The Other Hand

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Extract

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Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeting [sic] persecution and conflict.

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Most days I wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl. Everyone would be pleased to see me coming. Maybe I would visit with you for the weekend and then suddenly, because I am fickle like that, I would visit with the man from the corner shop instead – but you would not be sad because you would be eating a cinnamon bun, or drinking a cold Coca Cola from the can, and you would never think of me again. We would be happy, like lovers who met on holiday and forgot each other's names.

A pound coin can go wherever it thinks it will be safest. It can cross deserts and oceans and leave the sound of gunfire and the bitter smell of burning thatch behind. When it feels warm and secure it will turn around and smile at you, the way my big sister Nkiruka used to smile at the men in our village in

the short summer after she was a girl but before she was really a woman, and certainly before the evening my mother took her to a quiet place for a serious talk.

Of course a pound coin can be serious too. It can disguise itself as power, or property, and there is nothing more serious when you are a girl who has neither. You must try to catch the pound, and trap it in your pocket, so that it cannot reach a safe country unless it takes you with it. But a pound has all the tricks of a sorcerer. When pursued I have seen it shed its tail like a lizard so that you are left holding only pence. And when you finally go to seize it, the British pound can perform the greatest magic of all, and this is to transform itself into not one, but two, identical green American dollar bills. Your fingers will close on empty air, I am telling you.

How I would love to be a British pound. A pound is free to travel to safety, and we are free to watch it go. This is the human triumph. This is called, *globalisation*. A girl like me gets stopped at immigration, but a pound can leap the turnstiles, and dodge the tackles of those big men with their uniform caps, and jump straight into a waiting airport taxi. *Where to, sir?* Western civilisation, my good man, and make it snappy.

See how nicely a British pound coin talks? It speaks with the voice of Queen Elizabeth the Second of England. Her face is stamped upon it, and sometimes when I look very closely I can see her lips moving. I hold her up to my ear. What is she saying? *Put me down this minute, young lady, or I shall call my guards*.

If the Queen spoke to you in such a voice, do you suppose it would be possible to disobey? I have read that the people around her – even Kings and Prime Ministers – they find their bodies responding to her orders before their brains can even think why not. Let me tell you, it is not the crown and the sceptre that have this effect. Me, I could pin a tiara on my short fuzzy hair, and I could hold up a sceptre in one hand, like this, and police officers would still walk up to me in their big shoes and say, *Love the ensemble, madam, now let's have quick look at your ID, shall we?* No, it is not the Queen's crown and sceptre that rule in your land. It is her grammar and her voice. That is why it is desirable to speak the way she does. That way you can say to police officers, in a voice as clear as the Cullinan diamond, *My goodness, how dare you?*

I am only alive at all because I learned the Queen's English. Maybe you are thinking, that isn't so hard. After all, English is the official language of my country, Nigeria. Yes, but the trouble is that back home we speak it so much better than you. To talk the Queen's English, I had to forget all the best tricks of my mother tongue. For example, the Queen could never say, *There was plenty wahala, that girl done use her bottom power to engage my number-one son and anyone could see she would end in the bad bush*. Instead the Queen must say, *My late daughter-in-law used her feminine charms to become engaged to my heir, and one might have foreseen that it wouldn't end well*. It is all a little sad, don't you think? Learning the Queen's English is like scrubbing off the bright

red varnish from your toenails the morning after a dance. It takes a long time and there is always a little bit left at the end, a stain of red along the growing edges to remind you of the good time you had. So, you can see that learning came slowly to me. On the other hand, I had plenty of time. I learned your language in an immigration detention centre, in Essex, in the south-eastern part of the United Kingdom. Two years, they locked me in there. Time was all I had.

But why did I go to all the trouble? It is because of what some of the older girls explained to me: to survive, you must look good or talk even better. The plain ones and the silent ones, it seems their paperwork is never in order. You say, they get repatriated. We say, *sent home early*. Like your country is a children's party – something too wonderful to last forever. But the pretty ones and the talkative ones, we are allowed to stay. In this way your country becomes lively and more beautiful.

