

Extracts From Two Unfinished Manuscripts

SAM SELVON

EDITOR'S NOTE: The two extracts below are the opening pages of drafts of a novel and an autobiography on which Sam Selvon was working at the time of his death. Both works are untitled, though Selvon on a few occasions had mentioned "A High of Zero" as a possible title for the novel. And both works are incomplete, existing only in draft form. Selvon had handwritten what amounts to about 130 typescript pages of his novel, about 30 typescript pages of his autobiography, and several pages of notes and jottings on additional material for both projects in his notebooks and on odd bits and pieces of paper. Most of this material eventually will be published in one form or another. In the meantime, we are pleased to be able to include a few pages in this issue of ARIEL; and we would like to thank Althea Selvon not only for granting us permission to do so but also for undertaking to decipher and transcribe the handwritten drafts. In the extracts that follow, all ellipses are the editor's, not Selvon's, and square brackets are used to indicate editorial explanations and also words and phrases that perhaps are not an accurate deciphering of Selvon's handwriting.

Extract from the Unfinished Novel

IT STILL GAVE Devertie much pleasure, aged and lame and sunburnt as he was, to have the family together on a Sunday for lunch. At 65, it was time to slacken off this intensity, this concern, this participation and involvement with the intricacies and vicissitudes of life and the attitudes of those who had to cope. In that respect he reserved his involvement for his own flesh and blood. In their lives he continued to live—it would be a shocking thing to him if any younger member of the family died before he

did; a man had a duty to survive to old age, to overcome sickness and adversity to the stage where he could look back and thoughtfully summarize his existence and try to come to a few conclusions before his own end. He even planned, if there was anything in obeah or voodoo, to come back from the grave and pull their toes to keep them in line.

And God knew, he had worked hard enough for them, so that they would not have to worry about the basic needs. It was one of the conclusions he himself wrestled with—whether this was a good thing or not, perhaps he'd die and never know.

It was now almost happening that he was living a one-day week; as if the Sundays were all that mattered—four in a month, fifty-two in a year. The rest of the time, it was as if parts of his life and his body were missing—an arm in San Fernando, one leg holidaying in Tobago, the other busy making money—was there never enough?—and his heart, Marcel [his daughter], in the public library in Port of Spain. He had been partly responsible for her continuing to work after her marriage to Clem; he could not envision her in the role of housewife—not yet, anyway, give them a year or two to have children.

Devertie sat in a rocking chair, in the open gallery he had had added to the upstairs of the grand old house. It commanded a view of the gravel road which wound to the house from the public main road, and he could see visitors before they saw him because there was a tree-covered corner a hundred yards away that blocked the house from their view. On a small table at his side was a glass of rum punch he had made himself. He could not trust Laura with drinks—put her in the kitchen with the servant and she produced mouth-watering food, but ask her to concoct a drink and she would put the bottle of rum and a glass on a waiter, with a jug of water to chase with.

He had squeezed two fresh limes, crushed the ice, poured the rum, shaken two drops of Angostura bitters into the glass, and grated just the right amount of nutmeg to top it. Now he was allowing the crushed ice to melt a little before sipping the drink.

It was another morning of blue sky and brilliant sunlight—all he wore, sitting in the open, was a light sports shirt and a pair of white shorts; his feet were always bare in the house. The sun,

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A photocopy (original size) of part of the opening paragraph of Sam Selvon's draft of his unfinished and untitled novel.

COURTESY ALTHEA SELVON

halfway to zenith, filtered through the leaves of a great rose-mango tree with some branches spreading over the gallery; in season, he could stretch out and pluck ripe fruit, and he still had a yen sometimes to eat the green ones sliced and marinated in a mixture of salt and pepper and vinegar, as children did. He had a view here of the sea—not the coastline, which was hidden by dense foliage, but some distance off where it sparkled as bright as a welder's torch. It reminded him of his days in the navy during the war. Looking towards that part of the island in those days, working on small anti-submarine ships, he never dreamed that he would possess land there, that he would settle and become proprietor of an estate that produced fruit and vegetable and poultry to feed the city.

