

another white man on their horses, one snorting as if he too bore his master's rage.

The driver knocked over the coalpot that was on the steps, burst in, dragged Father by the heels into the yard and whipped him. All the while the white men reined their circling horses, and, through his laboured breathing, Father implored them to believe that his illness was real.

Then he stood up and after he had taken his cutlass, he touched my head. Just after he had gone, walking between their horses, I felt my burning brow and saw the blood that must have transferred from his hand.

The old woman had no time for me. The excitement had brought out into the yard the tenants who took up work later and children of my age not quite old enough to wield a sickle or husband a water buffalo. I slipped away down the rutted trace.

I wanted to put distance for a while between myself and all that pain. The bush was high and damp and the clearing to which I came was a railway track. Running from slipper to slipper, I arrived at a river. Over it was a bridge. When I crossed I saw the train. I slinked around it and, hearing voices, climbed into a car.

The engine whistled. I felt the judder; heard the clank of chains. I fought back my tears. My face and limbs burned with cuts from the razor grass.

When they found me I could not make myself understood. I knew only that I lived with my mother, my father and my brother in a long house with the smells of food and acid pipes and the quarrels of each apartment invading the other.

Everybody at the orphanage was kind to me. There were other boys like myself; we all became Christians. I would say that it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Warren Grant: I liked the name they gave me. I said it to myself all the time when I was alone.

Look at me now. Despite my ups and downs, I've had a good life as a teacher and I've raised five children, all gone from Amina and me now. The last boy is teaching at Dalhousie.

Soon I'll retire; I'll be home all day with Amina. The pension is small but I have saved, bought insurance, my children are all doing well. And don't talk about the grandchildren! Amina and I go crazy when they visit.

Amina will still carry on the shop below. Who knows, one good day we might rent it out and just relax, take it easy.

Yes, I could have had a worse life than this. I could have ended up like

that fellow across the road. What's going on in his head? Why does he stare? What does he think?

Sun or rain, day after day, sometimes even at night, he stands there at the gate of the House of Refuge.

## AMRYL JOHNSON

### Yardstick

Is like the man don't sleep at all, at all. Don't matter how early I open the door, he there on he veranda, looking out.

'Morning, Mr Braffitt. How you?'

A toothless grin exposed the pink wealth of his gums.

'I dare, yes, Zelda girl. And yourself?'

His reply, the response was not always said. Sometimes, it was merely implied.

Today just like any other blasted Thursday. I have to wash the clothes, cook the food, get the first two ready for school in time, get myself ready for work then take the baby to the nursery. Her head was hot, she had to remember and—

Zelda went back to forcing clothes against the scrubbing board. She caught a glimpse of the old man in her line of vision just before she slapped the wet cloth against the board. He was still smiling.

Remember and—Then she had to—

'Yes Mr Braffitt. Is true. Is true.'

And when she finish doing that, she go have to—

'Is true. Is true what you saying, Mr Braffitt. I agree. I agree.'

Zelda was only half listening. Her answers came almost mechanically. This was habit. Part of an early-morning ritual which had started from the very first morning, the very first morning she had moved into the yard.

'The old man always want get you in some 'tory. Is like he always, always have something to say.'

Old talk. Five in the morning, every morning. The old man would be there on his veranda, waiting to tell her something. I hear he have false teeth. I only hear. I ain't yet see he with he teeth in. All I ever see he doing, is skinning up he gum. Zelda could not always understand what he was saying. At times, she found herself blatantly guessing.

'Pa Braffitt does want talk politics. He ain't happy at all, at all with the way they running things in the country.'

Mother Gloria who also lived in the yard, had laughed when she said it.

'He say he does remember when—. And the man travel all about, oui. He did work Panama Canal. The man go America, he go Canada, he go England. He—.'

'And he come back here?!'

Zelda's interruption had been high-pitched with incredulity. Mother Gloria had looked at her as if she was being disrespectful.

'Trinidad is he home, child. When he done he travelling, where else he go go?'

Zelda thought Mr Braffitt a fool.

Here? Me? Even if I did have a house here waiting. Empty.

Every now and then, her thoughts would drift back to that particular conversation with Mother Gloria. If she was at home, she would look around her and Schueps. She would look at her poverty and deprivation and suck air through her teeth. She would do so loud with contempt. Sometimes, she would say it aloud.

'When I get out, you think I ever coming back here? Here? Christ, I tell you when I gone, I gone.'

It was as if all her life had been spent in those two rooms he had taken her to when she was carrying their first child. Only for a while. Just a short while, he had said. Short while. Things were going to get better. Much better. And she had waited. More to the point, she had believed him. She had believed him. Ten years had gone by. Ten years of her sweet sweet life. Gone.

And Lord. And Lord, what? What, what, what? What did happen? What did go wrong, Lord? He in the same job he did have when I first meet he. And when last they give he a raise? I did think he have ambition. What ambition?