I will tell you what happened when they let me out of the immigration detention centre. The detention officer put a voucher in my hand, a transport voucher, and he said I could telephone for a cab. I said, *Thank you, sir, may God move with grace in your life and bring joy into your heart and prosperity upon your loved ones*. The officer pointed his eyes at the ceiling, like there was something very interesting up there, and he said, *Jesus*. Then he pointed his finger down the corridor and he said, *There is the telephone*.

So, I stood in the queue for the telephone. I was thinking, I went *over the top* with thanking that detention officer. The

Queen would merely have said, *Thank you*, and left it like that. Actually, the Queen would have told the detention officer to call for the damn taxi himself, or she would have him shot and his head separated from his body and displayed on the railings in front of the Tower of London. I was realising, right there, that it was one thing to learn the Queen's English from books and newspapers in my detention cell, and quite another thing to actually speak the language with the English. I was angry with myself. I was thinking, You cannot afford to go around making mistakes like that, girl. If you talk like a savage who learned her English on the boat, the men are going to find you out and send you straight back home. That's what I was thinking.

There were three girls in the queue in front of me. They let all us girls out on the same day. It was Friday. It was a bright, sunny morning in May. The corridor was dirty but it smelled clean. That is a good trick. Bleach, is how they do that.

The detention officer sat behind his desk. He was not watching us girls. He was reading a newspaper. It was spread out on his desk. It was not one of the newspapers I learned to speak your language from – *The Times* or the *Telegraph* or the *Guardian*. No, this newspaper was not for people like you and me. There was a white girl in the newspaper photo and she was topless. You know what I mean when I say this, because it is your language we are speaking. But if I was telling this story to my big sister Nkiruka and the other girls from my village back home, then I would have to stop, right

here, and explain to them: *topless* does not mean, the lady in the newspaper did not have an upper body. It means, she was not wearing any *garments* on her upper body. You see the difference?

– *Wait. Not even a brassiere?*

– *Not even a brassiere.*

– *Weh!*

And then I would start my story again but those girls back home, they would whisper between them. They would giggle behind their hands. Then, just as I was getting back to my story about the morning they let me out of the immigration detention centre, those girls would interrupt me again. Nkiruka would say, *Listen, okay? Listen. Just so we are clear. This girl in the newspaper photo. She was a prostitute, yes? A night fighter? Did she look down at the ground from shame?*

– *No, she did not look down at the ground from shame. She looked right in the camera and smiled.*

– *What, in the newspaper?*

– *Yes.*

– *Then is it not shameful in Great Britain, to show your bobbis in the newspaper?*

– *No. It is not shameful. The boys like it and there is no shame. Otherwise the topless girls would not smile like that, do you see?*

– *So do all the girls over there show them off like that? Walk around with their bobbis bouncing? In the church and in the shop and in the street?*

– No, only in the newspapers.

– Why do they not all show their breasts, if the men like it and there is no shame?

– I do not know.

– You lived there more than two years, little miss been-to. How come you not know?

– It is like that over there. Much of my life in that country was lived in such confusion. Sometimes I think that even the British do not know the answers to such questions.

– Weh!

This is what it would be like, you see, if I had to stop and explain every little thing to the girls back home. I would have to explain linoleum and bleach and soft-core pornography and the shape-changing magic of the British one-pound coin, as if all of these everyday things were very wonderful mysteries. And very quickly my own story would get lost in this great ocean of wonders because it would seem as if your country was an enchanted federation of miracles and my own story within it was really very small and unmagical. But with you it is much easier because I can say to you, look, on the morning they released us, the duty officer at the immigration detention centre was staring at a photo of a topless girl in the newspaper. And you understand the situation straight away. That is the reason I spent two years learning the Queen's English, so that you and I could speak like this without an interruption.