Devertie served alongside Englishmen, Americans, Canadians, and Norwegians, and a greater number of islanders from all over the Caribbean. It was his first experience working with whites and people from the other islands. It opened up locked doors in his mind and made him aware how insular and contained his attitude was towards life. He had never completed his education, and now he read avidly, argued, listened, and observed, rediscovering himself. He rose to the rank of Petty Officer, but he was not interested in promotion or the war. His father, a man full of grace and dignity, who had come from French creole stock, was dead. His mother, a mixture of white and East Indian blood, died while he was on patrol with a convoy of oil tankers five hundred miles out in the Caribbean Sea, and he only found out when he returned a week after her burial. By then grief had lost its poignancy for uncles and aunts—he was the only child—and he himself, already separated from her for three years except for occasional visits when he was on leave, got over the bereavement with his new-found consciousness. He put a wreath of anthurium lilies and roses on her grave in the Lapeyrouse Cemetery. He said a short prayer of thanks to her and his father for the kind of man he was and what he was hoping to be, for he realized a great deal of his feelings now must have been inherited from them.

His mother's death fortified the thoughtful loneliness which was part of his character now. He had made no real friends in the

service, and he quickly forgot the war when it was over. He had made no plans for his return to civilian life, apart from a resolution to be his own boss in whatever occupation he found himself.

A Rehabilitation Centre set up for ex-servicemen free land to develop in the Maracas Valley, a few miles from Port of Spain. American engineers had built a good road during the war to the popular Maracas Bay bathing beach. It was a mountainous region, covered with wild jungle, uninhabited but for a few hardy fishermen or smallholders who rarely ventured out of the bush. The fishermen loaded brown woven baskets with their catch and toted it on their heads up the steep wooded cliffs to a truck on the road, which took the fish to market in the city. Their calves were developed into hard balls of muscle from the climbing; their bare toes spread widely seeking grip on the rugged trail. The smallholders were a dying breed, a mixture of Spanish or French, perhaps even with traces of Carib blood.

He drove to Maracas and looked over the sites that were being offered. He felt calm and at peace in all the greenery, and in spite of the backbreaking work that would have to be done to clear the land and make it arable, he decided immediately. With his demobilization money and a grant from the Government, he bought a second-hand jeep and the equipment he needed, and single-handedly, to begin with, he tackled the jungle.

He had a good friend at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in St. Augustine, George Raja. There was nothing about the land and what it could yield that George didn't know, and it was on his advice that Devertie chose the actual site.

"You're going to have a hell of a job to clear the land," George told him, "but it's great soil; anything'd grow here. If you're serious."

"You'll see how serious I am," Devertie said.

"I could come some weekends and help you."

"Thanks, but I don't need you for this. Six months from now I'll want your knowledge and ideas."

And here again the experience of working the land gave him satisfaction and expansion, recalling the sea in a way he was never conscious of when he actually sailed and lived on it, a full-moonlit night lying on deck anchored off Gasparee Island, and

the [Dragon's Mouths] current lapping against the ship as if it were [interfering], giving it motion so that the mast moved like a pendulum across the sky. Another night there was no moon, only a few trillion stars, seemingly pluckable with a stretch, and he lay there and saw five of them pitch over a length of time—a brief shiver of gold that vanished before the vision was registered in his brain, as if it never existed in time present, but time past, and having happened, constituted a thought in time future. With such nights he found himself becoming closely attuned to the vegetation about him, and considered trees before he felled them, and while he felled them, and after he felled them, and once he trampled on a nest of tac-tac ants, and allowed them to climb up his legs and sting him, but he couldn't remember what he was thinking then; it was only a blur when he tried to recall the incident.

He was not the only ex-serviceman to take advantage of the project, but there was enough acreage and jungle to widely separate them, and he neither sought nor gave assistance to anyone. In time he employed Philip, a young fisherman, a second generation descendant of a black slave, to help him. He met Philip on the Maracas beach one morning when he was having a swim. The boat had just come in with a catch of fish, mainly moonshine and mackerel, and Devertie gave them a hand hauling the boat onto the beach. He fell into conversation with Philip and found him likeable, and came to an arrangement for him to work on the plot when he was not fishing. Philip came, and in time overseered other workmen when the venture began to succeed and Devertie acquired more land.

