

KATHERINE JAMIESON



# Ain't Ready for No Man

A woman discovers herself in Guyana.



AS A CHILD I WAS HAUNTED BY THE “SAVE THE CHILDREN” ad campaign. A block of simple text, a black and white photo. *In the time it takes you to finish reading this paragraph, a child will have died of starvation.* The children were my age, dark-skinned, dressed in slippers, stained shorts, nothing. Babies screamed, their mouths stretched open for the food that would never come. As I began reading, a girl would stare out at me with a hungry, little smile. *Here I am,* she would say, *still alive.* And, being a literal child, when I finished reading I would think, *now she’s dead.*

Children were dying in Ethiopia, hundreds of them in camps, their bellies distended so they looked fat, like they could tip over on their skinny legs. They lived with their starving mothers and fathers, starving brothers and sisters. On TV I saw them move in slow motion, too tired to wave

away the sucking flies in the corners of their eyes. I cried when I heard they had to pick the grains out of animal shit just to stay alive. But when I read, *For the price of a cup of coffee a day, this child could eat for a week*, I felt the soft cushions of an armchair holding me, heard the birds singing in the backyard, my dog barking. My parents drank coffee every morning—if they stopped, how many more weeks could she live?

As I sat reading, you were running through the streets of Georgetown, sucking half-eaten candies you'd picked off the sidewalk. You were four years older than I, your worn housedress flouncing on your knees as you dodged chickens and stray dogs, trailed mango peels in the dust. When I lived in your city, I imagined that I could turn my head and see you: a phantom little girl playing in the pitted yards. Your singular look of concentration devoted to a grid drawn in the dirt with a stick, your thin brown arm poised to drop a stone, dead into the center.

When we met, I saw the shadows of this past on you, but you had little use for it by then. You were successful, college-educated, wielding the power to grant money to the poor who were no longer you. But I probed: I was still the girl who had sat in the armchair, worrying about girls like you dying. I wanted to know the end of the story. Twenty years later I had come to the country of “a child dies every thirty seconds of malnutrition.” *Make me understand what happened*, I insisted. *Tell me how you didn't die. How you're alive today for me to love you.*

Guyanese do not talk loosely of the past. You tolerated my American curiosity, though perhaps you suspected it was borne of too much food. *Girl, like you love ask questions!* you teased me. Why recount a catalogue of deprivations? What could be surprising? It did not seem unique to you. When we spoke of your childhood, I felt as I did hearing Creolese, the English dialect of Guyana. I struggled to wrap my mind around this language that was so different from my own,

but was, in fact, my own. I finally resorted to begging for the parts to guess at the whole. *How do you spell that?* I asked my students, my friends, the person on the phone giving me directions. And all of them would attempt the impossible, struggling to give me letters for an unwritten language. *D... O... U... W?... G?...* Their voices trailed off, apologizing. *Me sorry, Miss, me ehn't really know.*

So it was with you, humoring me with stories of the past. You gave me the facts you remembered: the crowded home, the violent father, the grandmother who hated your skin darker than her Portuguese white. But when I posed the questions, *Why? Why was it this way?* you simply shook your head. These things I had to accept: your first tongue could not be written, and your childhood could not be explained.

Still, I forged on. I pushed for the details, the off-moments, the memories you thought unimportant. I was like an investigator recreating a scene, the scene of your invention. Why did I push? Because I adored you, and thought the way to love you better lay in understanding this history. Because I wanted to know this country you sprang from where I now lived. Or maybe your life was just a peephole, a partial view into another world, where I could look on safely. Please excuse my voyeurism, my demands, my curiosity. I was young and so were you. But here is what I gathered. Here are the spellings you invented for me, and the words I made them spell.

