

Home Is Not Here

Birdie Brown sat in a plastic chair and stared at the clock on the wall, paying little mind to the sweat pooling into her elasticated waistband, the ache in her tired legs or the numbness of her backside. The letter in her handbag warned that lateness would not be tolerated, but she had been kept waiting for sixty slow minutes and frustration had supplanted the fear that had sat heavy in her belly ever since the rahted¹ summons had arrived.

Really, she thought, if dem a gwine kick mi outta de country dem could at least be on time².

The waiting room had not been designed with the comfort of its temporary inhabitants in mind. She was wedged between a woman bickering with her companion in hushed Chinese, and a pale, twitchy man with dark rings around his eyes. She could smell instant coffee, and weed, and Chinese food; the woman had retrieved a lunchbox from a carrier bag with a defiant air. Birdie's stomach rumbled. She'd been too nervous to eat breakfast.

"Bridget Brown?"

Birdie.

"Here," she called, feeling as self-conscious as a school girl. A young woman, with greasy hair and a smattering of spots across her forehead, gestured indifferently. Birdie heaved herself to her feet and shuffled after her, fanning out her blouse and mouthing a silent appeal to whichever god might be listening.

"Thank you for coming in today, Ms Brown," said the woman – her nameplate read S. Jenkins, Immigration Officer – as she slid behind her desk. Birdie forced a smile (she thought, but could not be sure, that she could hear someone crying) and lowered herself into a chair marginally more comfortable than the one she had just vacated.

"Letter told me to come," she replied, sensing that the woman seemed to be waiting for a response. "So I come."

S. Jenkins tucked her lank hair behind her ears and made a noisy show of re-arranging the papers on her desk.

"Letter said my appointment was at twenty past eleven too," Birdie said innocently.

"I apologise for the wait," the young woman replied automatically. "But unfortunately due to a staffing issue we can't guarantee exact appointment times."

Why yuh give mi an exact time fi an appointment den, Birdie wanted to say, but she bit her tongue, a little nibble, right on the tip. [...]

The immigration officer cleared her throat and set down her pen, suddenly business-like [...].

"Ms Brown, you were invited here today to discuss your immigration status and determine if you are legally permitted to remain in the United Kingdom."

"I've been here since 1955 –" Birdie began, but the woman raised her hand.

"There are procedures in place to ensure your claim is reviewed correctly and fairly," she said stiffly. "And these procedures have to be followed. Do I have your co-operation? It will go much smoother if I do."

Bewildered, Birdie nodded.

"So," the immigration officer opened a manila folder. "You arrived in the United Kingdom in 1955, is that correct?"

"... Yes."

¹ (Jamaican English) damned

² *if dem a gwine kick mi outta de country dem could at least be on time* (Jamaican English): if they are going to kick me out of the country they could at least be on time

"And you were seven years old at the time of your entry?"

"It was two weeks after my seventh birthday. My mumma – mother – told me it was the best present a young girl could ask for –"

45 "Please, Ms Brown, just the facts." Birdie bit down on her tongue, hard.

"It says here that you left Jamaica under the care of your mother and travelled on *her* passport –"

"I didn't need a passport of my own." Her stomach churned; the fear was back, a mass of snakes that threatened to slide up her gullet and spill out over the desk. She forced them back down before speaking again. "No pickney – no child – needed one. You came with your parents, and because they
50 could stay so could you. It was allowed."

"It was allowed *then*." S. Jenkins sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose, revealing a patch of pink skin beneath her glasses. "As outlined in the 1971 Immigration Act, all those who entered the country without the correct documentation prior to that date do not have the right to remain in the UK indefinitely – though I am sure you can appreciate how difficult it's been trying to solve all these
55 decades-old cases. It's been a nightmare, actually. I've been rushed off my feet –"

Birdie didn't respond.

"But no matter. It's my job to establish whether or not you are permitted to remain."

"This is my home."

"I understand that may be how you feel –" S. Jenkins faltered, and looked down at the slim file.
60 Birdie was grateful; it gave her a chance to chase³ a tissue from her sleeve. The disembodied sobs got louder.

"Let's start again," S. Jenkins said, in what she clearly thought was a gentler tone. "You and your mother arrived in England in 1955, correct?"