Devertie sipped the rum punch, resting his mind from memory. It was a pleasant drink; he was fastidious with any form of alcohol in his old age, museful of earlier years when he would knock back rum straight from the bottle or swallow a pint of wine without a pause.

His thoughts skipped time and events to the day he met Sophie [his wife] at the Red House, the Government's main administration building, where he had just settled some business about land title. He was hesitating near the decorative fountain downstairs, undecided. . . .

Driving in from the main road, Lance [Devertie's son] went over a rut in the gravelly driveway and the Volkswagen lurched. Mavis jerked against the seatbelt and glared at him.

"You do it for spite."

"I didn't see it."

"I see it. You driving. How you couldn't?"

Lance didn't reply.

Mavis had got up that morning with one of her headaches. Resentment, bitterness, frustration, and fear had got up with her; a row started in the kitchen over coffee before breakfast. It began before a word was spoken: he felt the vibrations the moment she came downstairs, and flopped in a chair at the dining table, with a hangover face. The irony was she never touched a drop of drink; he often wondered what it would be like if she did. She lost all her beauty when she was like this, as if her face had no support and would sag away unless they quickly came to words, when some colour would return to her cheeks as the argument started on some random topic. It could be anything—his smoking first thing in the morning, a teaspoon out of place on the table, the weather if it was foul, or it could be a left-over from yesterday that hadn't been picked clean. Failing that, there would be some incident that occurred during the week—a bitch or bastard who upset her in the office, or a jaywalker when she was driving down Frederick Street. Jesus, there were a million things, like this morning, picking at a loose thread in her dressing-gown, "I only bought this dressing-gown last week, and it falling to pieces already." Her voice was high-pitched, as if he were in another room.

He leaned back in his chair and hid behind the news section of the *Sunday Guardian* he was reading. In the ashtray, a cigarette he had forgotten smoked itself away; leaving a cylinder of ash that threatened to collapse and tip the butt on the table.

Smoke curled lazily from a cigarette he had rested in the ashtray. She said, "You light a cigarette and just leave it in the ashtray to waste."

She got up and began to wipe down the range, although he had cleaned it in anticipation.

"I'm not going anywhere today. Especially to see your father. Why we can't go somewhere else for a change on a Sunday?"

"Did you take aspirin?" he asked.

"I got up early and took two. You think I should take some more?"

The question was earnest, but if he said no, she would take them, and if he said yes, she'd say she'd better wait a while, maybe it would clear up. So he said nothing. She made herself a cup of coffee and came back.

"You hear? You better phone and tell them early so they don't prepare."

"Bloody fool," Lance murmured.

"Oh God, the first thing you call me this morning is a fool!"

"Not you. What Obrien said at the Finance Committee meeting yesterday, that he didn't think the number of cars in Trinidad had increased enough to budget so much money for road improvement. I have half a mind to phone him and tell him that is damn stupidity. These fellows always open their mouth without learning the facts."

"I didn't sleep so well last night. I think I will ask Frank for some sleeping tablets."

"Your body confuse-up enough with the amount of tablets you take for your pressure. I thought you said you were going to take Yoga lessons and learn to relax."

"When I will find the time? Straight from work I got to come home and cook and clean up the house."

"You find time for a lot of other things."

"Sunday is the only day I got to rest, and you want to go Maracas. Not even to bathe, but see your father and mother."

"We could have a dip if you like."

"By the time you drink, and eat up all that brunch, who want to swim?"

"I'm peckish now. Is there anything to eat?" He got up himself and went to the fridge, and came back nibbling a leg of fried chicken.

"You should eat something if you want to get rid of that headache," he advised. "You want some toast?"

"I suppose so."

He toasted two slices of bread for her and put it on the table with butter and guava jelly. Mavis had taken up the section of

paper he was reading. He shrugged off a slight irritation and picked up the magazine section. There was a review of a new Derek Walcott play, which reminded him to get tickets.