The detention officer, the one who was looking at the topless photo in the newspaper – he was a small man and his

hair was pale, like the tinned mushroom soup they served us on Tuesdays. His wrists were thin and white like electrical cables covered in plastic. His uniform was bigger than he was. The shoulders of the jacket rose up in two bumps, one on each side of his head, as if he had little animals hiding in there. I thought of those creatures blinking in the light when he took off his jacket in the evening. I was thinking, Yes sir, if I was your wife I would keep my brassiere *on*, thank you.

And then I was thinking, Why are you staring at that girl in the newspaper, mister, and not us girls here in the queue for the telephone? What if we all ran away? But then I remembered, they were *letting* us out. This was hard to understand after so much time. *Two years*, I lived in that detention centre. I was fourteen years of age when I came to your country but I did not have any papers to prove it and so they put me in the same detention centre as the adults. The trouble was, there were men and women locked up together in that place. At night they kept the men in a different wing of the detention centre. They caged them like wolves when the sun went down, but in the daytime the men walked among us, and ate the same food we did. I thought they still looked hungry. I thought they watched me with ravenous eyes. So when the older girls whispered to me, *To survive you must look good or talk good*, I decided that talking would be safer for me.

I made myself undesirable. I declined to wash, and I let my skin grow oily. Under my clothes I wound a wide strip of cotton around my chest, to make my breasts small and flat.

When the charity boxes arrived, full of second-hand clothes and shoes, some of the other girls tried to make themselves pretty but I rummaged through the cartons to find clothes that hid my shape. I wore loose blue jeans and a man's Hawaiian shirt and heavy black boots with the steel toecaps shining through the torn leather. I went to the detention nurse and I made her cut my hair very short with medical scissors. For the whole two years I did not smile or even look in any man's face. I was terrified. Only at night, after they locked the men away, I went back to my detention cell and I unwound the cloth from my breasts and I breathed deeply. Then I took off my heavy boots and I drew my knees up to my chin. Once a week, I sat on the foam mattress of my bed and I painted my toenails. I found the little bottle of nail varnish at the bottom of a charity box. It still had the price ticket on it. If I ever discover the person who gave it then I will tell them, for the cost of one British pound and ninety-nine pence, they saved my life. Because this is what I did in that place, to remind myself I was alive underneath everything: under my steel toecaps I wore bright red nail varnish. Sometimes when I took my boots off I screwed up my eyes against the tears and I rocked back and fro, shivering from the cold.

My big sister Nkiruka, she became a woman in the growing season, under the African sun, and who can blame her if the great red heat of it made her giddy and flirtatious? Who could not lean back against the doorpost of their house and smile with quiet indulgence when they saw my mother sitting her

down to say, *Nkiruka, beloved one, you must not smile at the older boys like that*?

Me, I was a woman under white fluorescent strip lights, in an underground room in an immigration detention centre forty miles east of London. There were no seasons there. It was cold, cold, cold, and I did not have anyone to smile at. Those cold years are frozen inside me. The African girl they locked up in the immigration detention centre, poor child, she never really escaped. In my soul she is still locked up in there, forever, under the fluorescent lights, curled up on the green linoleum floor with her knees tucked up under her chin. And this woman they released from the immigration detention centre, this creature that I am, she is a new breed of human. There is nothing natural about me. I was born – no, I was reborn – in captivity. I learned my language from your newspapers, my clothes are your cast-offs, and it is your pound that makes my pockets ache with its absence. Imagine a young woman cut out from a smiling Save the Children magazine advertisement, who dresses herself in threadbare pink clothes from the recycling bin in your local supermarket car park and speaks English like the leader column of *The Times*, if you please. I would cross the street to avoid me. Truly, this is the one thing that people from your country and people from my country agree on. They say, *That refugee girl is not one of us. That girl does not belong*. That girl is a halfling, a child of an unnatural mating, an unfamiliar face in the moon.

So, I am a refugee, and I get very lonely. Is it my fault if I do not look like an English girl and I do not talk like a Nigerian? Well, who says an English girl must have skin as pale as the clouds that float across her summers? Who says a Nigerian girl must speak in fallen English, as if English had collided with Ibo, high in the upper atmosphere, and rained down into her mouth in a shower that half drowns her and leaves her choking up sweet tales about the bright African colours and the taste of fried plantain? Not like a storyteller, but like a victim rescued from the flood, coughing up the colonial water from her lungs?

