An Olive Grove in Ends

Moses McKenzie

> *Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*
>
> – Matthew 7:13–14

There are roads in neighbourhoods like mine all across the country. Broad roads. Without mansions. In England they have names like City Road or High Street, except this road was called Stapleton, and those familiar with her charm might call her Stapes.

They were broad roads because they tracked their way from one side of Ends to the other. Ends was what we called our neighbourhood, or any neighbourhood like ours. I wasn't sure of the reason, whether it was because it was where the downtrodden saw the light at the end of the tunnel, or because once you arrived you only left when those in charge wanted to rebrand. Either way, it was stuffed to the gunwales with people trying to make ends meet, so the name made sense.

It was a far cry from Clifton.

The moment you left the city's centre you could hear or smell Ends, whether you took a left after Staples, or carried straight through Old Market. The sounds were disorderly. It smelt non-white. It was the other side of Abbey Road and industrial wastebins that were padlocked in other neighbourhoods hung and stank like open stomachs. You could find a million dreams deferred in the torn slips that littered outside the bookie's.

I loved and hated this road.

It would always have a place in my heart, a certain fondness I kept in acknowledgment of how it had shaped the man I had become. I had grown to know Shona right here too, and for that I was truly grateful. Still, I hated it because there was nowhere I was better known, a fact I would soon come to find more troublesome than I'd ever imagined. And nowhere was there a greater example of how much pain we could normalise as human beings.

The road was patrolled by young and old: abtis arranged tables outside cafés, serving tea from pans; they peered into the faces of young hijabis, trying to find a likeness and match daughter to hooyo. Their sons and nephews stood outside corner shops and met at park benches, and together with my cousins, they were watched by the disapproving eyes of our respective elders.

I belonged to the Hughes family. The infamous Hughes family – known to police and hospital staff across the city. Except in truth, I was a Stewart. It was the name written on my birth certificate, and it was my papa's name, but I owed it no allegiance.

Usually, the women in the Hughes family kept their surname if they ever married – which they did, several times – but my mama, Erica, had been all too quick to rid herself of such a burden. That was how my mama viewed any attachment to her maiden name. She twisted the familial bottle cap and poured past relationships down the drain like a wino intent on betterment. She had tried to impart her ideology onto me, but I was Hughes through and through.

A long time ago she had forsaken her desire for the house-atop-the-hill and, as a teen, had wed my papa, then a trainee pastor. And now, much to the mockery of our family, she was a pastor's wife and worship leader and had inherited two names instead of one; like new shoes Sister replaced Mrs, and Stewart ousted Hughes.

I had more cousins than rivers had rivulets, and like a doting stepmother, Stapes took us all in. A few of my aunties had council houses on the offshoots, and I think I had a cousin or two in the high-rises that overlooked the toings and froings of the busy road. Those who didn't live nearby could be found on Stapes more often than in their own homes – at Nanny's, in Ladbrokes or one of the yard shops, buying cassava and plantain. My likkle cousins might be found at the blue cage playing ball, and the elders might be at one of the free houses tossing dominoes and talking about things they knew nutun about.

My cousin Winnie called the street itself home. She slept on the Baptist church steps and begged cigarette stubs from the gutter. She said she found the gutter more giving than the people passing, but maybe the people passing had nutun left to give.

I sailed the pavements in June as one accustomed to the breaks in the concrete. I swayed clear of battyman poles and touched fists with those who knew me well enough to acknowledge me, but not enough to ask how I was. And even if they had asked, I would've lied and said all was well.

My cousin Bunny spotted me from across the street and touched his hand to his heart, then to the sky. I returned his salute and we kept it pushing.

Bunny was a funny one, unpredictable like the weather. If there was a child in Ends without a father, we said it was Bunny's yute. He was to women what Vybz was to Jamaica's youth – at least that's what he thought.

He called himself the Garfield Sobers of infidelity.

Once, not long before my twentieth summer began, I had seen him sprawled across a bus stop, hair half-cornrowed, tracksuit at his knees, with Winnie asleep on his thigh and a crack pipe in his hand. He'd looked at me through glass eyes but I didn't tarry. The next morning I saw him at the helm of an empty pram, walking through Cabot Circus in a cheap suit with two of his yutes on either side. His arm was linked with a young woman's who wasn't either of their mamas, and he held a brick phone to his ear with his shoulder.

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Moses McKenzie is of Caribbean descent and grew up in Bristol, where he still lives and writes full-time. Born in 1998, Moses wrote his first novel, *An Olive Grove in Ends*, at the age of 21. He has been commissioned to write a TV series based on the novel. His second novel is underway.

This is an extract from *An Olive Grove in Ends* (Wildfire, 2022). A recording can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**