

OONYA KEMPADOO

Two Chapters from *Tide Running*

Rain Out'a Season

Now in the middle'a this dry season, the sky set-up. Sea set-up here too, out on Plymouth Point rocks. Rain coming. From all the heat that pass a'ready and scorch the land, rain now looking to come. In the middle'a dry season. Nuthing have time nor place now, not even God can control he business no more. And the sea like it. Watch it chipping 'eself with the breeze. As the sky damp down and get darker, is so the sea copying, waiting. Rile-up and wicked, more ready for the rain than the sky 'self. I stoop under the rock ledge, out'a the wind and set to watch a senseless thing happen. Rain in the middle'a dry season. The turnin' trees and yellow hills get ketch by surprise. Stand-up with they eyes wide open and clothes strip off, no shelter to run to. A pirogue butting the waves, hustling to get in, a few birds wild, skittling past, fighting back the wind. Sea turn up 'e colours sharper, deeper and lighter stripes. And then the rain start sweeping. Just a few drops pelting here but a sheet coming steady from a far ways out. Closing down the sea, rushing coming in with a breeze fanning in front, making them trees dig they toes in the ground, bracing, naked and frighten, mouth open to bawl but no sound coming out. Grey rocks in front'a me turn wet black. Sand-rocks soaking in the drops, crabs scamplng down into the water. Sea send out some mighty big waves, raise-up and rolling in fast, racing to reach the land and soak it before the rain. But this rain sheeting in, suck out all the strength from the sea, all colour from everything.

Lashing coming, overtake them waves and whip the land. Trees taking licks, streaks raining blows on hills disappearing quick, gone. Only white and grey humps left, and the stinging rain voice that drown out even the sea. Just the rocks close-up scrouch down with me. Black shiny ones outside crying. Little rivers waggling away loose bits'a sand. Can hardly see the water toes at the end'a the rocks, peeping out from under the white blanket, floating up and down. And the rain shushing, slicing and shushing with the wind behind it. Chicken flesh grow on me skin, little bumps raise-up. Ice run from me foot right up to me ears. A shiver. In this cold whiteness the sea come like a dead body. Dark, grey and swell'n, rain pocking holes in 'e skin, floating it and sliding it round. Dead feet bumping the rocks and another sheet'a rain fan past on its way to cover down the hills. A coffin shroud. Chicken skin.

This kind'a deadliness is a strange one. Come to show you how small you is. Or how it can take you, just so. Wiping out near everything you can see, that you know is there, making up things out'a water and air. White and grey feelings come to jumbie you. Shushing, cloaking down you brain till you can't tell what time gone, how long you dead and drifting, floating with glass eyes open and rain beating on them. Me leg ketch cramp, I shift and straighten it out in front'a me.

As it come, so the rain going, lifting off the whiteness as it leaving, ribbons dribbling past. Shreds and shadows left in the creases'a hills, between rocks, still whispering shush. White-rice grains'a rain falling silent and straight down now, see them slowing 'gainst the colours coming back out. Wind gone with the rain. Sea sulksing and li'l dripping trickling sounds waking up round me. One'a the crabs peep over the top of a rock. Suckershells crackling, drinking. Hills showing up theyselves, yellow brighter. The trees with they skin darken wet, trying to lift up they green. But none couldn'a figure the reason why. Where the rain come from now, where it going?

Our Worship Sir

Was in Court Number Two I had to go and waste my time, up in front, close behind a jacket mister who busy-looking, turn-page reading and pulling he fat nose. The room small, like a classroom and the teacher sitting up in the box with a old fan by him. Dwarfie school desk and chairs on one side, scratches all over the benches, corners rubbed down by nervy hands, varnish wear-off the edges. The place smell hot and dusty like a classroom too. Only thing missing is chalk. No use, nuh.

‘Gilbert Ramsey! Gilbert Ramsey! No appearance, Your Worship.’

‘Pauline George! Pauline George! No appearance, Your Worship.’

‘Twenty-ninth’a June.’ Teacher look at the lady sitting behind a desk by him.

She look up at him and raise-up her pencil-line eyebrows. ‘Yes, I hear you.’ She keep them raise-up and write the date, scratching she head with the top’a the pen, fingertips stubby and round-off from housework like Lynette own.

‘Terence Samuel! Terence Samuel! Present, Your Worship.’

The fella come and stand next to me, Mr Jacket still reading and writing on some yellow paper.

Teacher flap he hand to the police by him. ‘Prosecutor?’

‘PROSECUTOR’ mark-up on he fat black book so everybody could know is he own. Voice deep-deep to fit a man looking like he. Short and red, he head like a rock, chin square-off and forehead squash down he nose. Big Pro. He voice come from down by he belt, boom round in he broad chest spanning he uniform button tight.

‘. . . Unable to proceed today . . .’

Miss Eyebrow inspec’ing she big grubby book, taking she own sweet time.

‘. . . Come back on the twenty-sixth’a June . . .’

The fella go back outside fumesing. They wasting people time.