To begin, I desired a photo of you from childhood, but none exist. I was jealous of your siblings who had known you then, in your pressed school uniform with the prefect badge. *She was always different*, your older brother Lelord told me, *even when she was small*. I envied the woman we met in Matthew's Ridge. Yes, she had known old Lam, the Chinese man who lived on the hill. *That was my grandfather*, you told her. She scrutinized your face and I watched as she located you, the little girl I would never know. *I remember you*, she nodded, unraveling the twenty years since you'd first stepped

off the boat into this isolated jungle town. She smiled fondly at a girl's face I couldn't see. *You were small, small when ya come last time.*

Frustrated, I tried to shrink you down too. Your adult features on a tiny girl's head, your body loose and skinny. I flattened your breasts, straightened your hips and there you were at my waist, looking up at me, your billowing hair soft in my hand. *Strange for a child to have eyes like little coals,* I thought. *Strange, you thought, for a white lady to ask so many questions.*

You were born on an island named Wakenaam in the vast Essequibo River, where the family had moved for your father, Joseph, to run a logging concession. *But where exactly were you born? In a hospital, in the house?* I wanted to picture you entering the world, but you just shook her head, laughing. *Who cares, I'm here now.* Because your family did not have money for cow's milk you were weaned on coconut water, the cloudy amniotic fluid of a towering tree.

You were the last of eighteen children by your father, a fact you first told me first by the *hors d'oeuvres* table at a party. I almost dropped my paper plate. By the time you were born, you had siblings in their forties, grown brothers and sisters with their own children. Your mother Rowena, your father's second wife, already had five boys and a girl. And it was hard coming last, your father getting old, never enough powdered milk for tea in the morning. *I've had enough black tea in this lifetime,* you always told me, adding cream, spoonfuls of sugar.

Joseph was handsome, fair-skinned, half-Portuguese and half-Indian, an alcoholic at your birth. After you appeared, he stopped drinking suddenly, without explanation. He named you, as he named all his children, after characters in movies. Majestic, melancholy names: Aloma, Cordell, Rohan, Lelord, Hilrod, Gregory. You became Ardis.

Nights I stayed with you we slept together under a gauzy mosquito net that blurred the moon. We secured it to the

ground with massive white dictionaries you'd bought used, excited when you found the old set with the softest onionskin paper. One morning I pulled a volume out and opened to the A's, seeking *Ardis*. *It won't be in there, monkey*, you said, still sleepy, *it's my name*.

*It's in here*, I said, flipping through pages that threatened to tear, my eyes gliding past *arctic*, *arcturus*, *arcane* to find, finally, one written fact of you. The dictionary was authoritative; you respected it. I loved telling you what your name meant.

The first, a variation, *Ardisia*, *a bush that gives hard, red berries and grows in East India and the West Indies*. There was a little picture with this one, lines for the branches, little berries we had to imagine red. The second, from the Greek, *point of an arrow*. And so I recognized you as hard-won, like those few small berries, and sharp, not just the arrow itself but its winnowed tip. Your father had named you well, for a future he would never know. You tried to find *Katherine* for me, but it was only a name.

Joseph was smiling in the one water-stained photo I saw of him at your brother's house on rainy afternoon. I noticed his perfectly straight teeth. *Dentures*. *He pulled out all his teeth once when he had a toothache*, you told me, laughing. *So he would never have a toothache again*, he said. I looked at the photograph again, tried to find his eyes through the tinted glasses. *Pulled them out himself? With what? No anesthesia?* I asked. *Don't worry about it*, you told me, *the man was crazy*. Another time he poured buckets of paint from an upstairs window on a neighbor who had crossed him. He beat you with planks and telephone cords and hands. He beat your mother, threw a bike at her, shoved a pumpkin at her head. When he locked her out of the house in the rainy season she had to sleep under the house. But he kept you in school when Rowena wanted you home scrubbing floors. You guessed it was because he thought you would support him in old age. Still, you thanked him most for that.