"Yes."

65 "And your father was already residing in England at the time?"

"He sailed over sometime in 1954. My mumma – mother – and I followed about a year later."

"Why did you not travel with your father?"

"He needed to find work here first, to pay for our fare. It was common."

"I see."

70 *Do yuh?* Birdie asked silently. She doubted the woman had any idea how common it had been for families to be split up in such a manner. If she did she wouldn't be asking such *chupid*⁴ questions –

"Do you have the exact date of his arrival in the UK?"

"Not an exact date, no, but –"

"So you can't prove he arrived in 1954?"

75 How to prove the pain of separation? She hadn't thought to save her tear-stained hankies. The only consolation had been the knowledge that it wouldn't be long, no time at all really, before she and mumma left for England too, and they'd be with puppa, and they'd all be so happy, and England would be so good to them.

Will it really, mumma?

80 *It will, chile*⁵.

Birdie hadn't any reason to doubt her mother's words. The promise of Life in England had been packaged up so neatly, like a parcel tied up in crisp brown paper. You tore off the wrapping and the gifts tumbled into your lap – plentiful work, more money, better opportunities for your children and your children's children. The newspapers said that the Mother Country⁶ needed to be rebuilt after
85 the war⁷, and those that were willing to get off their backsides and pitch in⁸ would be rewarded beyond measure. [...]

³ (here) pull

⁴ (Jamaican English) stupid

⁵ (Jamaican English) child

⁶ *Mother Country* (here): England

⁷ (here) the Second World War

⁸ *pitch in*: help

Puppa had met them at the airport, with gifts for them both. For his daughter, a smart blue anorak, with shiny red buttons, and a coat of unassuming beige felt for his wife.

90 "All de white sistren⁹ wearing dem," he'd said with a grin, draping it around her shoulders and pulling her in for a kiss. Then he'd turned to Birdie and opened his arms.

Birdie was struck with sudden shyness. Puppa didn't look quite the way she remembered... he was thinner. Shorter, almost. So, instead of looking at him, she had buried her face in the front of his shirt and inhaled.

Coffee, tobacco. Home.

95 And then she was crying, but she didn't know why. Her father chuckled¹⁰ her gently beneath the chin and smiled.

"Tears fi yuh old man, eh? Wha, yuh nah happy to see mi? [...] Come. Let's guh home."

Home.

100 Birdie spent the first half of the taxi ride wedged into puppa's armpit, but even the overwhelming happiness at being reunited with a long-lost parent could not rival a small child's curiosity. Soon she was sat with her nose pressed against the window, her breath fogging the glass. She wiped the condensation away impatiently but even then, there wasn't much to see. Just road after road of grey buildings, stacked beneath a grey sky. A few umbrellas, all of them black. Trepidation bubbled in her stomach, but she mistook it for hunger.

105 After driving a considerable distance, the taxi stopped outside a squat brick house. All the houses look the same, she thought, shivering on the pavement while her father argued with the driver over the fare. Like a row of glum children lining up to see the headmaster.

However, she was pleased by the size of the house – two whole storeys, and a glossy black front door with a smart brass knocker – until her father pointed out that the bottom floor was occupied by
110 someone called Patricia.

"Why yuh let someone live inna wi house?" Birdie asked, affronted.

"It nah our house, baby. Wi rent de top floor; Pat has de bottom."

Birdie was ushered into a dim corridor and up a flight of stairs. There she found a kitchen, two narrow bedrooms and –

115 "Toilet wi share wid Pat. It's outside."

Birdie explored her new home while puppa hauled the trunk up the stairs. The kitchen window overlooked the privy, and beyond that, a high wall topped with shards of green glass. The paint was peeling around the window frame; she scraped a patch of mildew growing in the corner of the sill with her fingernail. Her nose itched. The kitchen smelled like burning fat. She was confused; everything in England was supposed to be better. Was this better? [...]
120

School had been a particularly confusing experience. Bridget ("Birdie," her teacher had said, with an upturned nose, "is not a real name") had always excelled at literature and history, but her giddy¹¹ enthusiasm for the Queen's English and the Queen's England alienated her even further from her peers. They laughed every time she opened her mouth to speak, and then her teacher would
125 admonish her for causing a disruption, so alongside the three R's¹² she learned it was best to stay silent – even when she was cornered by a gang of boys from the upper school, who had tried to look up her skirt to see if she was different 'down there' from white girls. [...]