Excuse me for learning your language properly. I am here to tell you a real story. I did not come to talk to you about the bright African colours. I am a born-again citizen of the developing world, and I will prove to you that the colour of my life is grey. And if it should be that I secretly love fried plantain, then that must stay between us and I implore you to tell *no one*. Okay?

The morning they let us out of the detention centre, they gave us all our possessions. I held mine in a see-through plastic bag. A Collins Gem Pocket English Dictionary, one pair of grey socks, one pair of grey briefs, and one United Kingdom driver's licence that was not mine, and one water-stained business card that was not mine either. If you want to know, these things belonged to a white man called Andrew O'Rourke. I met him on a beach.

This small plastic bag is what I was holding in my hand when the detention officer told me to go and stand in the

queue for the telephone. The first girl in the queue, she was tall and she was pretty. Her thing was beauty, not talking. I wondered which of us had made the better choice to survive. This girl, she had plucked her eyebrows out and then she had drawn them back on again with a pencil. This is what she had done to save her life. She was wearing a purple dress, an A-line dress with pink stars and moons in the pattern. She had a nice pink scarf wrapped around her hair, and purple flip-flops on her feet. I was thinking she must have been locked up a very long time in our detention centre. One has to go through a very great number of the charity boxes, you will understand, to put together an outfit that is truly an *ensemble*.

On the girl's brown legs there were many small white scars. I was thinking, Do those scars cover the whole of you, like the stars and the moons on your dress? I thought that would be pretty too, and I ask you right here please to agree with me that a scar is never ugly. That is what the scar makers want us to think. But you and I, we must make an agreement to defy them. We must see all scars as beauty. Okay? This will be our secret. Because take it from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means, 'I survived'.

In a few breaths' time I will speak some sad words to you. But you must hear them the same way we have agreed to see scars now. Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means, this storyteller is alive. The next thing you know, something fine will happen to her, something *marvellous*, and then she will turn round and smile.

The girl with the purple A-line dress and the scars on her legs, she was already talking into the telephone receiver. She was saying, *Hello, taxi? Yu come pick me up, yeh? Good. Oh, where me come? Me come from Jamaica, darlin, you better believe that. Huh? What? Oh, where me come* right now? *Okay, wait please.*

She put her hand to cover the telephone receiver. She turned round to the second girl in the queue and she said, *Listen, darlin, what name is dis place, where we at right now?* But the second girl just looked up at her and shrugged her shoulders. The second girl was thin and her skin was dark brown and her eyes were green like a jelly sweet when you suck the outside sugar off and hold it up against the moon. She was so pretty, I cannot even explain. She was wearing a yellow sari dress. She was holding a see-through plastic bag like mine, but there was nothing in it. At first I thought it was empty, and I thought, Why do you carry that bag, girl, if there is nothing in it? I could see her sari through it, so I decided she was holding a bag full of lemon yellow. That is everything she owned when they let us girls out.

I knew that second girl a bit. I was in the same room as her for two weeks one time, but I never talked with her. She did not speak one word of anyone's English. That is why she just shrugged and held on tight to her bag of lemon yellow. So the girl on the phone, she pointed her eyes up at the ceiling, the same way the detention officer at his desk did.

