

A *Murder* for Miss Hortense



A Mystery

Mel Pennant



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To my grandparents, Miss Dolly, Baby, Bobsie and John, and to your whole generation

“Don’t underestimate her,” I say. “Old women can be very fierce.”

Rosalind Stopps, *A Beginner’s Guide to Murder*

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

James Baldwin

The Original Members of the Pardner Network of Bigglesweigh

Miss Hortense

Blossom

Constance

Dimples

Errol

Fitz

Pastor Williams

Mr. McKenzie

1

The Pardner Lady Is Dead

On the morning Blossom brought the news that the Pardner Lady, also known as Constance Margorie Brown, was dead, Miss Hortense had not long finished watching *Kilroy* and was in the back garden pruning the Deep Secrets. Her bloodred roses, which she had planted a lifetime ago, were put there to stop her forgetting something that was, by its own nature, quite unforgettable. The sun hadn't yet risen to its highest point, and as she knelt down, it filtered in through the leaves, playing a kind of peekaboo against her back.

Blossom, who said she had rushed off the number 64 bus and all the way to Miss Hortense's home, could barely get the words out: "Dead! And I never saw it!"

She carried the news all the way from Bridge Street Market, where she had been in conversation with Mr. Wright. That was the Mr. Wright who Blossom had once said favored Engelbert Humperdinck, but, apart from the light skin and sideburns, Miss Hortense couldn't see the resemblance. It was Mr. Wright who saw the ambulance as it pulled up at a quarter to seven outside Constance's home, number 52 Percival Road, which was the house on the corner. The ambulance didn't leave until something like 8:15 a.m., which meant, according to Mr. Wright, that they must have been working on her hard. Mr. Wright, as they knew, lived in the council flats opposite, so although he didn't quite have direct access into Constance's front room, if he went out on his balcony (which he did upon hearing the sirens and seeing the flash of blue lights) and stood with his neck tilted heavily to the side, he could just about see into the front right corner of Constance's bedroom.

Blossom took a deep breath and stopped fiddling with the chiffon scarf that hung unevenly about her neck. There was a slight tremor at the corner of her mouth. Blossom was a woman who didn't step out of her yard without two layers of foundation and several pins in her hair. Her nails were always immaculately polished in a magenta pink. But on that morning, something

had gone wrong, and one eyebrow sat higher than the other and her skin tone was uneven. She licked her lips and continued.

Constance, like Miss Hortense and Blossom, lived by herself, although unlike them, Constance had children—a son and daughter—but Mr. Wright was quite sure that it was *she* in the body bag that was zipped up all the way to the top. “Body bag” was whispered by Blossom, and she crossed herself before repeating the words and then crossing again, despite the fact that Blossom wasn’t a Catholic or in any way a follower of any religion—except, if there were such a religion as Love Thy Money, then it’s fair to say that Blossom would have been a very devoted member.

Blossom was quite sure that the information she had was correct. There was no mistaking it. And then, just like that, when she’d got it all out, Blossom deflated like a balloon and nearly lost her footing on Miss Hortense’s doorstep because it was *a shock*. The shock of having Constance be quite alive and full of life, taking up even more space than was strictly necessary, for so many years, to the unbelievable realization that she had now become a Hope No More.

For once, this was not a death that Blossom was claiming she had foretold. That was what the “I never saw it!” bit was about. Blossom generally knew everything that was going to happen after it had happened, but she was particularly accurate when it came to death.

“I can’t believe it,” she said again, the sweat dripping from her brow. It was normally at least an eighteen-minute walk from the bus stop to Miss Hortense’s, but this day, according to Blossom, she made it in four and a half minutes.

There was nothing for it but to let Blossom in and get the little glasses from the cabinet and pour the neat white rum, Wray & Nephew, all the way to the top of each.

“I...” said Blossom, gripping the glass hard. But nothing further came out. It was rare for Blossom to be without words. It had happened only once before, in the summer of 1968, after her second husband, Lester (the one with the funny eye), hit her and she had boxed him so hard that he flew

across the room and hit his head on the sideboard. She had rushed all the way to Miss Hortense's then too.

Now both of them fell silent as they contemplated what it meant for the Pardner, indeed for them all, now that the Pardner Lady was dead.

2

No Place for Our Money

The Pardner had begun on the night Hortense first met Blossom, a miserable Friday evening in the summer of 1963. Despite the season, clouds hung in the sky like they had dropsy and there was a chill that ran right through Miss Hortense's bones. Errol had come to find her after he'd heard she'd moved to Bigglesweigh and had insisted she leave her box room to join him at a blues dance. "Come na, man." Although she didn't mind a good party, it was her sister who had loved them.

