

# inner city blues

norman samuda smith  
A NOVEL



*A work in progress*

Cover design by Aaron Linton-Chambers

## ***SYNOPSIS***

“Sometimes a hard line is a wrong line...”

“Two wrongs never make a right...”

Peter Henderson, aka the “Flat-Foot Hustler” is brutally assaulted after leaving a blues party in the early hours of Sunday morning. Robbed of his hustling money, face down, bleeding and motionless, the attack sends out shock-waves, affecting his nearest and dearest. No longer the confident, verbal swaggering youth, Peter’s a frightened, fragile young man, unable to leave the sanctuary of his bedroom. The assault also scuppers his plans to relocate with Faye before their baby is born. Faye seeks help from her friends, Lorraine, Vivene and her boyfriend Delroy (Peter’s cousin) and Lorraine’s boyfriend Errol to turn the situation around.

Peter’s side-kick Zigie is convinced he knows who attacked Peter but his accusations fall on deaf ears. He quickly realises Peter is protected by a wall of silence from his family and friends.

After a slow recovery, and rejecting the temptation to pursue a 9 to 5 lifestyle; Peter and Zigie team up again. Zigie however, has one aim in mind, revenge; Peter’s attackers must pay a heavy price.

Revenge is a dish best served cold but the heated consequences of these actions may jeopardise the lives of Peter, his family and friends.

Inner City Blues is based within the back-drop of inner-city Small Heath Birmingham during the mid-1970s, *and* is the long awaited sequel to Norman Samuda Smith’s ground breaking first novel *Bad Friday*:

## Chapter One

Peter stands in the crowded hallway by the door of the middle room nodding his head in time to the reggae beat. Ital Nyah's eighteen inch speakers drive their moaning gutsy bass line which rattles every window of the terraced house. The high pitched treble and midrange sections single out each horn, symbol and percussion which pierces through to his eardrums. He gazes into the dusky heaving room full of midnight ravers where a lone hazy light-bulb flickers in the far corner. Huddled around its subtle glow are the Ital Nyah crew. Their silhouettes adorn the wall as they dance as one to the rhythm. Pedro is at the control tower, his dreads shaking as he fiddles with the dials of the pre-amp and equaliser, like he's in a recording studio mixing and blending a new dub plate. Selectors Beres and Robbo man the turntable and sift through their bottomless record box of hypnotising roots rock reggae pre-release singles, disco-mixes and album tracks; while microphone chanter Poppa Errol voices his original poetic parables. His *Sing-Jay* style keeps the blues dance rocking.

Peter is surrounded by his rivals, their eyes forever scrutinising potential clientele who are just arriving. This is the last time he's gonna stand in Shebeens night after night playing the bush doctor, hustling to raise Her Majesty's pounds, while the envious who are not doing so well glare contempt at his success. After this night, it's gonna be all about him, Faye and their baby due in February...

*'...Me nuh know how unnu gwine cope wid a baby massa,'* his Mom Merl reacts when he tells her of Faye's pregnancy earlier that day, *'...unnu is just sixteen comin on seventeen and yuh don't even know if yuh love yuh baby mother. Lard have mercy pon de poor child Faye carryin...'*

Peter restricts Merl's cussing by kissing her cheek then hugging her, *'...don't worry Mom, we gonna be a'right, trust me.'* He dances around the kitchen singing natty rebel songs leaving Merl with more trials and crosses in her head...

Earlier that morning he received a letter from the M.E.B who were bearers of good news; he was successful passing their entrance exam. His Cousin Delroy and his bredrin Errol didn't believe him when he told them he nailed an Apprentice Electrician post. It didn't matter what his bredrins thought, but Faye, that was a different tune, she didn't believe him either. Her reaction was a long sneering glare from his head to toe, followed by her sucking her

teeth, long and loud. He was vex. Peter had a habit of foretelling future events before receiving confirmation from the primary sources. When his predictions didn't manifest, his friends often labelled him a fraud. Faye couldn't figure out why her response made him so angry, coz countless times in the past, he didn't give a damn about her feelings. Up until recently he was a player and was blatantly playing Faye big time. His dilemma was struggling against the idea of being 'tied' down to one girl when she announced her pregnancy. Although Faye was visibly upset by his actions, she continually voiced her love which enabled him to see her as more than a play thing, and the scary thought of being a future Daddy was gradually appealing to him.