A rough-up fella on the bench next to me. Scar-up all over he head and neck. Piece’a ears gone, a old tom cat - head and neck in one, shoulders tough and thick. A damage-look in he small eyes, like he brain beat-up too. Take he two big-skin hands and scrub he shave-head and face, set back looking out the louvres.

Outside, the sea chilling, looking close like a wall going up to the sky. Hot sun scorching rooftops in town to a red tin desert. Bus sounds and music from the market square, stifled and smothered. Fort Granby outline ‘gainst the sky and, lower down, the tall church

tower with the balls balance right on the end'a the points. A old lady come out'a she kitchen squinting and go down she back step, one at a time. Heat whiten she hair more and dance like glass off she galvanise roof. Broad bright green banana leaf waggle 'gainst the louvres'a the courthouse, dodging a hot breeze drifting in - the only living colour 'part from the sea. Tom Cat stretch and yawn. Time stretch 'eself too.

Next case is Tom Cat own. When he name call and he stand up, the back'a the class start sniggling and holding in laughs. He pants tight tight and pinch-up in he bumsey. Crook he knees and pull it out, fix he balls and spin a finger in he nosehole.

Like all'a them know Tom Cat. Big Pro smiling, call the wic'ness – is a old man, all excitey, getting on 'bout what Tom Cat do he, t'ief he food, all kind'a thing and how he go 'chop he up'. Big Pro cool he down, them jokers in the back laughing.

In a silence, when teacher busy writing, Tom Cat let out one loud belch. Miss Eyebrow duck she head giggling and Tom Cat start fanning. Fanning the stink belch slow over to Big Pro. Set them off laughing again. Teacher patience done. Wasting people time. The wic'ness carrying on again. And all when he finish done and they shoo he from the stand, they only give Tom Cat a small charge – a two-fifty – and tell he 'he get off light'. Tom Cat vex 'cause he want a 'lickle two-months' instead, he like it inside the townhouse. Brace heself back on the bench steupsing and watching the sea.

Mornin' dragging 'eself into the next case.

'Lucille Smith!' A woman get up from a bench behind.

Teacher take off he spectacle, rub he eye and wave she to the stand. She squeeze past, brushing she bumsey on Big Pro desk to step up onto the small box.

'Hold the Bible with yuh right hand.' Miss Eyebrow say from behind she desk.

Pro get up slow, scraping the chair and running he finger inside he belt, clearing he chest. Teacher put back on he spectacle and look out the window. He is a Indian-mix man, must'e from Trinidad. Hair stand up, comb back sharp, make he look stric'er. Serious face, eyes quick, he hand tired'a writing.

'Tell the Magistrate your name and where you live,' Pro rumble, swelling he chest and rolling he hand towards Teacher.

She start, Teacher writing down, the woman talking and looking up at the ceiling, roll she eye to Pro when she finish.

Pro breathe in deep. Important. 'Do you remember the day of the sixth of October 1998?'

‘Sixth’ a October?’ The woman rolling she head quite back now. Pull-in both’ a she lip and bite them, look down, check each side’ a she jeans-pants.

Big Pro turn to her.

‘It’ ink so, heh.’ Shame and smiling, getting on like a li’ l girl. She almost big-size like Pro. Hair paste back neat, face shining with Vaseline, t-shirt with a gold print spanning she waist big as she bosom.

‘You think so?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah I rememba. Un-humn yes.’

‘Where were you at six-thirty a.m. that day?’

‘Six-t’irty in de evening? I was home.’

‘No, A.M. In the morning.’

‘Oh A.M, right.’ Tap she head, hold on the stand and brace forward. ‘Yes, in de morning,’ she get it, ‘I was home. Dat was when Georgie come and tell me dis fella break-in me shop. Georgie does live by me, he ketch . . .’

‘Hold up! Hold up.’

Them police in the back chucking small laugh at the woman stupidity. Big Pro heself smiling at Teacher and swelling up he chest to continue.

‘You can only say what you saw, only that.’

She watching the fella next to me and he stare she back, bold-face.

‘Where is your shop located? . . . So it’s part of a big building . . . And the building is made up of what?’

‘Wall. Is a wall building.’ She look at Pro like he should know better, he must know the concrete building heself but Pro looking at Miss Eyebrow and they shaking they heads together.

‘And the shop is in this building? How many openings?’

‘Opening? I didn’t leave nuthing open.’

Gaffles from the back.

‘No. Doors.’ Roll her on with he hand.

‘Well, it have a sliding door to the front and two half’ a door to the back.’

She feel good with she answer, nod and plunk she hands behind she waist. Look down at Pro sideways. She ready again but ‘two half’ a door’ echoing round the back’ a the room. A police hold up three fingers and slapping the bench. Pro smiling round. Teacher have to watch outside for patience.

‘So how many doors? Two half’a doors is the top and bottom of one door and the one in front makes two?’

‘Yes!’ Like this big police couldn’t count. ‘Two half’a door . . .’ she pointing top and bottom, ‘. . . and one in front . . .’ thumb she hand over a shoulder, ‘. . . two door!’ She stance waiting, eyes turn up to the ceiling.

‘Now, the doors, how do you secure them?’