After a while, you done hoping. You done waiting for the rainbow. Every morning when you open your eye, you should feel good about life. Every day when I look up into the sky, was like every ray of sun less bright than the day before. And when you do hear the shout, you start to feel a tightening in your stomach even before you begin to open your eye.

Was how it was for a while. And sudden sudden one day, I leave that behind. My inside start to get hollow hollow. Was like I empty. Was like I real real empty. Everything I feel getting less and less. Then like nothing inside me. Nothing. Nothing. Then like was I can't feel nothing at all, at all, something else start welling up inside me 'til the thing get full full. And it hurting. The thing hurting. I start to wonder if the pain ever going to go. I ever going be free of this hurt? But it do. It leave me numb. I never going to feel nothing again. Everything I do from then on, I do it from duty. After that, every child I bring into this world, I shit out of me like vomit.

Zelda had not needed to go looking. She had found any, all yardsticks right there on her doorstep. Of late, she had taken to spending more and more time talking to herself.

'You see me, I not like Rosalie, eh. I still alive. I ain't dead.'

Rosalie make ten. She, the man, and the children that ain't leave yet still in the board house where she make the first. Now she breast so dry up and shrivel, they hanging to she waist. She ain't never have no pleasure. She ain't never tasted no joy. She spend she whole life making baby. Making baby have she chain to the house. I never see she dress up. I never see she going no place. I just have to look in Rosalie eye to remind myself how I don't want to be. Of late, is like the two of we always catching one another glance. She don't talk much. Rosalie don't say much but she don't have to. Is there. Is right there in she face. Everything. Rosalie not old. Rosalie not an old woman but every line on she face does tell she story. Rosalie don't wear no expression. She don't look happy. She don't look sad. She don't look nothing. If wasn't for all the lines, I would think is mask the girl wearing. Is not a real face at all, at all. I feel every line on Rosalie face is she state of mind. She hiding behind mask to try and shield sheself. I feel so. But is when I look in Rosalie eye that I want to bawl. I want bawl for she. I want bawl for all of we. Anger does take me down below. I look in Rosalie eye and she telling me she life done. She trap. She in prison. I look in she eye and I want to scream for she. One time, I look at Rosalie and I make my decision. After that, my crying done. All my regret over. Long time now I make a vow and I have Rosalie to thank for that. I done make my decision. I getting out. By hook or crook, I getting out.

'Is true, Mr Braffitt. Is true. What you say is true.'

The emphasis had now long since shifted. So much of what Zelda was doing was now done out of a sense of habit. No longer even duty.

'No, Mr Braffitt, I ain't think so. I sure the rainy season done.'

Every morning the same cupid conversation. And sometimes when I

come to think on it, I sure the reply I giving he ain't a fart anything to do with what he telling me. But what I go do? What? What?

It had slowly dawned on her. The truth and this decision had become more certain. More fixed. She had acquired a new found resilience. Zelda now had the stamina, the strength to go through the daily rigmarole, step by step. It was this determination which had recently found her sneaking days off work to spend hours in crowded waiting rooms, waiting. Just waiting. Waiting. Waiting her turn.

'You think it easy?! It ain't easy, you hear! It ain't easy. You only think it easy.'

It was his stock reply. Joseph had not shouted. He had only raised his voice. He had never been violent. He had never lifted a hand to Zelda or the children. While most women would have been grateful, it was this peaceful, to her mind docile, nature which had been the bone of contention in their marriage.

Too damn quiet for he own good. Too quiet and softy softy. People don't appreciate you for it. They does want take advantage. I ain't know how it is he ain't learn by now. They does take he for a fool again and again but the man never wise up. I did like he at first because he was gentle. He was gentle and nice. I did think sooner or later he go see you don't get nothing for nothing in this world. Yes, is true, when I first meet he, I did like he 'cause he quiet and gentle. But, Lord, when you see opportunity after opportunity slip through he finger 'cause he too softy softy to go out and fight and claw and devour, something does stick in your throat. And what the arse he know 'bout it? The man always giving me the same blasted reply. It ain't easy. It ain't easy. No, of course, it ain't easy. It have anything in life that easy? Tell me. Nothing in Trinidad going to come to we black people. We at the bottom of the ladder. Is not like the Indian and them. They helping one another. I tired telling he the stupidey little job he in since I know he, ain't worth nothing. When last he pay go up? Eh? Eh? When last? He working night watchman. Since I know he, he working night watchman for little little money. If wasn't for the job I holding down, I don't know how we would have manage. And the children does grow out of they clothes so fast. What sort of family we is, anyway? He working nights. I working in the day. On he days off, all he want do is sleep or he out with he boys and them. When the children and me does get to see he? Family? What family? We make three children together and is like he feel he work done. From the start, is like I alone doing the bringing up. I alone. I bathing them, I caring for them. I is the one does have to do the beating.