Peter smiles positively at his future which is looming large. Waiting for him on his start date in a month's time, is block release to college for eighteen weeks each year for five years; Merl reminds him every day he should be thankful for being given the opportunity to shine in hard times. Record unemployment, redundancies and the three day working week are affecting everybody he knows in some way or other; but Peter is aware his future apprentice wage packet won't be enough to provide for Faye and their baby. The Shebeen patrol is a means to an end. At least the money he's raising gives him and Faye a start.

Fresh early morning ravers continue to flock into the bubbling blues dance, adding their love and positive vibes to the three shady, jam-packed rooms. Peter pushes the button on his digital watch. Its flickering red figures shine through the Sensemilla and cigarette haze 2.15am. His fingers play with the last two herbs which are tightly wrapped in brown paper and sitting in the back pocket of his Levi's. He's feeling well pleased and satisfied he manifested his prediction of cleaning up before 3am. From the front door his ears twitch to the sound of raised voices. He heads in that direction to explore. The two hefty Door men Big John and Lukey argue with a posse of youths who are sitting on their racer bikes blocking the entrance to the blues.

"Why yuh gwaaning so dark star? All we wanna do is put our bikes in de back yard then come inna de blues."

"No, no, no," Big John waves his index finger in the youths face, "...can't do dat yuh nuh."

"What's yuh problem *old man*? Cho, *look*, call de owner man!"

"Can't do dat either."

"*Why not?*"

“Coz dem busy yout man, yuh can’t see how de place ram?”

“...And unnu have a reputation fe mashing up nuff blues dance inna de area, so *step!*” Lukey intervenes.

“*Eee-hee*, so y’all move unnu bike and mek de party people dem rock and come in, *seen?*” Big John concludes with a limp wave of his hand.

“*Nah man*, yuh a gwaan *stink* now star, Jah know!”

There’s enough light for Peter to see the yout man’s smooth baby face, ‘...*Young enough fe get a slap,*’ he thinks, ‘...*and send him to bed where he belong dis time ah night.*’

The youth’s persistent cheeky grin agitates Lukey.

“Me nuh like yuh attitude yuh know young blood!” he grunts.

The yout leans forward on his handle bars and begins a staring game with Lukey. His baby dreads peep from his red, gold and green crown.

“So what yuh gwine do *old bwoy?* Tump down a poor defenceless pickney?” the youth’s grin broadens when he receives encouraging giggles from his likkle bredrins who are twenty strong and taking up space on the pavement. Lukey grinds his teeth and charges forward.

“I’ll do more than dat yuh facety likkle...!”

Big John’s arm extends in front of the advancing Lukey. His forearm thuds into Lukey’s chest stopping him in his tracks.

“Easy Lukey. Him a yout man still. Can’t box him up. No, can’t do dat, *seen?*”

Lukey heaves and scowls while Big John glares down at the young lions before a smile chisels its way through his crater face.

“I tell yuh what young lion, ditch de bikes and I’ll let y’all inna de blues, *cool?*”

The yout sucks his teeth and skilfully manoeuvres his bike out the small paved excuse of a front garden, through the gate to join his bredrins on the pavement.

“*F’get dat old man!* Come we go warriors. Dis blues is saaf anyway,” he says and they ride off into the night. Lukey stands in the middle of the pavement with his hands in his pockets. The posse disappear into the darkness riding towards Charles Road.

“Rahtid yout dem,” he cusses, “...they should be inna dem bed to raas!”