Hortense and Errol hadn't seen each other since the spring of 1958. On the night he came to find her, she was soon to turn twenty-nine and was thicker-set with a more ample bosom and wider hips. But, despite nearly three years in England, her skin tone, a deep, dark mahogany, hadn't lost any of its depth. He was twenty-seven, but still the same scrawny pipsqueak. She noted, however, that his copper hair no longer sparkled. He had just acquired a wife called Precious, and very shortly before that, a daughter, both of whom Hortense had yet to meet. As they walked side by side, they talked briefly about Hortense's sister Evie. Evie, whom she followed to England in September 1960. Evie, who was lost to her.

"Is just how it is here," he tried to rationalize. "Na worry 'bout it."

"Well, I going find a place for the two of we and the pickney," said Hortense, giving away more than was characteristic. "I going tek her and me nephew away from that man."

As they arrived at Blossom's little house, a brass horn rose to greet them, and Hortense shook out her headscarf to the pulsating "Madness" of Prince Buster.

A sudden commotion came from further inside the house. In the front room, a small table was squashed in the middle, with a man sat at each of the four sides, staring each other down. Behind the men was a gathering of people watching the unfolding drama, including a woman the color of yellow yam with a mouth full of little shark teeth, whom Miss Hortense would later

come to know as Constance Margorie Brown. She was peering over shoulders.

“Rahted! How him do it?” said a man stood next to Constance. He had noble, chiseled features as if carved from the granite of a gravestone. This was Mr. McKenzie. He shook his head. “That na make no sense. Brown can’t play.”

“I win. Fair and square,” said a man sat at the table with a prominent forehead and slicked-back hair who turned out to be Mr. Brown, Constance’s husband. He rose, not very far, to his feet—he was a short man—and gestured to the dominoes tiles on the table, all akilter now.

“Is I win! You fe give me my winnings.”

Another man at the table rose slowly. He had broad shoulders and a fighter’s ready stance. This was Fitz.

“Is dere anyone here who this man don’t owe no money to?” asked Fitz to the room.

Someone in the corner shouted, “Brown owe the whole world to rahted,” and Mr. Brown, with his big forehead, seemed to shrink into the carpet, before sliding towards the door.

Miss Hortense watched as whatever smile Constance Margorie Brown had previously disappeared. She leaned away from her husband as he passed her on his way out, her shark teeth revealing more of themselves.

“See the real player deh so,” shouted a large man with a funny eye, sat at the table.

His name was Lester, but that wasn’t the name Miss Hortense had for him. He motioned, with a bulbous finger, for Errol.

“Come now,” Errol said, turning back to Hortense and easing both of them further into the room. “Hortense a go tek me place,” he shouted across the crowd. Errol was practically pushing Hortense towards the space Mr. Brown had left.

The Bullfrog (the name Hortense had for the large man with the funny eye) said, “No.”

So Errol fished in his pocket and took out four single-pound notes and a handful of change, which he counted and put on the table. *Slam.*

“All right, then,” said the Bullfrog. “Come na, darling. I going tek you money,” he taunted Errol and the third man at the table, whose name was Bigsy. “I going whip you backsides tonight.”

Hortense shook her head at Errol, removed her coat and sat at the table. To her right, Fitz—she could smell the spice in his aftershave. To her left, Bigsy. In front of her, the Bullfrog, breathing heavily.

They were playing the dominoes game Six. In order to win, you needed to win six games in a row. One break in the pattern and you started back at square one. The game could go on for hours. Hortense rolled up her sleeves. The Bullfrog said in Errol’s direction, “She know how fe play?” Hortense looked across at him. He was an ugly-looking man if ever she’d seen one. She put down her handbag and picked out her seven bones, the tiles she was going to play with.

The first five games were taken by the Bullfrog. He belched into the room. A smile played at the corner of his wet mouth as he eyed the money on the table.

When the Bullfrog was about to play his first domino of the sixth game, Bigsy deployed the common tactic of distraction and shouted towards the kitchen. “Dee? Tell them what happened to you at the bank.”

His wife, Dimples, a sickly-looking slip of a woman with no dimples in sight, emerged from the kitchen a few moments later. “Well, on Monday, I went to the Royal National Bank,” Dimples began into the room. Her voice was watery. She frowned, and Miss Hortense spotted the dimple for the first time.

