

# BROWN TOWN BLUES

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NOTTING Hill is an eight-penny bus-ride away from the neon culture of London's West End. Not many people bother to make the journey. For between the glitter of Piccadilly and the phosphorescent gloom of Notting Hill there lies a gulf so deep that to those living on "the right side of the tracks" the race riots at the beginning of September proved an inexplicable eruption. But to the people of Notting Hill it was just a bald presentation of the obvious.

This is London's Tobacco Road, lying in a shallow saucer between the square mile of the city's centre and the more westerly suburbs. The inhabitants call it "Brown Town"—to distinguish it from its northerly neighbour, White City. It would be laughable to describe the tall, gloomy houses as Regency, but the bones are there. Cats and children and peeling paint mark the streets. Spiked black railings fence the pavements. Old women with crumpled faces and empty gums lean against the lintels of doorways. Inside, faceless corridors are black as the night. Walls stand shored-up with planks. Faded strips of cotton curtains hang lifelessly from the windows.

There is violence in the very stones of Notting Hill. The bomb sites lie littered with bricks, broken beer bottles, rubbish. The goods yards hurl black smoke and soot into the air to settle on the rooftops. Junk shops and scrap yards are only separated by dimly-lit cafes selling greasy ham and eggs and overbrewed tea. Decay grows everywhere.

Two hundred seamstresses sit bent double over their sewing machines in the rag factories, churning out the cheap cotton "fashion modes" for the bazaars, while outside the babies howl in their broken-down prams. Children chase each other, and skinny dogs chase the children. The old women watch and talk among themselves. The church poster down the road says, "Fear ye not, neither be afraid." Fifteen yards further on, written in livid chalk, the wall proclaims: "Kick Out Niggers".

It is not an idle demand. About a fifth of the population of Notting Hill are West Indians and Africans. It is easy to see where they live. Look for the cracked windows. Look for the boarded-up doors, with corrugated iron or desperately

piled-up furniture shutting out the paltry light of a so-called summer's day. That is where they live. And if the Whites have their way, they won't be living there very much longer.

The softening up process begins at dusk. The hooligans are home from their soul-numbing jobs as office boys, messengers, carriers, fetchers, lifters, movers. Dinner over, they go out. Out to meet the boys. Out on the pavement. The last blade of grass that grew in Notting Hill was killed years ago in the rush. By eight o'clock the main arteries that feed this constricted heart of London are filled with a sluggish mass of teenagers, looking for fun. Excitement. Something to do. Something to look at. And all they see are the dull faces of each other, dead behind the eyes. Teddy boys in tight trousers. Toughs in leather jackets. Dolls covered in paint and tight skirts, selling their chain-store sex as the cheap papers decree. Oh, for some excitement. Oh, for some fun. Anything. Anything at all.

A girl sits on the pavement and tells the world: "I'm a Teddy girl." She lifts her head, as if to say "I'm Al Capone. I'm big." Behind her on the wall an ugly scrawl shouts "Teddy" and "Kill Niggers". An idiot, a genuine dervish—capers about for the amusement of his pals on the street corner and shrieks "Let's carve up a Wog."

"Come on, fellers, come on. Let's get a nigger." The others laugh at him. They wouldn't mind. Why doesn't somebody do something. Nothing happening to-night. But there are no Black men to be seen.

Suddenly the police arrive. "Here comes the Law, boys." The police are their natural enemy. From the Black Marias they spring, twelve at a time, with growling Alsatian dogs. "All right, now move on there. Come on, move. There's nothing happening to-night. Go home."

But nobody goes home. They stand and sulkily move foot before foot, to the next corner. More police. "Move on." To the next street. Same process. "What can you do?" says the sergeant. "These guys don't go to bed until two o'clock in the morning."

Suddenly five thugs spot a Negro, moving quickly down the street. "There's one!" They congregate together. "Run, you black bastard!" shouts the leather-coated boy. He's about eighteen. Weighs one hundred and thirty, probably. Still, there are five of them. The West Indian disappears around the

corner. The thugs go and pick up some girls. Too many police around.

From the corner pub comes a party of Unionists. Mosley's men, carrying pamphlets and copies of *Action*, their party paper. The Union Movement, Fascism made respectable and brought up to date, is fighting two council seats in the area, with high hopes of winning at least one, possibly both. Pamphlets explaining the "black invasion" and demanding that the Black man go are handed to every bystander.