Rowena was your mother, a half-African, half-Chinese woman. Standing next to Joseph she is dark-skinned and plump, beaming. She balances her first grandchild on her hip, a kitchen apron tied on her waist. *I've left myself undone*, she would say at the end of the day, happy to put her family ahead of herself. *She loved her boys*, you told me when we saw the smudged faces of children on the street. You watched them gnaw the bigger shares of meat each night at dinner. *She always kept us clean and pressed*, when we saw the smudged faces of children on the street. *We were poor, but we never looked as poor as we were*.

You remember a happy childhood: cajoling your brothers to play games with you, learning to read, borrowing books from an old man on your road. Your father visiting you in the hospital when you were sick, the roar of his motorbike engine as he pulled up outside your window every day. You remember a terrible childhood: beatings, fights. Your father slapping your mother, throwing a pot of food across the backyard. Watching your dinner fly into the dirt, the pot dented, another night with an empty stomach.

Our first date was in an empty Indian movie theater. We sat alone in the high balcony by the fans, clasping our hands tightly in the dark. Later, we went to a small roadside restaurant in town, a slight breeze rippling across our legs. We touched hands and knees under the table, laughed at the fat, drunk men slamming dominoes. You looked so beautiful: our secret was hot in my mind.

Across the street we heard boys yelling at each other, beginning to fight. We were far enough away to be safe, surrounded by the light of the restaurant. They yelled threats I could hardly understand. I did not notice your face tightening until you said, *That's how my family was*. On a trip to Kwakwani, we heard a man and woman fighting outside our window, their curses getting louder and louder. I was holding you, my knees curled into your knees; I could not see your

face. *My parents were like this, Mommy yelling at Daddy until she got licks.* We closed the window to shut out their noise.

Sometimes I would mine for the past, pressing my unanswerable *why's* on you, and sometimes the past would push itself between us. The night you told me you had lived in an orphanage I thought you were kidding. *Do you think this is the kind of thing you joke about?* you whispered to me in the dark. You were not angry, just sad. *No, I just can't believe we've known each other a year and you haven't told me.* Stroking my hair: *Well, here, I'm telling you now.*

You whispered the story to me, as if ashamed. *I was young, two or three, and my parents were too poor to keep me. Reverend Sun Myung Moon had set up a church in Georgetown with an orphanage. They sent Aloma and me there to live so we would have enough food to eat. On Sundays Mommy and Daddy visited. We sang in a choir called the "Seraphim" and watched The Sound of Music, over and over.* There had been a picture of you singing in the angel choir, now lost. I felt this from the beginning: you were always an orphan.

You returned to your parents' home a few years later. You grew up to be beautiful and then the boys came around. One visited you on his bike, prompting Rowena to emerge from the house with a warning. *Y'all listen to dis, she said, Ardis ain't ready fuh no man, ya heah!* I could see it clearly: your mother's hands on her hips, you skulking back to the house, the chastened boy weaving off down the road. *What did your mother say when the boy came?* I asked you over and over. You imitated the same sing-song cadence, until finally I could hear Rowena and agree with her. *Ya ain't ready fuh no man!* I liked to say to you. But you're ready for me.

*And when did you know you loved women?* I asked. There had been no language for this. One morning on your way to school, you heard someone calling from an upstairs balcony and looked up, expecting what? To run to the store, maybe, deliver a message. It was the code of law to be respectful of

adults; you could be beat for less. A woman stood above you wearing a sheer robe, silhouetted against the darkness of the doorway. She looked, what? Beautiful, yes. Young, but older than you, and you were no longer a child. Her robe was low between her breasts, and she seemed to be telling you something you had never heard before. *I was surprised. I had never seen a woman stand like this.* You saw her desire. And, though it would be years before it was safe to admit it, you also saw your own.

When you were sixteen, Joseph immigrated to New York City to be with another woman. *That was his true love, I think his last years were happy with her.* Rowena got cancer soon after, and you slept in the hospital bed with her every night. *She cried out for him until she died,* you said, shaking your head at this kind of love. Your father died a few years later, in your early twenties.