Then the girl on the phone turned to the third girl in the queue and she said to her, *Do* yu *know the name of dis place where we is at?* But the third girl did not know either. She just stood there, and she was wearing a blue T-shirt and blue denim jeans and white Dunlop Green Flash trainers, and she just looked down at her own see-through bag, and her bag was full of letters and documents. There was so much paper in that bag, all crumpled and creased, she had to hold one hand under the bag to stop it all bursting out. Now, this third girl, I knew her a little bit too. She was not pretty and she was not a good talker either, but there is one more thing that can save you from being *sent home early*. This girl's thing was, she had her story all written down and made official. There were rubber stamps at the end of her story that said in red ink this is TRUE. I remember she told me her story once and it went something like, *the-men-came-and-they-*

burned-my-village-
tied-my-girls-
raped-my-girls-
took-my-girls-
whipped-my-husband-
cut-my-breast-
I-ran-away-
through-the-bush-
found-a-ship-
crossed-the-sea-

and-then-they-put-me-in-here. Or some such story like that. I got confused with all the stories in that detention centre. All the girls' stories started out, *the-men-came-and-they-*. And all of the stories finished, *and-then-they-put-me-in-here*. All the stories were sad, but you and I have made our agreement concerning sad words. With this girl – girl three in the queue – her story had made her so sad that she did not know the name of the place where she was at and she did not want to know. The girl was not even curious.

So the girl with the telephone receiver, she asked her again. *What?* she said. *Yu no talk neither? How come yu not know the name dis place we at?*

Then the third girl in the queue, she just pointed *her* eyes up at the ceiling, and so the girl with the telephone receiver pointed her own eyes up at the ceiling for a second time. I was thinking, Okay, now the detention officer has looked at the ceiling one time and girl three has looked at the ceiling one time and girl one has looked at the ceiling two times, so maybe there are some answers up on that ceiling after all. Maybe there is something very cheerful up there. Maybe there are stories written on the ceiling that go something like *the-men-came-and-they-*

brought-us-colourful-dresses-
fetched-wood-for-the-fire-
told-some-crazy-jokes-
drank-beer-with-us-
chased-us-till-we-giggled-

stopped-the-mosquitoes-from-biting-
told-us-the-trick-for-catching-the-British-one-pound-coin-
turned-the-moon-into-cheese-

Oh, and then they put me in here.

I looked at the ceiling, but it was only white paint and fluorescent light tubes up there.

The girl on the telephone, she finally looked at me. So I said to her, *The name of this place is the Black Hill Immigration Removal Centre*. The girl stared at me. *Yu kiddin wid me*, she said. *What kine of a name is dat?* So I pointed at the little metal plate that was screwed on the wall above the telephone. The girl looked at it and then she looked back to me and she said, *Sorry, darlin, I can not* ridd *it*. So I read it out to her, and I pointed to the words one at a time. BLACK HILL IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRE, HIGH EASTER, CHELMSFORD, ESSEX. *Thank you, precious*, the first girl said, and she lifted up the telephone receiver.

She said into the receiver: *All right now, listen, mister, the place I is right now is called Black Hill Immigration Removal*. Then she said, *No, please, wait*. Then she looked sad and she put the telephone receiver back down on the telephone. I said, *What is wrong?* The first girl sighed and she said, *Taxi man say he no pick up from dis place. Then he say, You people are scum. You know dis word?*

I said no, because I did not know for sure, so I took my Collins Gem Pocket English Dictionary out of my see-through bag and I looked up the word. I said to the first girl, *You are a*

film of impurities or vegetation that can form on the surface of a liquid. She looked at me and I looked at her and we giggled because we did not understand what to do with the information. This was always my trouble when I was learning to speak your language. Every word can defend itself. Just when you go to grab it, it can split into two separate meanings so the understanding closes on empty air. I admire you people. You are like sorcerers and you have made your language as safe as your money.

So me and the first girl in the telephone queue, we were giggling at each other, and I was holding my see-through bag and she was holding her see-through bag. There was one black eyebrow pencil and one pair of tweezers and three rings of dried pineapple in hers. The first girl saw me looking at her bag and she stopped giggling. *What you starin at?* she said. I said I did not know. She said, *I know what you tinking. You tinking, now the taxi no come for to pick me up, how far me going to get wid one eyebrow pencil an one tweezer an three pineapple slice?* So I told her, *Maybe you can use the eyebrow pencil to write a message that says HELP ME, and then you can give the pineapple slices to the first person who does*. The girl looked at me like I was crazy in the head and she said to me: *Okay, darlin, one, I got no paper for to write no message on, two, I no know how to write, I only know how to draw on me eyebrows, an tree, me intend to eat that pineapple meself*. And she made her eyes wide and stared at me.