Is me alone having to do everything. Everything. Father? What father? He is any father? I more father to them than he.

I twenty-six years of age and is still a fire in me, I still hungry and I want get out of this place before it dead. Look at me, juk, juk jukking. Jukking clothes against the blasted scrubbing board but why I have to—?

Zelda's thoughts suddenly accelerated in time. She stood looking down at the clothes, her eyes almost glazed and her mouth now hung open with inspiration.

Girl, you stupid. You real real stupid, yes. You done. You fix-up, fix-up already. Don't wait 'til the end of the week. Why wait until the end of the week?

Zelda made an instant decision. The excitement she began feeling was reflected in her voice.

'Today a real special day, Mr Braffitt. You know that?'

He looked at her blankly for a few seconds as if trying to make sense of what she was saying.

'Is true, Zelda girl?'

Zelda always found it consoling when she and the old man were on the same wavelength.

'Yes, Mr Braffitt, today a real special day and tomorrow morning you go see why.'

Zelda offered a broad smile. It tempted his own. At the best of times, his smile was never far from the surface.

Yes, Mr Braffitt, let we smile. Let we smile, you blasted old fool. What you think it is at all? You travel quite England. You travel quite America. You travel quite Canada. And when you done, you come back here? To this? Man, you real mad, oui. Old man, you real real chupid. You a vrai chupidy, yes. And I not too far short. Wait? No, man, my waiting done. I done run out of time. My time done. I pay my due. I serve my sentence. Yes, Mr Braffitt, let we smile together 'cause if wasn't for you, Mother Gloria and Rosalie, I would never've taken this thing so far. Every time I see the three of all you is like the devil and he fork chuking me, chuking me. He chuk, chuk, chuking me. He telling me, he reminding me that if I ain't take stock I going to end up like all of all you.

'Yes, Mr Braffitt, today is a real special day.'

Zelda and the old man continued to smile at each other for a while longer. He seemed oblivious to the contempt which twisted her smile into a grimace.

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Zelda cocked her head, listening to the seconds of a clock as it made its loud progress towards the bewitching hour. Midnight. Zelda sat waiting. A packed suitcase by her side. The room was in darkness. The moon's light through the open curtains seemed to highlight just one feature. A vase of plastic flowers on the small table by the window showed almost daylight colours. The glow also fell on the slip of white paper on the table next to the vase. The note read, simply.

BOY, I GONE  
I NOT COMING BACK  
THEY IS YOUR CHILDREN TOO

Zelda went over recent events as she waited.

I have my papers. I done fix-up, fix-up. I get my passport. I get my visa from the American Embassy. I ready. I didn't plan to go 'til Saturday night. Straight from here to the airport. But something in me did snap when I pick up that piece of clothes. I know I didn't want spend no three more mornings slapping no one set of clothes against no jukking board and having to scrub it. I going now, tonight self. I go spend the rest of my time 'til the flight by Kevin and them. That is the last place he go think to look for me. And who say he go look?

Zelda heard the car as it screeched to a halt. Picking up the suitcase, she walked out of the door and, without a backward glance, closed it firmly behind her.

## JAMAICA KINCAID

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### *My Mother*

Immediately on wishing my mother dead and seeing the pain it caused her, I was sorry and cried so many tears that all the earth around me was drenched. Standing before my mother, I begged her forgiveness, and I begged so earnestly that she took pity on me, kissing my face and placing my head on her bosom to rest. Placing her arms around me, she drew my head closer and closer to her bosom, until finally I suffocated. I lay on her bosom, breathless, for a time uncountable, until one day, for a reason she has kept to herself, she shook me out and stood me under a tree and I started to breathe again. I cast a sharp glance at her and said to myself, 'So.' Instantly I grew my own bosoms, small mounds at first, leaving a small, soft place between them, where, if ever necessary, I could rest my own head. Between my mother and me now were the tears I had cried, and I gathered up some stones and banked them in so that they formed a small pond. The water in the pond was thick and black and poisonous, so that only unnameable invertebrates could live in it. My mother and I now watched each other carefully, always making sure to shower the other with words and deeds of love and affection.

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I was sitting on my mother's bed trying to get a good look at myself. It was a large bed and it stood in the middle of a large, completely dark room. The room was completely dark because all the windows had been boarded up and all the crevices stuffed with black cloth. My mother lit some candles and the room burst into a pink-like, yellow-like glow. Looming over us, much larger than ourselves, were our shadows. We sat mesmerised because our shadows had made a place between themselves, as if they were making room for someone else. Nothing filled up the space between them, and the shadow of my mother sighed. The shadow of my mother danced around the room to a tune that my own shadow sang, and then they stopped. All along, our shadows had grown thick and thin, long and short, had fallen at every angle, as if they were controlled by the light of day. Suddenly my mother got up and blew out the candles and our shadows vanished. I continued to sit on the bed, trying to get a good look at myself.