and he sent me an autographed one. It took me a long time to realize that the

signature was printed, and not written by hand. I wrote to Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher too, when they were the Favourite Couple. They each sent me a picture.

One of the movies I loved in my teenage years was *Carousel*. My sister and I went to see it one night at the Tropical, an open-air theatre, and we had to walk back home because we stayed to see the beginning again and all the buses had stopped running, but we walked home singing the songs. My sister sang really well. She could harmonize, but I always learned the words quickest. We were always singing together. I would think of myself as a sexy Eartha Kitt type, but my sister would laugh at me. She used to swap me her supper for pictures of Grace Kelly and she cried the night we saw *High Society*, because Grace had married her Prince and that was her last movie.

I liked *Imitation of Life*, the Lana Turner movie about the White Black girl whose mother was Lana Turner's Black maid and she didn't want to acknowledge her, and I cried when Mahalia Jackson sang at the maid's funeral at the end, because I was glad that the poor Black woman got such a nice funeral. Remember that stupid movie?

I loved Pat Boone. I went to see *Friendly Persuasion* because he sang the theme song, which I liked but didn't understand what the words meant, which meant that it must have been about love and how you felt when you were in love. Anyway, I went and fell in love with Tony Perkins and swapped my sister my supper shortly after that for a photo of Tony Perkins jumping up on a diving board, which she found in a movie magazine. I liked *Stalag 17* because Daddy took us once when we were young and

he laughed and laughed and laughed out loud at the part where they had a rat race and the rat that was winning suddenly went mad and started chasing his tail. We were embarrassed and said, 'Daddy shush,' but he used to take us to see that movie every time it came round again and laugh just as loudly every time the part came on that he liked.

I liked *Porgy and Bess* because the Black people in it seemed like normal people, not the maids and slaves they usually played, and the singing was good. And I LOVED *Jazz on a Summer's Day* and *Black Orpheus*, which I saw on a double bill the night I got out of hospital after measles/bronchitis/gastroenteritis. Both of these films made me feel like the person I wanted to be. Marpessa Dawn, the heroine of *Black Orpheus*, was the Black woman I wished I could look like.

But I guess what really made me want to go to England was the fact that films had amply prepared me to exist in and appreciate Europe's cities and lifestyle. Films, and music.

'Rock and roll is here to stay'.

There was nothing to contradict the truth of that statement in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1964. On WINZ from Miami, Florida, Jamaicans listened through heavy static to the popular lyrics of the musical era which gave youth its freedom and attitudes. Ears glued to radio sets each night, we became familiar with the songs of Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and the Comets, Pat Boone, Bobby Darin, and the Platters.

Jamaica still basked in the glow of 'Independence' – a great word, a feeling, a political reality. It had been two years since the start of Independence, and the memory was still fresh of a

ball-gowned Princess Margaret gazing sweetly up into the eyes of a tuxedoed Prime Minister Alexander Bustamante in the waltz which marked the official beginning of it all. Still fresh too, in our memories, were the ceremonies, fairs, shows, extravaganzas, speeches and promises which marked 'Independence': the opening of the Sheraton Kingston, the first hotel to be part-owned by the Jamaican government and a foreign hotel chain; the opening of the Esso Oil Refinery, with its sky-high, ever-burning flame rising over the slums of the Dungle; the start of a brand-new holiday – Independence Day – to replace Emancipation Day, which we were told was a bad reminder of our slavery past.

'Independence' held out the promise of a magic wand with which we could make our national fortune, a Jamaica in which we would become instant heroes and heroines. The land would become prosperous and give forth the kind of plenty that we were accustomed to seeing in American films and magazines. As if to prove this correct, Independence had brought us our first cotton candy machine and our first Miss World – honey-skinned, honey-haired Carol Joan Crawford.

Bliss.

So it did not seem in the least bit incongruous for young Jamaicans like me to be memorizing, singing and dancing to the words of 'A White Sport Coat and a Pink Carnation' or 'Silhouettes' or 'Dream Lover'. We were simply in training for the time when we would take our place in that fantasy world defined and described by Fats Domino, Johnnie Ray, Jimmy Darren and The Big Bopper.

'Blueberry Hill'.

'Let's Twist Again'.

'This Magic Moment'.

'Diana'.

'Dre-ee-ee-ee-eam'.

Somewhere below Cross Roads, where the 'lower classes' sported, Jamaicans were making a new music called ska, the beginnings of reggae. Above Cross Roads, the crowd at the popular 'Glass Bucket' nightclub existed in blissful ignorance of this trend, or if they indulged, did so conscious of the fact that they were slumming. Not for us the small-brim hats and curling-comb-sausage hairdos. If it wasn't Byron Lee and the Dragonaires' cha-cha-cha and twist, then it was Carlos Malcolm's rock and roll. I was not allowed to socialize below Cross Roads, so I enjoyed my ignorance and danced the rock and roll enthusiastically.