"You want to see the new Walcott play?" he asked.

"What play?"

"Never mind."

"Why 'never mind?' You think I stupid and don't know anything about plays and art and literature?"

"You know you're not interested. Nothing wrong in that. To each his own. I'm going, though."

"When?"

"Wednesday."

"Wednesday is my bridge day."

"Okay."

"And I am using the car. I'm telling you from now."

"No strain." He was about to rest the chicken bone on the table when he saw her glaring at him over the top of the paper. He took it to the bin.

"We should leave here about ten o'clock," he said.

"They have your photo in the paper," she said. "Look." She spread page three on the table and pushed her forefinger under the picture. She read the caption for him. "Lance Devertie, senator for East Belmont, raised the question of education at Friday's meeting of the Schools committee. See 'Election on Page Five.'"

He took the paper away before she could read the story aloud, a habit he disliked. She would call his attention to the label on a box or a feature in a magazine, (but the worst was with letters from friends or relatives) and then proceed to read aloud, robbing him of the pleasure of taking in the information himself. Come to think of it, there were a hundred irritating habits she had that became magnified in the years of their marriage. They were shortcomings he was aware of before he took the step, but he thought he would be able to live with them. The courtship was stormy, and once—it was a trivial matter: her reluctance to lend him money for a taxi fare (because he had run [short] taking her to dinner at an expensive Chinese restaurant in St. Vincent Street); and the taxi was for her convenience too—he came very

close to giving her up, when he was alone later and the incident occupied his thoughts. It was not the first time, and he was depressed to think he had allowed himself to be trapped into a love affair with a mean woman. But he ignored all the warning bells. I can pull out whenever I want, he lulled himself. And he continued to lull himself. And gradually, all the love and passion went out of the marriage, and the lulling turned into resignation, and he broadened his philosophy to cope with it, thinking, well, it takes all sorts; I walked right in with my eyes wide open (from a song); and, you make your bed, you got to lie on it. It was still amazing to think, though, how a man could grow to tolerate shortcomings and faults; somehow it conflicted with the ideology of a perfect human relationship, which was what one dreamed of on falling in love. That objective seemingly impossible, the next best thing was an understanding, but even that didn't exist with them. Of course, there were a lot of physiological and emotional reasons; snippets on the facets of human emotion and behaviour were fashionable in all the communication media; he had only to look in the magazine now, and he would find some asshole going on about how to mend a broken marriage. Try a different position. Little things still count. When last did you buy her flowers? . . .

Extract from the Unfinished Autobiography

I REMEMBER MY father well, though there was never any deep intimacy in our relationship. And yet, perhaps in his own way he loved and hated deeply. I do not mean to imply that he did not love me or that I did not love him, but looking back and trying to recall the kind of man he was, and the kind of thoughts he used to think, I can only stand knee high and look up to see his face at this stage. Many years later, when he was getting old, and I was a young man, and we drank together, it was a different story.

At this earlier time, I remember his body more than anything else. He had a big head and a big face. Many mornings I got up with my little sister, and we went to the big bedroom where he

and ma slept, and crept into bed with them. I explored his face. By touch of hand I know every feature of it—his round chin, stubbled, his dark lips, almost hidden by the handle-bar moustache I never saw him trim (and it never seemed to grow any longer). His nose . . . had a little ridge on it half-way up the bridge; then his eyebrows were smooth and not thick or bushy; his forehead was usually puckered a bit between the eyebrows, vertical lines that came and went as my fingers moved about his face. His head was big, and he had large, flat ears, and wisps of hair grew out of the holes. His hair was soft and black, but it did not grow very thick.

Resting on his warm chest, I went up and down as he breathed—by that hour his snoring had ceased; he was most peaceful then. His neck was thick and there was very little of it my fingers encountered before they touched his chin. He had a few strands of hair between his breasts, and some grew around his nipples. There was a lot of fat around his middle, he had a mound of a belly, and a hole in his navel into which I poked my finger. I saw his genitals many times—not when he was sleeping, but often when he was showering in the big concrete bath he called me to join him, or I went of my own volition, for I liked to bathe with him. . . .