Now all you had was brothers and sisters, but some of them were already lost. Rohan had immigrated “backtrack” to the States, illegally; you had heard he was in jail. Cordell had tried to kill himself and then disappeared; you assumed he was dead. Hilrod always had a new business idea; you lost money believing in him. It was only through your siblings that I could imagine your childhood. They showed its liabilities, while you showed almost nothing. You showed only what you wanted to show.

I met Aloma once in your living room. She was as soft and plump as you were sinewy and strong. Girlish, quiet, mother to two boys with different fathers, she hardly spoke. She was there for money, like most other times. After your father’s death she had cried to you, *he troubled me*, those few, coded words telling of years of molestation. *She was home alone with him after I went to school. He was older and couldn’t find lovers as easily as before. He must have come after her then.* I paused, afraid to ask. *Never you?* I asked. She shook her head. *Why*



*never you?* Again you won the coin toss, got your life. *Why not you?*

Of your siblings, you were the only one to pass the A-levels, studying all summer from a book a teacher gave you. I went to your college graduation in a muddy field by the Atlantic coast, your flapping robes the colors of the Guyana flag. At twenty-seven you had become the girl in the arm-chair, out of danger. But there was no need for black and white pictures, threatening text; you knew this story well enough already. Your nieces and nephews were those faces staring out at you from your own family photos. You watched the patterns beginning to repeat. *She likes to beat too much*, you said about Aloma after watching her with her boys. You saw that there was another girl who needed saving (there is always another girl who needs saving) and imagined that you could help her.

For Fayola, you imagined a different life. Gregory had married Hassina, a Muslim woman, and they had had nine children together. Fayola was twelve years old, the age when Guyanese children take the exam to qualify for secondary school. You decided to take her into your home, tutor her so she could pass the test. All of Hassina's other daughters had been married off young to men in the islands so they could send back money to the family. You wanted to help Fayola have a different life.

We visited them in Albuoystown on a bright Sunday afternoon in May, traveling by mini-bus from your home close to the Embassies, until we reached their sunken porch. Hassina greeted us with a child on her breast, two at her knee. The house was dark and musty with clothes piled in the corners and mattresses lining the floor. An older girl ran to buy cold drinks for us at the corner store. Fayola stood by as you and Hassina talked, and I wandered out to the back to play with the younger children. A tiny girl, two or three, kept running

up to me and touching my hair then running away and laughing. She had long lashes, lovely brown eyes. When she turned to run I noticed open sores on her back and thighs.

*Look at her back,* I said when you came to find me. You saw your niece's wounds, her giggling, smooth face. *Should we go to the clinic, bring back cream for her?* I asked. You shook your head. *She'll get them again, there's no point.* You could only save one girl at a time.

But which girl could grow up to save herself? I glanced at the baby girl in Hassina's arms as we left. Could she be another Ardis? You had been unlikely, number eighteen. But Aloma's infant daughter would not be the one; she died of dehydration later that year. And Fayola was not the one; you soon discovered that she couldn't read. When you went to comb her hair you found a smooth layer on top, a mess of ratted knots below. It took you hours to comb down to the scalp, to find the root of the hair. She didn't want to study, wasn't serious about school. There was nothing you could do. You weren't a mother, never wanted to be. You sent her back.

I return to the ad to understand you, the black and white photo of the girl who should have died in a paragraph's time. The words told the truth. Others have died around you, or lived lives bound by suffering. The words lied; you are here today. Behind her hungry, little smile lies something else: a pure, grinding determination for a life like the reader's, sitting in her armchair thousands of miles away. Not just her food, or her pity, or her coffee money, but her chance to live as she wanted, love as she wanted.

As a child, you studied death also. After school, you went alone to the funeral parlor near your school and stood with the mourners around the open casket. You liked to be there when it was time for the viewing, to see what death looked like. You approached death methodically, unafraid; death was your rival. Poverty, abuse, disease, none of these had gotten you so far, but you knew that death was a worthy opponent.

In those days, you watched it and you mastered it, you looked back at me from the page, smiling with a different kind of hunger altogether.



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