While this was happening, the second girl in the queue, the girl with the lemon yellow sari and the see-through bag full of yellow, she had become the first girl in the queue, because now she held the telephone receiver in her own hand. She was whispering into it in some language that sounded like butterflies drowning in honey. I tapped the girl on her shoulder, and pulled at her sari, and I said to her: *Please, you must try to talk to them in* English. The sari girl looked at me, and she stopped talking in her butterfly language. Very slowly and carefully, like she was remembering the words from a dream, she said into the telephone receiver: *England, Yes please. Yes please thank you, I want go to England.*

So the girl in the purple A-line dress, she put her nose right up to the nose of the girl in the lemon yellow sari, and she tapped her finger on the girl's forehead and made a sound with her mouth like a broom handle hitting an empty barrel. *Bong! Bong!* she said to the girl. *You already is in England, get it?* And she pointed both her index fingers down at the linoleum floor. She said: *Dis is England, darlin, ya nuh see it? Right here, yeh? Dis where we at all-reddy.*

The girl in the yellow sari went quiet. She just stared back with those green eyes like jelly moons. So the girl in the purple dress, the Jamaican girl, she said, *Here, gimme dat,* and she grabbed the telephone receiver out of the sari girl's hand. And she lifted the receiver to her mouth and she said, *Listen, wait, one minnit please.* But then she went quiet and she passed the telephone receiver to me and I listened, and it was just the dial

tone. So I turned to the sari girl. *You have to dial a number first,* I said. *You understand? Dial number first, then tell taxi man where you want to go. Okay?*

But the girl in the sari, she just narrowed her eyes at me, and pulled her see-through bag of lemon yellow a little closer to her, like maybe I was going to take that away from her the way the other girl had taken the telephone receiver. The girl in the purple dress, she sighed and turned to me. *It ain't no good, darlin,* she said. *De Lord gonna call his chillen home fore dis one calls for a taxi.* And she passed the telephone receiver to me. *Here,* she said. *Yu betta try one time.*

I pointed to the third girl in the queue, the one with the bag of documents and the blue T-shirt and the Dunlop Green Flash trainers. *What about her?* I said. *This girl is before me in the queue. Yeh,* said the girl in the purple dress, *but dis ooman ain't got no mo-tee-VAY-shun. Ain't dat right, darlin?* And she stared at the girl with the documents, but the girl with the documents just shrugged and looked down at her Dunlop Green Flash shoes. *Ain't dat de truth*, said the girl in the purple dress, and she turned back to me. *It's up to yu, darlin. Yu got to talk us out a here, fore dey change dey mind an lock us all back up.*

I looked down at the telephone receiver and it was grey and dirty and I was afraid. I looked back at the girl in the purple dress. *Where do you want to go?* I said. And she said, *Any ends.* Excuse me? *Anywhere, darlin.*

I dialled the taxi number that was written on the phone. A man's voice came on. He sounded tired. *Cab service*, he said.

The way he said it, it was like he was doing me a big favour just by saying those words.

'Good morning, I would like a taxi please.'

'You want a cab?'

'Yes. Please. A taxi-cab. For four passengers.'

'Where from?'

'From the Black Hill Immigration Removal Centre, please. In High Easter. It is near Chelmsford.'

'I know where it is. Now you listen to me—'

'Please, it is okay. I know you do not pick up refugees. We are not refugees. We are cleaners. We work in this place.'

'You're cleaners?'

'Yes.'

'And that's the truth, is it? Because if I had a pound for every bloody immigrant that got in the back of one of my cabs and didn't know where they wanted to go and started prattling on to my driver in Swahili and tried to pay him in cigarettes, I'd be playing golf at this very moment instead of talking to you.'

'We are cleaners.'

'All right. It's true you don't talk like one of them. Where do you want to go?'