“I said I wanted to open a little bank account.” Sniffle. Frown. Dimple. “The cashier said they didn’t do that. So I said,” continued Dimples, “*But I thought this was a bank.*”

“Pass,” said Bigsy, slapping the table. He didn’t put a domino into play.

“And then she said that they didn’t have any place for my kind of money.”

“But don’t all banks have place fe money?” said a high-pitched voice. Miss Hortense looked up to see a tall, fair-skinned woman who had entered the room with a tray of over-stewed stewed chicken. It was Blossom. The Bullfrog tutted.

“Well, that’s what I said, and I even showed them I had it. Five pounds,” said Dimples. “But, *Oh no*, said the cashier. *We can’t take that*,” mimicked Dimples, frowning. Dimple.

“And what did you say back?” Hortense asked, cool and composed. It was the first time her voice had entered the room. She continued to study her dominoes.

“Say back?” asked Dimples, looking puzzled. “Well, I didn’t say anything back. I left. As quickly as I could.”

“I heard it’s the same at the First Union Bank up on George Street,” said another woman, now standing in front of Mr. McKenzie, with a resemblance at the mouth to Constance. This was Mr. McKenzie’s wife, Myrtle, a prim-looking, buttoned-up woman. She was staring across the room at a man wearing a baggy beige suit who was continually wiping at his brow. His name was Pastor Williams.

“Better if you seeking to accumulate riches to go to Luke. Verse twelve, thirty-three through to thirty-four: *Provide yourselves a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupt...*” Myrtle continued, seeking to get the pastor’s attention, but the room had moved on.

“It’s because you wasn’t with you husband,” shouted the Bullfrog, licking down a domino. “Bigsy, you fe go back with her to the bank, you hear? Is we fe do de talking and manage de money,” he continued. He belched again.

Bigsy sat up. “Well, yes,” he said. “Dee, I could go back with you next week.”

“Pass,” said Fitz, tapping his hand on the table. He didn’t have a domino to put into play.

Hortense, who had heard quite enough from the Bullfrog, shifted in her seat and eased off her shoes.

“All I wanted to do was put a likkle savings aside,” said Dimples.

“Dem scared we a go rob up the place,” said Fitz, not looking up from his dominoes.

“Union can boycott bank, Errol?” asked Mr. McKenzie from behind Myrtle, who was still quoting the Bible.

“But that na what dem want?” said Bigsy.

“Why don’t you just start a Pardner?” asked Hortense, gently putting down a double blank. No one except for Errol had seen it coming. There was an intake of breath from the room. Miss Hortense had blocked the game.

The Bullfrog pushed his chair back so violently that it fell over, and he cursed a bad word beginning with *b*. He stood on his stumpy legs and slammed his heavy fist onto the table so hard that several of the tiles jumped off in fright and landed on the floor. Fitz looked across at Hortense; something danced behind his eyes. A broad smile appeared on Errol’s face.

But Miss Hortense noticed how Blossom had flinched, just as the tiles had done, when the Bullfrog brought his hand down onto the table.

The next three games Hortense won straight. Errol was practically laughing. The Bullfrog’s neck pulsated. It grew increasingly quiet as the guests in the room gathered around the table to witness the Bullfrog being licked by the nurse woman Errol had brought.

Dimples said, “This Pardner, who would be the banker?”

“I could do it,” said Blossom. This time she had with her a bowl of clumpy rice and peas that had clearly caught the bottom of the pot.

“You?” roared the Bullfrog, who it turned out was Blossom’s husband—no wonder the flinching. He whipped his head around and lashed out his tongue. “You stupid or what? You can’t even breed pickney.”

The room fell silent. Miss Hortense looked up to see that Blossom had almost completely disappeared in her own house.

“Anyway,” said the Bullfrog, “Pardner a no good business. Old-time foolishness from back home. What can Pardner do for we here inna England?” He slapped down another domino.

“Well, yes, maybe you right,” said Bigsy, blinking at his dominoes.

“What about Hortense?” asked Errol as Hortense won another game. “She’s good with money and a nurse to rahted. Can’t get nothing more trustworthy than a nurse.”

“No thank you,” said Miss Hortense as she picked out the bones for the next game. She had no desire to take on this raggedy group of people.

“And what about that house you was talking about for you and your sister?” asked Errol. Hortense looked up from her dominoes and glared at him. He knew full well not to put her business into a room of strangers. He turned quickly to Dimples. “And you, Miss Dimples, you is wanting to build a place back home. And, Fitz, you is always talking about getting a boxing gym for you and the boys dem. And you, Pastor, how about a proper church for you and your disciples; Miss Myrtle could help you build it. Why wait for them to accept us and our money?” asked Errol, as if he were at a rally.