Grab, step, spin, return.

Grab, step, spin, return.

Praying the elastic in the waist of the crinoline wouldn't snap under the weight of the dried starch which stiffened it and which scratched the soft skin behind our knees with every swirl. In our group, Saturday's female teenage preoccupation was ensuring that the crinoline was washed, starched and stretched out in a circle on the line in the sun from early morning, so that it would be dry and crisp for the afternoon matinee at the Carib cinema.

Also washed and dried to a crisp was our processed hair, creamed in imitation of hairstyles we saw in the movies at the Carib. We would swirl and swirl until the end of each number, then return to our seats around the dance floor to sip rum and Coke and dab the sweaty hairline, leaving the floor to more skilled and energetic dancers.

Then came Saturday night parties that, if one was lucky enough to be invited, were considered successful if the popular set of White Canadian and English men attended – that group of hedonistic new immigrants to Jamaica whom all the city's beauties were earnestly pursuing as husband material. Just as we had been trained at our upper-class schools to copy White norms of beauty, it was drilled into the psyche of all of us 'well-brought-up' young ladies that we should try as best we could to find a White husband. ('Make sure the children come out with "good" hair, my dear.')

The Canadian and English boys never had it so good. Imported by the island's upper-class businessmen who were beginning to develop the newly 'Independent' Jamaica, they were advertising executives, architects, doctors, engineers, teachers, clerks. Once their initial culture shock had worn off, they rapidly became accustomed to being in great social and sexual demand, and many rushed to take marital advantage of their singular good fortune, scouring the annual beauty contests for their prime selection.

The beauty contest was a rite in which the city's most beautiful young lady would be persuaded to compete against an assortment of popular beauties whose cheering sections featured the city's most notorious playboys. It was an extravaganza of poolside fashion parades, social appearances and dramas, culminating in a splashy 'coronation', at which the 'lady' would graciously accept victory over the popular beauties, whose tears of defeat would quickly be stopped by expensive presents from their playboy friends.

I devotedly attended each coronation, sighing wistfully at these parades of confidence and beauty that came from being

'almost White' and with a 'good' figure and, especially, 'good' hair – the requisites for all beauty contest entrants. I kept my swimsuit for the rum punch parties at friends' homes, the pools of favourite small hotels, or the popular beaches – all of which were Sunday's diversions.

Sundays would end back at someone's house, drinking beer or white wine, eating boiled lobster or packaged pizza, before getting back home to prepare for the mundanity of Monday.

Life for this particular young Jamaican had no certain plan. It was enough that I had been bold enough to start living on my own – one of the first young Jamaican women to do this. Sharing a Mona Heights back house with a former schoolmate, we quite shocked 'society' – not only by this daring act, but by the fact that we liked to walk barefoot, drive to a beach to watch the sun set, or play our guitars at bohemian parties in the fashion of folk singer Joan Baez, whom we admired, in the company of our multiracial friends. Otherwise, life was mostly lipstick, nail-polish, clothes, boyfriends, parties and music. And occasionally, some silence to read, and think, and dream.

But though the circle was being increased by White men, it was decreasing because of immigration. Friends were leaving, following the working-class trend to seek a life outside Jamaica. As the banana boats filled with immigrants for the streets of London and Birmingham, so the airplanes filled with Jamaican girls leaving home. The lightest-skinned girls went first.

To Canada. America. England.

To study, they would say.

To work.

But really, to look for a husband.

To pretend to be all-White, not just nearly.

Then the bolder Black girls departed.

To New York.

To Germany.

To Italy.

Hoping for a life in 'show business'.

As a model, they would say.

But also looking for a husband.

Definitely not Black.

And the girls for whom Jamaica was suddenly too small.

An indiscreet pregnancy.

Sad love affair.

Possessive boyfriend.

Possessive parent.

Yes, Jamaica did seem very small. Why, one crazy Canadian could drive from Kingston to Montego Bay in three hours! Wet your knickers, if you were in the car with him. Or scream in anger at his disregard for death's possibility – yours, his and the humble people walking on the dark country roads whose lives he nearly ended. And sometimes did.

Yes, Jamaica was very small. Four hours small. And repetitive. And always the feeling of not fitting in, not being a part. Not enough challenges, opportunities. Still just a one-horse town, two years behind American fashions, movies, shoe styles, hair styles. The only thing up to date was the music. The Jamaican Top Ten was almost the same as the New York Top Ten, except when one of those ska numbers would creep in, like 'Guns of Navarone' by