She wing a look at he and don’t answer.

‘How do you lock them to secure them?’

‘I does just lock them.’ She do a key action in front. ‘Is a sliding door, I just lock it.’ Turn she key again, more firm.

‘No, *how* do you lock it?’

She realise he simple now, that’s why he smiling so stupid to heself and the fellas in the back laughing at he. Turn square to him, take she hand and draw it out. ‘You does have to pull one side across so, to meet the otha side . . .’

Everybody laughing ‘cept Teacher and Mr Jacket.

‘. . . And then you does just lock it.’ She turn the key again. So simple. Turn up she hands.

‘*What* are you locking it with? A padlock, a chain?’

‘A key! You does lock it with a key!’ Do it slow so he can see clearly. Teacher glaring at Big Pro.

‘Okay, okay. And the back door, the same?’

‘Yeah. A next key.’

‘Okay, so the locks are built-in. And what is the front door made of?’

‘Glass. Is a glass door.’

‘The whole door?’

‘Yes. The whole door is glass. Is a glass door.’ Draw a big box with she two hand.

‘Anything else the door is made up of?’

Teacher take off he spectacle and put down he pen.

‘Is a sliding door. It make out’a glass. The whole thing is glass, you could see plain through!’ She can’t believe that Pro don’t know what a sliding door look like. And them jokers starting up again in the back.

‘But what is *around* the glass!’ He smiling again at Eyebrow. ‘The frame, what is the frame made out of? Wood?’

She give up trying with him, look to Teacher for help. 'How it can make out'a wood? Is a sliding door. I sure everybody inside'a here know what a sliding door make out'a. Is not wood.'

Teacher refuse to look in she eye.

'Well, what?'

'A silva t'ing what does be round them kind'a door!'

'A metal?'

She fed up. 'Yeah. A silva metal.' Paint it heavy-hand round the door. Done with that.

'Okay, a glass door with a metal frame.' Pro trying to get back serious.

Teacher pick-up he pen but he ain' writing. He looking at Big Pro like he sorry for him. Mr Jacket was listening all the time, acting as if he reading, now he watch Teacher and turn-up he two hand at him. Teacher fedupsie look pass him straight and go back to the sea.

'The back door now. What is that made . . .'

The stupidity I have to stay here and listen at, just to wait for mine to call.

' . . . Do you know Wayne Martin?'

'Look, he right dere.' She fly out a hand at the fella. She waiting again but Teacher take enough.

Mr Jacket stand up. 'Your Worship . . .'

'Yes, I think this is wasting time. The other witness is here?'

'No sir.' Pro mumble, fingering he hat.

'Well, we'll continue this another time . . . and talk to your witness before . . .'

Flap he hand from Pro to the lady, ' . . . try and . . .'

Pro hold he hat and look down like a small boy. Teacher still flapping he hand and fretting. 'Come down from there . . . You can go.'

She still waiting.

'You can go and sit down.' Chase her from the stand and close he eyes, turn to Miss Eyebrow for her to find a date.

Pro and Miss Eyebrow and the rest'a the class shame for the woman, how she can't even answer a few question. But she ain' shame, she don't feel no how. Must be Pro that do something wrong with he big stupid self.

Midday reach. After I setting there all mornin', all they do is to call me name, make me stand up, Pro rumble something and then they tell me I have to come back again. Again.

I have to come and waste time. Set down on a hard bench, in a choky room breathing full'a hot people and listen to all'a that. For a stupid t-shirt. I have to come back again.

Oonya Kempadoo: *Tide Running*

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A brief description from the author

Tide Running is a portrait of some contemporary Caribbean characters and the predicament of a young society looking to America for its fantasies and heroes. It tries to raise unsettling questions about relationships, wealth and responsibility.

The tragic hero is Cliff - a seemingly stereotypical, beautiful but inarticulate young black man. Cliff and his brother Ossie have grown up in Plymouth, Tobago, their lives turning on the axis of small town life: trying to be cool, young men fooling outside Masta Barbar's shop, gangsta-rap blasting, *Baywatch* and 'Oprea Winfree' interrupted by the preacher-man's street calls, a morning's fishing, sex – and the sea.

Then a young couple and their child arrive on the island. Bella, a Caribbean woman and Peter, an Englishman come to live in the designer house on the hill. And it is there, drawn by the cool 'flim-style' house, that the harsh brittle life of urban Plymouth is kept briefly at bay. There, in the midst of their life of travel, photography and art, that desires and tensions deepen and Cliff's dream-run begins.

Trying to live the lyrics of rap, dub and reggae, he starts stealing, joy-riding, the fast life – guns and music in his mind, the local drug dealers and 'the boys' to impress. The reality, is 'nuthing doing' days to fill, repetitive court scenes for petty offences and the cowboy law of local police. And then a darker turn to events. Was this destined to happen, is it the individual or the society and what part has the relationship played in this?

The first part of *Tide Running* is written in Cliff's voice, the second in Bella's and the third goes from one to the other. The following short chapters, *Rain Out'a Season* and *Our Worship Sir* occur at the turning point of Cliff's behaviour, a restlessness appearing.