I had memorised the address on the United Kingdom driver's licence in my see-through plastic bag. Andrew O'Rourke, the white man I met on the beach: he lived in Kingston-upon-Thames in the English county of Surrey. I spoke into the telephone.

'Kingston, please.'

The girl in the purple dress grabbed my arm and hissed at me. *No, darlin!* she said. *Anywhere but Jamaica. Dey mens be killin me de minnit I ketch dere, kill me dead.* I did not understand why she was scared, but I know now. There is a Kingston in England but there is also a Kingston in Jamaica, where the climate is different. This is another great work you sorcerers have done – even your cities have two tails.

'Kingston?' said the man on the telephone.

'Kingston-upon-Thames,' I said.

'That's bloody miles away, isn't it? That's over in, what?'

'Surrey,' I said.

'Surrey. You are four cleaners from leafy Surrey, is that what you're trying to tell me?'

'No. We are cleaners from near by. But they are sending us on a cleaning job in Surrey.'

'Cash or account, then?'

The man sounded so tired.

'What?'

'Will you pay in cash, or is it going on the detention centre's bill?'

'We will pay in cash, mister. We will pay when we get there.'

'You'd better.'

I listened for a minute and then I pressed my hand down on the cradle of the telephone receiver. I dialled another number. This was the telephone number from the business card I

carried in my see-through plastic bag. The business card was damaged by water. I could not tell if the last number was an 8 or a 3. I tried an 8, because in my country odd numbers bring bad luck, and that is one thing I had already had enough of.

A man answered the call. He was angry.

'Who is this? It's bloody six in the morning.'

'Is this Mr Andrew O'Rourke?'

'Yeah. Who are you?'

'Can I come to see you, mister?'

'Who the hell is this?'

'We met on the beach in Nigeria. I remember you very well, Mr O'Rourke. I am in England now. Can I come to see you and Sarah? I do not have anywhere else to go.'

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then the man coughed, and started to laugh.

'This is a wind-up, right? Who is this? I'm warning you, I get nutters like you on my case all the time. Leave me alone, or you won't get away with it. My paper always prosecutes. They'll have this call traced and find out who you are and have you arrested. You wouldn't be the first.'

'You don't believe it is me?'

'Just leave me alone. Understand? I don't want to hear about it. All that stuff happened a long time ago and it wasn't my fault.'

'I will come to your house. That way you will believe it is me.'

'No.'

'I do not know anyone else in this country, Mr O'Rourke. I am sorry. I am just telling you, so that you can be ready.'

The man did not sound angry any more. He made a small sound, like a child when it is nervous about what will happen. I hung up the phone and turned round to the other girls. My heart was pounding so fast, I thought I would vomit right there on the linoleum floor. The other girls were staring at me, nervous and expectant.

'Well?' said the girl in the purple dress.

'Hmm?' I said.

'De *taxi*, darlin! What is happenin about de taxi?'

'Oh, yes, the taxi. The taxi man said a cab will pick us up in ten minutes. He said we are to wait outside.'

The girl in the purple dress, she smiled.

'Mi name is Yevette. From Jamaica, zeen. You *useful*, darlin. What dey call yu?'

'My name is Little Bee.'

'What kinda name yu call dat?'

'It is my name.'

'What kind of place yu come from, dey go roun callin little gals de names of insects?'

'Nigeria.'

Yevette laughed. It was a big laugh, like the way the chief baddy laughs in the pirate films. *WU-ha-ha-ha-ha!* It made the telephone receiver rattle in its cradle. *Nye-JIRRYA!* said Yevette. Then she turned round to the others, the girl in the sari and the girl with the documents. *Come wid us, gals,*

she said. *We de United Nations, see it, an today we is all followin Nye-JIRRYA. WU-ha-ha-ha-ha!*