The road we lived in was less than half a mile long and only about two hundred yards of it was asphalted. I had to walk in my *watchekongs* over fine gravel and grit up to the corner of Panco Lane, a steep hill, before I got to the asphalt, then a hundred yards or so until I came to the main road, where the shops were. This was the main artery into and out of the town on North Side. If I turned right and continued I would get to town. If I turned left I would come to my school, and if I wanted to walk forty miles I could stay on that road and pass the oil fields in Pointe-à-Pierre, and the sugarcane fields on the plains of Caroni, and arrive at the capital city of Port of Spain. Once there was a walking race from San Fernando to Port of Spain, and I stood in the crowds by the corner cheering and watching the walkers go by in that curious, twisted-up gait, with their elbows jutted out and their backsides swinging from left to right. Half of them dropped out by the time

they got to Chaguanas, which was about halfway, and only two of the twenty that started finished in the city.

All the traffic from the North and the South plied on this road, and an hour before I set off for school, hundreds of workmen would be cycling to the oilfields five miles away or travelling on the special buses laid on to transport them to work. It was mostly downhill going, but the grind was in coming back; you had to hop off and push your bike in the steep places. The whole town in fact was a series of mounds and dips, with one big hill in the centre—a landmark you could see from Port of Spain on a clear day. The face of this hill was scarred with gravel pits, with the greenery like a fringe at the sides and the top. From where we lived, sometimes I would see workmen like ants pick-axing away at the hill. It seemed to me that they could do that forever, and it would make no difference to the size of the hill, but I heard my father say that they were digging on the other side too, and that some day the people in San Fernando would look up and find the hill had disappeared. One day I went there when they were “blasting.” There was a man [posted] at the entrance with a red flag, to stop anyone from going in fifteen minutes before the dynamite charges were exploded. And then *BOOM*; a landslide of gravel came slithering and sliding down the hill; the larger chunks of rock bounced and tumbled outward, but the main body of the slide just rolled down in a shower of stone and gravel, and the sound of it was hard to describe, except that it had a loud “ssh” in it. Unless you know the exact spot they were going to blast, you could miss the sight, for the face of the cliff was immense and there was no way of telling where unless you noticed in what direction the pit workers were focusing their attention.

This big hill was like a sentinel over all the others that made up the town. Most of the time you were walking up or down, and most of the houses were built on foundations dug out of sloping land. The house we lived in, the front was supported by concrete posts a good six feet off the land, and the posts changed to sturdy ballista wood and diminished in height to two feet at the back.

It took me about ten minutes, half-walking and half-running, to get to the school at the corner of Cane Street and Pointe-

à-Pierre road. Here again the school was built on uneven land, one side of it on the ground, the rest supported on concrete posts, and built higher. The lower side was where the smaller children held their classes, and to get to the upper part, you had to come out of this primary section into the yard and climb wooden steps, as there was no internal stairway. There was very little playing space around the school; indeed, when it was built by the Canadian Missionaries, who took it upon themselves to christianize the East Indian section of the island's population, most of whom had settled in the sugarcane districts in the central and southern parts, little thought was given to recreation. The biggest piece of land—and that too was slopy—was used for gardening classes. No theory or instruction either; it was sheer child labour in the hot sun to keep cassava and dasheen growing, and uproot the constant invasion of weeds and tufts of knotty grass. There was no room to play cricket and football, or any other game which required space to move around freely, and we often debauched onto Jackass Alley, a short stony lane that ran north-south on the opposite side to the garden. In the yard at the back of the school, there were two little larger than a sentry-box latrines, one for boys and one for girls. The teachers tried to stop the boys from pissing out in the open, at the back of theirs, but it was hopeless. There was a hibiscus fence here and it grew luxuriantly nourished with piss.

There were two mango trees in the yard, but they never got the chance to come to full fruition, as the children stoned the young mangoes from the day they first appeared. Sometimes a class would be held under the trees—mostly singing, so as not to disturb the rest of the school. . . .