The next game Hortense deliberately lost to the Bullfrog, and then quickly the next four games in succession. When the Bullfrog won the sixth game in a row, he rubbed his hands together and pocketed the four pound notes and one pound in change; there were no casualties on the floor and Blossom wasn’t flinching. Errol slapped his thigh; the party was over. Even Millie Small with her “My Boy Lollipop” couldn’t raise the mood.

“I know,” said Dimples. “Why we don’t start a Pardner right now? It’s Friday, everyone must still have a likkle something left inna them pocket? What about five pounds? Pass me you hat, Fitzroy.” Fitz passed his hat to Dimples and fished out five pounds to drop in. Pastor Williams dithered, then said he would put in five pounds the following day. Dimples put in the five pounds she was going to deposit in the bank. Mr. McKenzie put in five pounds, and, after Myrtle insisted, another five pounds for her second cousin Constance. The Bullfrog refused to put a single penny in, of course, and wouldn’t let Blossom do so either; but when Hortense returned with a slice of her rich moist black cake the following day, Blossom had five pounds (which she told Hortense she had been hiding under a floorboard) waiting for her.

Errol leaned down to whisper in Hortense's ear. "What happen, man? You could have taken him. That was my last money. You can sub me?"

Miss Hortense cussed her teeth and put her wages in the hat for her and Errol.

The hat contained, or would contain, forty pounds.

It was more money gathered in ten minutes than many would see in months.

"Now, Miss Banker," said Errol, directing himself to Miss Hortense, his spirit buoyed again by seeing what was achieved in the hat. "Who going bag first draw? Who going get the whole of this money first?" For that person, it would come like a loan. It would take another seven weeks before they would pay it back with their weekly contributions, and eight before they would get another lump sum themselves. But it was so much more than a loan, as the faces of each of those who had contributed attested as they looked from Miss Hortense to the hat. It was the face of a loved one they could send for and hold close; it was a means to start a little business and to become the person they wrote back home and boasted that they were; it was a little piece of land, a refuge, a house, a church hall, a boxing gym, a community center. It was a future they could plan for, and finally see a path to, and it was a finger up to the Royal National Bank.

No longer were they just a group of individuals striving to make a home for themselves in a foreign land. They were part of something bigger; integral to each other like organs of a body. And Miss Hortense was right at the heart of it.

On that miserable Friday evening in the summer of 1963, Miss Hortense became the banker, also known as the Pardner Lady of Bigglesweigh. She didn't put herself forward willingly, but she took her responsibilities deadly seriously, and she would not stop being the Pardner Lady, nor taking those responsibilities seriously, until seven years later. That was when she was kicked out of the Pardner in the most humiliating way you could imagine after the thing that no one spoke about happened. Another thirty years would pass, and Constance Brown would have to die, before the remaining

members of the original Pardner—well, at least those who were able to walk, that is—were all in the same room again.

3

Bricks and Mortar

For Hortense, the Pardner had meant many things, but by far the most precious of things was her own front door.

Hortense had lived at 37 Vernon Road, Bigglesweigh, Birmingham, England, for over half her life. At the ripe age of sixty-five, Miss Hortense, even up close, could be mistaken for being two decades younger than she was. Her skin was still soft and plump despite the years in England. But for the occasional visit to Mane Attraction on the High Street, she still hot-combed her own hair using the traditional method of the hot iron on the gas cooker with newspaper and Dax. She dyed her hair herself too, but she wasn't afraid to let the gray show, and the silver of it streaked through her hair like sugar glistening through a stick of rock. It was that silver that shone through now, catching the sunlight, as Miss Hortense stood in contemplation at the window in her front room.

She was thinking about their Pardner and how it had never been ordinary. How it had had more than three lives. Its first life had enabled the eight of them to chase their dreams—37 Vernon Road an example. It evolved, in its second life, into a community investment scheme that had benefited not just the eight of them, but the whole of Bigglesweigh. In its third life, it had pivoted again into something entirely different and far more dangerous. It had moved into the “Looking Into Bones” business: “Bones” the shorthand word for the quick-fire dominoes game they played, but also the word they used to describe the murders, disappearances and kidnappings they had investigated, back when it was too dangerous to use the names of those involved.

Miss Hortense turned briefly to look at Blossom, sat behind her on the settee, still speechless at Constance's death. She thought about how she had sought to protect her by losing that dominoes game all those years ago, and how she had been protecting her ever since. If it wasn't for that game, she