Yevette was still laughing when the four of us girls walked out past the security desk, towards the door. The detention officer looked up from his newspaper when we went by. The topless girl was gone now – the officer had turned the page. I looked down at his newspaper. The headline on the new page said ASYLUM SEEKERS EATING OUR SWANS. I looked back at the detention officer, but he would not look up at me. While I looked, he moved his arm over the page to cover the headline. He made it look as if he needed to scratch his elbow. Or maybe he really *did* need to scratch his elbow. I realised I knew nothing about men apart from the fear. A uniform that is too big for you, a desk that is too small for you, an eight-hour shift that is too long for you, and suddenly here comes a girl with three kilos of documents and no motivation, another one with jelly-green eyes and a yellow sari who is so beautiful you cannot look at her for too long in case your eyeballs go *ploof*, a third girl from Nigeria who is named after a honeybee, and a noisy woman from Jamaica who laughs like the pirate Bluebeard. Perhaps this is exactly the type of circumstance that makes a man's elbow itch.

I turned to look back at the detention officer just before we went out through the double doors. He was watching us leave. He looked very small and lonely there, with his thin little wrists, under the fluorescent lights. The light made his skin look green, the colour of a baby caterpillar just out of the

egg. The early morning sunshine was shining in through the door glass. The officer screwed up his eyes against the daylight. I suppose we were just silhouettes to him. He opened his mouth, as if he was going to say something, but he stopped.

'What?' I said. I realised he was going to tell us there had been a mistake. I wondered if we should run. I did not want to go back in detention. I wondered how far we would get if we ran. I wondered if they would come after us with dogs.

The detention officer stood up. I heard his chair scrape on the linoleum floor. He stood there with his hands at his sides.

'Ladies?' he said.

'Yes?'

He looked down at the ground, and then up again.

'Best of luck,' he said.

And we girls turned round and walked towards the light.

I pushed open the double doors, and then I froze. It was the sunlight that stopped me. I felt so fragile from the detention centre, I was afraid those bright rays of sunshine would snap me in half. I couldn't take that first step outside.

'What is de hold-up, Lil Bee?'

Yevette was standing behind me. I was blocking the door for everyone.

'One moment, please.'

Outside, the fresh air smelled of wet grass. It blew in my face. The smell made me panic. For two years I had smelled only bleach, and my nail varnish, and the other detainees' cigarettes. Nothing natural. Nothing like this. I felt that if I

took one step forward, the earth itself would rise up and reject me. There was nothing natural about me now. I stood there in my heavy boots with my breasts strapped down, neither a woman nor a girl, a creature who had forgotten her language and learned yours, whose past had crumbled to dust.

'What de hell yu waitin fo, darlin?'

'I am scared, Yevette.'

Yevette shook her head and she smiled.

'Maybe yu's right to be scared, Lil Bee, cos yu a smart girl. Maybe me jus too dumb to be fraid. But me spend eighteen month locked up in dat place, an if yu tink me dumb enough to wait one second longer on account of your tremblin an your quakin, yu better tink two times.'

I turned round to face her and I gripped on to the door-frame.

'I can't move,' I said.

That is when Yevette gave me a great push in the chest and I flew backwards. And that is how it was, the first time I touched the soil of England as a free woman, it was not with the soles of my boots but with the seat of my trousers.

'WU-ha-ha-ha-ha!' said Yevette. 'Welcome in de U-nited Kindom, int dat glorious?'

When I got my breath back, I started laughing too. I sat on the ground, with the warm sun shining on my back, and I realised that the earth had not rejected me and the sunlight had not snapped me in two.

I stood up and I smiled at Yevette. We all took a few steps away from the detention centre buildings. As we walked, when the other girls were not looking, I reached under my Hawaiian shirt and I undid the band of cotton that held my breasts down. I unwound it and threw it on the ground and ground it into the dirt with the heel of my boot. I breathed deeply in the fresh, clean air.

When we came to the main gate, the four of us girls stopped for a moment. We looked out through the high razor wire fence and down the slopes of Black Hill. The English countryside stretched away to the horizon. Soft mist was hanging in the valleys, and the tops of the low hills were gold in the morning sun, and I smiled because the whole world was fresh and new and bright.