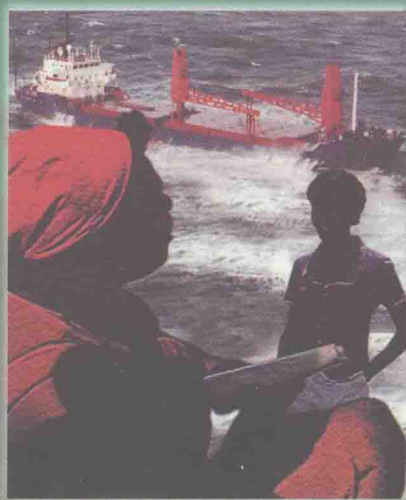


Wake Rasta

AND OTHER STORIES



Garfield Ellis

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Rasta

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FOR FATHER

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HARTEL

I remember the Thursday evening I went to see him after it had rained, for my weekly school and maintenance money. I was twelve years old. He came from the back room of the bar – the private back room where only special patrons were allowed. He shuffled to the front room, and across the floor to me at the door where I peeped in.

A woman lingered behind at the entrance to the private room – allowing him time to see me, giving way to the barmaid's request and glowing, knowing stare. He came through the door to meet me and we leaned together against the wall and watched as the jolly buses stopped and started as they slowly ground northwards in the after-rain muck of Orange Street. He smelled of white rum and grease and cheap perfume. His face was grave.

I leaned next to him and placed my foot against the wall. He lit a cigarette and we stood there in silence for a while. He nudged me and I dropped my hands to his as he quietly passed some money to me, unseen by the prying eyes of patrons passing in and out of the bar and from the numerous pickpockets that must have been watching us. We had been doing this for several years now. We had gotten it down to an art. I took it quickly and felt it – felt the size of the bills, felt their weight and texture, then slipped them into my pocket knowing it was not enough.

He turned to go.

"What about my pocket money?" I asked.

"Take some out of that," he told me, dropping the cigarette to the street.

"But that is for mama," I told him.

"Things kinda short this week," he said dryly. He placed his hands in his pocket and turned to lean on the wall once more.

"But I saving to buy something," I told him.

"Things short this week."

I half sighed, half nodded disappointedly. He sighed too and produced a dollar bill from his pocket and placed it in my hands. I choked and told him thanks.

"The Common Entrance results came out yesterday," I told him.

"Yes?"

" Yes. You passed?"

"No, but it was my first time. I will pass next year."

"It don't matter what time you take it."

"But only one person, from my class passed."

"Why you weren't the one?" He spoke hoarsely and looked down at me for the first time – his features soft in the lessening light, his beard half grey, his eyebrows bushy over soft eyes – "Why you weren't the one?"

I fell silent. We gazed again into the street. Then I stammered, "Remember you promised me a watch for my birthday next week."

"I'll give it to you when you pass the Common Entrance."

The woman appeared at his side. He nudged her a soon - come. "You better try catch the bus before the rain come again," he told me. "You better try catch the bus."

"Yes sir. "

I walked slowly away and glanced back to see the woman now beside him standing where I stood. They were both looking at me. For a minute we stood there all three looking at each other across the musky, smelly, darkening evening. She turned suspiciously to speak to him and he tried to hush her by answering secretively. But their words were harsh enough to cut the path to my ear.

"But him don't favor you. Is really you son?"

"So them say," he whispered, "so them say."

I remember too the Friday I was to go with him to his home so we could go to the country together for the week-end. I remember that it was raining that evening too. I

dressed in my new Tarzan shoes and my grey terilin dress pants. My mother loaned me her plastic shopping bag and I stuffed my two suits of pants and shirts inside. I reached the bar at five o' clock and waited for him.

I waited for four hours but he did not come. I asked his old friend the other mechanic who worked with him at the JOS garage. He said he saw him around five but he did not know where he had gone. I told him I was to go to his house that night and wondered if he could take me there. He said he could not. I asked him to tell me where my father lived and which bus went there so I could go there myself. He told me he did not know.

I would have asked the waitress with the compassionate, knowing eyes, but boys of twelve were not permitted to cross into the bar. I took the last bus home and knocked my mother awake at twelve midnight. I did not cry.