The Unionists walk up the street, while on the other side a group of West Indians sit on their doorstep and watch.

"There they are!" says the leader of the White troupe. "It won't be long now."

"We're ready for you" comes back the cry in thick, angry Jamaicanese.

"Don't worry, it won't be long now." One of the men stops to spit in the gutter. Another hurls obscenities. "Filthy black bastards." The hatred on his face is frightening to see.

On the next corner, the police are at their rounds, moving on the crowds. Half a dozen are searched, shoved into the van for carrying razors, coshes, or insulting the Force. Their friends cheer them away. You can see the whole story in their eyes.

"When you're poor, mate, you can't afford no morals and that, see. It's like every one for himself, sort of. Take these niggers. I got nothing 'gainst Blacks, except they're a bit too flashy with their White girls. Prostitutes. They keep 'em. In those houses, mate, I'm telling you. Don't work, not one of 'em. And there's another thing. These 'ouses. They buys 'em up, see, and before yar knows what, there's niggers livin' right through the road. Packed with 'em. Drivin' cars. I tell you. Where you reckon they gets the cash, eh? I tell ya, mate. Off the streets. Isn't that right, Harry? I seen 'em."

By midnight the fun and the trouble and the sight-seeing and the moving on and the arrests are all over, and Notting Hill has gone off to a troubled sleep.

Outside their home, the group of West Indians still sit, smoking and talking. They are not just taking a breath of air. They're watching. Two nights ago three milk bottles flew through their window. Up the road somebody threw a petrol lamp into a house and sent half of it up in flames. Nobody is

going to do that again without getting his throat cut.

"Will you tell your goddamn paper the truth?" pleads the Jamaican. He's not swearing. He is just running out of patience. "You know, the Germans come over here, and live real easy. Real good, man. We come over—we, you know, who helped fight the Germans—and we get this, boy. It's impossible, man, I truly do think it's impossible."

"You know, these people here, they think we all swing in trees at home and live in hovels." He points to the dilapidated house behind. "Honestly, I lived better. Much better."

"Here, I can't get work. I'm a skilled craftsman. Carpenter. I go to the Labour Exchange, the man does not even look at my card, he says 'sorry, there's nothing for you' and then gives the White man next to me a job. As carpenter. What can you do?"

"I apply for a job. The man says 'how much experience have you had in this country.' I say I have seven years' experience in Jamaica. He says that's no good. Must have five years work in Britain. I say how do I get started. He says he does not know. What can you do, man?"

"And you've seen the notices? 'West Indians Need Not Apply'. And then they say we don't do any work!"

"Same thing with accommodation. Black men not wanted. Lowers the tone of the area. People say we live crowded in rooms. Why you think that is? Do they really think we don't want big rooms with carpet and soft lighting and stuff like that . . . ah, man, it makes you tired."

"The police are no help at all, boy. These riots . . . well, they've been going on a long time. They attack our women. They shove you in the street. They spit. Yeah, man, spit on your shoes as you walk down the road. Don't tell me. What can we do? We sit and wait for them to burn down the house . . . and the police just tell them to move on a bit, move on a bit. But they don't protect us, boy."

"They say we take their women. If a White girl wants to go out with a Black feller, what are we supposed to do? That's nature."

"They say we don't work. You know why we don't work. Eighty per cent of us West Indians and Africans are out of work at Notting Hill. Easily. And these riots will bring the others out, too. The employers say we are trouble-makers. I ask

you! We sit at home protecting our stuff and they say we cause trouble.”

“Flashy cars? You know how the Blacks get flashy cars? They save the money they get when there’s work, they buy second-hand models, they fix them up, and they get out, boy. They drive away.”

“But we don’t work. We sit and wait, boy, for something to happen. What’s going to happen? I tell you. There’s only one thing. That’s to fight it out. We’re outnumbered, sure, but what else can we do? Make an end to it, that’s better than nothing, what you say?”

A police car crammed with men pulls up at the kerb. A sergeant springs out. “Now if you want to do us a favour please get inside your door and stay there” he says, waving his arms.

“Sure, sure, we’re just going. Sure . . .” Slowly they move inside taking a last look at the deserted, paper-littered, sodium-lighted street.

