

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

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

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,

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

'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.'

‘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.

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.

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*

Picador: London, May 2001. ISBN 033 0482 521. Hardback £12.99

Note: These extracts are for use on this website only and must not be reproduced for commercial purposes elsewhere.

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.