Big John laughs at him, Lukey is not amused. Peter drifts back into the hallway to hold his corner and rock the rhythm.

After ten minutes of good vibes with peace and love in the house, a disruptive few swarm through the hallway sweeping Peter along with them. They spill into the middle of the dining room crowd at the back of the house. Those who are caught up in the rush are bumped one way and jostled the other. Big John and Lukey are in the mix of the confusion searching for the culprits. The likkle yout and his young lions are doing their best to avoid their grasp as the jockeying to hold down a comfortable corner begins. Peter ends up in front of Ital Nyah's massive bass bins, not a good position to be in considering his ears are ringing already. The crowd try to settle into a form of easy skanking, wedged shoulder to shoulder. Big John and Lukey grab the ring leader and frog-march him out the session. His young lions follow cussing the doormen. Peter wriggles loose and makes his move to reclaim his corner. As he approaches the hallway, he runs into a new wave of unruly pickney surging in. More bumping, pushing and shoving drags him further away from the exit and deeper into the dining room. Towering above the melee which pulls him into the dining room as well is Peter's sparring partner Zigie. He cusses at the top of his voice and fends off anyone who comes too close to his structure. "Move yuhself! Back weh from me man!" He swats the troublemakers aside and stands firm in the middle of the room like an Ebony Tree. Long fat dreads dangle from his head like solid branches. His height, broad shoulders and his screw face are enough credentials for the unruly few to take a wide birth around him.

"Unnu calm down to raas man, *cho!*" Zigie roars his contempt; his wrath chills the congregation until the music reigns supreme again.

The cocktail of the Sensemilla and cigarette smoke floating through the house finally invades Peter's head. He hadn't burned a spliff while he was in the blues, but the hazy blend makes him feel like he's blazed five. The room begins to spin a little. He's hungry and having visions of eating beans on toast. His feet are throbbing. Bed is calling. On the other side of the room standing close by Zigie but chatting with his cronies Benji and Marilyn is Peter's bush doctor nemesis Radics. Benji and Marilyn stand beside the speaker boxes and in front of a slightly opened window. They eyeball Peter from head to toe whisper to each other then burst into hysterical giggles. Peter takes it as a sign to clock out and go home; their actions kill his positive vibes, but at least he's got ten pounds worth of Kaya in his back pocket; he'll smoke some of that and celebrate his lucrative earnings when he gets home, regardless of the giddy

head. He carves a winding path around the easy skankers, the cigarette and spliff smokers, slithers around Radics, making sure he doesn't brush against him and taps Zigie's shoulder to gain his attention.

"Hail up Zigie, I-man goin home yuh know star."

"Wha appm lion yout, yuh charge?"

"Seen, I-man *well* charge Rasta."

"*A'right*, no problem," Zigie chuckles, "...same time t'morrow, *yes?* We gwine clean up again."

"*T'morrow? No, no, no* dreadlocks. T'morrow I-man gwine sleep me bredrin."

"*What? Sleepin, how yuh mean yuh gwine sleep lion yout?*" Zigie is almost singing soprano, "...money fe mek man," he glares down at Peter through his squinting eyes, "...hold on fe another ten minutes nuh dread, I gwine talk to yuh, *seen?*"

"*No man, me tired, me gaan!*"

"YOW BUSHMAN, C'MERE NUH!" three punters are demanding Zigie's attention; Peter glares at him and sighs impatiently.

"Cho, just wait fe me, *seen?* Ten minutes, trust me." Zigie disappears into the cauldron of dancers, leaving Peter to sit on the window ledge vacated by Benji and Marilyn. He opens it wider feeling the refreshing breeze racing up the sleeves of his T shirt, instantly cooling his body. It swirls and cuddles his neck and head; little by little easing his giddiness. Ten minutes. Half an hour. One hour. Zigie attempts to swing in his direction nuff times, but he is continually lured away by more custom.