A phone trilled. S. Jenkins apologised for the interruption and answered it, speaking in bored, bland tones to the unseen distraction.

130 Slowly, it had gotten better, Birdie silently rationalised; as more and more immigrants 'flooded' the country (as her headmistress had once put it) the tide turned, and she went from being rejected to accepted. But even then, acceptance didn't come with tearful apologies and open armed

⁹ (Jamaican English) sisters

¹⁰ touched

¹¹ excited

¹² the three R's: reading, writing and arithmetic

embraces; instead, it came begrudgingly. *You're here now*, they seemed to say. *You might as well stay*.

135 But she hadn't always wanted to stay. She could admit that to herself, couldn't she? She could admit that it had been hard, to watch in silence as her father's faith in the motherland turned into something else entirely – resentment, as hard and bitter as a bad ackee¹³. But he refused to give up. [...]

"Sorry about that." S. Jenkins replaced the receiver with a careless clang. "Now, where were we?"

140 "Erm –" [...].

"It says here that you never married... or applied for a passport." S. Jenkins smiled insipidly. "You don't seem to be overly fond of any form of official documentation."

"Never needed a passport." Birdie shrugged. "Or a husband."

S. Jenkins frowned. "You never wanted to go on holiday? Or visit your home?"

145 "It's not my home. I don't remember anything about it," Birdie replied quietly.

"Nothing at all?"

To Birdie's dismay, she detected a hint of pity. "No."

It was a lie. Like the sun on a hot summer's day, memories of the island still shone brightly in her mind; the dust plumes that billowed into the air as the iceman pedalled his bike up the dirt lane, a thick sheen of sweat covering his face as though he'd gotten into her mother's pomade. Biting into the first mango of the season, so sweet it made her teeth itch. [...]

150 But the older she got, the harder it became to see the island through the mist that settled high on the mountain tops in spring. Time had worn away at the edges of her memories and she was no longer sure that she could trust them; had she really found an injured tody¹⁴ hiding under the veranda, or did that happen to another girl in her class? Could her puppa really throw her as high as the house? Had she spent the first seven years of her life on Anslow Lane, or were the Anslows the family next door; absent father, proud mother, and a baby son, the one with velvety skin and a mouthful of shiny pearls? Jamaica came back to her in bits and pieces, and that's what they wanted to send her back to. Bits and pieces of a life she was taken from. Fragments of a girlhood.

160 "Well." S. Jenkins set down her pen, her face impassive.

Birdie realised for the first time just how young the woman on the other side of the plywood desk was. [...]

"Thank you for coming in today, Ms Brown. You can expect to hear from the Home Office¹⁵ in the next twelve to fifteen days outlining the results of –"

165 "Wait –" Birdie clutched the edge of her chair. Was that it? She hadn't had the chance to defend herself. All she had done was answer some banal questions. That couldn't be it, they couldn't send her back –

"Yes?"

170 *I am seventy years old. I bin here since I was seven. Wi was invited, an wi made dis place our home. It was hard, no lie – dere were times when I wanted to guh back, and dere was times I wished wi had never stepped foot on dis rhated island. But mi family is here. Mi whole life is here.*

"Ms Brown?"

Jamaica nah mi home. How can yuh sit dere and say it is? How can yuh think to send an old woman back to a place shi nah seen since shi was a girl? How can yuh be so cruel?

175 "Ms Brown, if you have nothing to add –"

Please. Don't send me back.

Birdie found herself on the steps to the building. A man pushed past her, grunting an apology without making eye contact. Somewhere in the depths of her handbag her mobile phone vibrated; another missed call from her daughter, each voicemail increasing in agitation.

¹³ Jamaican fruit

¹⁴ small bird

¹⁵ *Home Office*: government department dealing with immigration

180 Birdie had convinced Carmen not to come. She couldn't afford to take a day off work, Birdie had said. The twins needed to stay in school. And she could handle it by herself, couldn't she? It was just a formality. Her claim to stay in the country she called home couldn't be refuted, surely.

Home.

Birdie stood on the steps and wept.

(2021)