'*Fuck dis!*' Peter cusses internally and springs to his feet sucking his teeth. He snakes his way around the ravers. In the middle room he says his goodbyes to the Ital Nyah crew before stepping into the stillness of the streets.

The ringing in his ears grows louder when he strolls away from the house down Somerville Road. Ital Nyah's muffled militant bass line slices through the street's hush, thumping like heartbeats of countless African drums. The cool breeze revives him and it encourages the vision he's having about him and Faye to grow stronger...*They are sitting in the shade under a tree on a sultry summer's day in Small Heath Park playing with their baby son. The bredrins are kicking football, cracking nuff jokes, everything is cool...*He thrusts his hands into his pockets, his fingers play with the wads of notes bulging from them.

'*Shouldn't be carryin dis much cash around,*' he thinks.

Earlier that evening when he slid by Faye's yard a few hours before he set out to the Shebeen...

*'I tell yuh a'ready Peter, I don't want dis sort of life wid you appearin and disappearin when yuh like!'*

*'I know. I come to tell yuh, I ain't gonna be doin dat no more...control dis. Dis is yours. I open up an account on Monday; and dis is some more money fe you to put in, see?'*

*'Ain't no way am I gonna look after dis money star, no way, yuh mad?'*

*'Why not? It's fe us and our baby.'*

*'Well you put it in the bank then.'*

*'Can't, gotta go somewhere.'*

*'Yuh meetin up wid Zigie again enit? I gotta a bad feelin bout you and dis sellin arrangement yuh have wid him! I don't trust him...!'*

*'Paranoid!'* Peter smiles to himself as he turns left and saunters up the Somerville Road alleyway which links it to Kenelm Road. *'...I tell yuh seh I'll be a'right Faye,'* he throws his arms aloft like he's just scored a cup winning goal. *"...See, me safe!"* his yell echoes up into the clear night sky filled with Jah stars.

Two dustbin lids crashing, clanging and rolling towards him kills the still of the night. He jumps and freezes on the spot. A black cat emerges from the shadows, gliding in a cautious classy manner along the top of the six foot plus fence which separates the back gardens from the alleyway. It glares at Peter through its luminous green eyes, and then gracefully scuttles away skipping into another garden, creating more commotion with other dustbin lids. Peter chuckles, *'Wha appm lion yout? Yuh fraid of one likkle cat?'* He continues his stroll up the alleyway; now considering what he's gonna drink with his beans on toast. Near the top of the alleyway's merge with Kenelm Road, he stops in his tracks again when he thinks he's heard footsteps behind him. He quickly glances over his shoulder to see a rat scuttle across the alley. It skids and crashes into the fence ahead of its attempt to run towards Somerville Road. The black cat leaps from the darkness. It lands on its hind in front of Peter; before he could blink, the rat is in the cat's mouth. He watches the cat spit out its prey which then tries to make another escape, but is slapped from one paw to the other and hissed at with scorn.

*'A black cat, then a rat, what next?'* Five more minutes, he'll be home. *'I think I'll have a glass of Ribena followed by a spliff, then bed, fuck the food.'* He pivots to continue his journey home and walks into a forceful blow which



lands plum on his jaw. It spins him around, confusing his sense of direction. A kick to his stomach quickly follows, winding him. The hurt ripples through his belly. His knees buckle as he stumbles backwards, arms spinning, determined to stay on his feet. His aggressors keep coming forward. Peter swings a blind wild right. The strike is sweet; it sends one of the attackers reeling. *'One down.'* His instincts alert him to dodge a kick. He catches the swinging leg and sweeps away the grounded one. *BA-DAM!* His attacker tumbles back first on the concrete. His head rocks back and thuds onto the ground. He groans and spools onto his stomach, then his back before reeling onto his stomach again, clutching the back of his head in distress. *'Dat's two...'*

"What yuh want?" Peter shakes his head in an attempt to clear the blur. Standing before him are three remaining aggressors. Their faces are covered with, balaclavas. All with scornful eyes intent on finishing what they started. Lethargically Peter raises his fists to defend himself. A flying kick to his kidney region is the reply. It kills his resistance. His head smacks the pavement with a firm crack and skids along the concrete. Peter lay still with his face nestled in the ground. His attackers stamp on his arm. They kick his legs. Peter wakes. Despite the immediate pain he's feeling from the blows reigning in, he tries to coil tight like a ball in a vain attempt to protect his self.

*"Oi!"* a voice echoes from down the alley. The kicking stops. Hands raid Peter's pockets, grabbing, yanking and jerking his body. They run off chuckling, sniggering, cheering and dragging away their injured. While Peter drifts in and out and in again, one attacker remains glaring down at him. He feels his chest cave in when the foot sinks into it. Peter gasps for air as sprinting footsteps approaching him echo in his head.

"Peter is me!" Zigie rolls him onto his back. Peter spits blood, coughs, splutters and pants for air, *"...Oh shit man! Why yuh never wait fe me rude bwoy? Shit!"* Zigie grimaces and looks away when he sees his bredrin's face strewn with cuts and running red. Peter hauls Zigie close with his left arm, his mouth flops open in an effort to speak.

*"No. Don't seh nuttn dreadlocks."* Zigie kneels and gently rests Peter's head on his thigh. He wriggles out of his jeans jacket, folds it and places it on the ground. Softly he transfers Peter's head from his thigh to his jacket. *"...I gwine get some help, seen? I soon come! I'm coming back!"* After a moment's hesitation, Zigie runs off down the alley. Peter feels and hears the throbbing in his head, together with the ripples of pain continually stamping over him before darkness covers his eyes.

Faye sits in a sunken seated armchair partly resisting sleep and stirring to hold down a relaxing position. She is roused by Peter's moan when he struggles to raise his head. His effort is more than torture. Every part of his structure is on fire and throbbing persistently. He groans when his head flops on the pillow.

"Peter, try not to move. Yuh hurt bad." Faye avoids touching his bruised and bloated face showered with abrasions. His right eye is swollen shut. She avoids touching his upper body, so she strokes his dreads instead.

"They give me a good kickin, enit Faye?" he whispers through his dry croaky throat and coughs feebly to clear it. His eye roams and spots a jug of water. Faye reads him like a book, grabs the glass, half-fills it and holds it to his mouth. Peter sips. She bites her bottom lip to prevent herself bawling out loud.

"Who beat yuh Peter?" she leans closer to hear every word.

"Dunno," he coughs.

"Drink some more. *That's it.* Where was yuh goin?"

"Home."

"Was yuh comin from a blues?" Faye's tears burst into streams down her cheeks; she wipes them away quickly and clumsily with the heels of her hands.

"Seen."

"I told yuh not t'go didn't I?"

"*Hmm...*" Peter closes his eye as the pain ripples through his body again.

"...Y'Mom's on her way. You're in hospital baby. Zigie come and tell us yuh was beat up."

"They tek all me money didn't they?"

"What money?"

Peter stirs uncomfortably and gazes at the roof.

"...Peter, what money?"

"...De money you refuse to look after."

"I want *you*. Not the money. Don't worry. We gonna survive, but not that way, *seen?* We got each other and the baby. Yuh hear me?"

"But..."

"*Ssshhh...* rest now baby. Save your strength."

"Can't. Me head and chest ah hurt me bad. Why?" Peter grimaces and stirs some more.

"Yuh have nine stitches in yuh head baby. Four broken ribs and a broken arm. Doctor dem seh yuh lucky. Yuh injuries could've been worse. D'painkillers will kick in soon..." Faye's voice trails off when Peter sighs and falls silent.

“...Peter? Yuh a’right baby? Peter? Answer me! Yuh a’right?”

“*Yeh, yeh I-man cool Just wanna sleep...*”