I passed my Common Entrance the next year. Passed it the second time I took it. I passed for Kingston College. I was playing marbles in the street when Charlie, my step-father told me. Said he was playing dominoes when someone showed him the Gleaner. Said he left the game to come and tell me congratulations. I took the Gleaner from Charlie and ran to show my mother. She cried. She was cooking in the kitchen at the time and after she looked at it she cried. I took it aside and wiped the flour from the page, I tore it carefully out and folded it neatly – to save it for him. I looked up to see my mother still at the kitchen door, flour on her face where she had tried to dry her tears. She was looking sadly at me.

Thursday I took the paper to him. Outside the bar. He came early that evening. This time he came from down the street where the staff bus had dropped him. And I watched him shuffle through the crowd with his little black bag that held his lunch and now held his work clothes. It was not raining that day.

He shuffled to a halt and asked me how I did. I passed the folded paper to him and smiled the broadest smile I could remember. He took it from me, dropped his bag to the side-

walk along the wall of the bar and opened it slowly. He saw my name circled there. Circled in red and bold. He said nothing. He slowly nodded, folded it and passed it back to me.

"What this mean now?" he asked.

"I pass the Common Entrance, you don't see, I passed."

"Yes, so me see."

"I will be going to KC in September."

"That is good."

"You promised me a watch."

"I promised you a watch?" He may have spoken with incredulity. I do not remember.

"Yes, you promised."

"Maybe next week. Things not so strong this week, maybe bonus time."

"I soon come." He passed into the bar to count out my money in secret. I stood as stiff as board with disappointment. I walked to the edge of the sidewalk and looked into the water running down from the Haewood street market, clear yet dirty and stink. I dropped the folded page there.

He took me to his house one day to spend a week of my holidays. Everybody else was going to spend time with their fathers I told him. He took me to his house. A rented room with a bed a dresser and a dinette set and a tall regal woman, black as coal who walked like a dancer. Her name was Inez. She was an Obeah woman who worshipped at the Poco temple. There was no place for me on the bed, so they spread a sheet on the ground. I slept there. I became very sick. They rubbed me with oil and told me to tell my mother to take me out. My mother did not believe in Obeah. She said God or doctors would cure me. My mother said she would never send me back there. She did not want him to kill her pickney.

I ran away from home once to be with him, to sleep on the floor at the foot of his bed. Though it made me sick. He asked me why I came. I told him I had left high school and could not get a job. They were tired of me there, it was time for me to get a job, they were tired of feeding me. I got in a fight with Charlie. I told him he was the man of the yard, he

is the one who should find a job. My mother threw my things out the door. Said if I was man, to fight, I was man to live on my own. It was time I stopped taking bread from the mouths of the other children. So I left.

He told me I could stay. Inez gave me another blanket on the floor. I got sick again. She rubbed me with oil and took me to the Poco church. They put me in a circle and danced around me – in the circle around a fire in the center. Then they balm me and stretched me out on the floor while they played drums and the women danced and the lights swayed and the fire burned.

My mother came for me after two weeks. She did not know where he lived, but she met him at work at the JOS office and threatened to lock him up if he tried to steal her pickney. He asked her if she wanted him to turn me away when I needed somewhere to sleep. He knew she would have eventually come for me. He knew her well.

From the bathroom I heard them as they enter the yard.

"Where is my pickney?" I heard her ask.

Inez told her I was in the bathroom.

"Joseph. Joseph!" she called.

I came out wet, soap dripping from my hair – a little frightened.

"Dry off yourself and get your bags and come," she ordered.

He laughed. "She is your mother," he said.

She cut her eyes at him and told him to tell me again.

He took me aside and gave me five dollars. "You must obey your mother," he said. "Don't run away again. If you promise I will take you to the country to meet my mother."

I promised.

He did.

His mother was eighty years old. She lived in the hills of St. Thomas in a two room house. The kitchen was big and outside. The toilet was somewhere off in the bushes behind it. I met his eldest daughter too, she was older than my mother.

She lived with his mother in the little house with a daughter who was two years older than me, and a son Job, my age. He never told me about her, or about the other two who were married and lived further up in the village – who came hurriedly with their husbands and children with presents to meet their father's youngest child.

"Him don't look like you," they told him. "Him don' look like you at all. That's why you take so long to bring him."

"You sure him is yours?" his mother asked.

"So them say," he said.

"Well if you never go there they wouldn't call you name," she said. "All the same you great-grand-father did kinda have him complexion."

They took care of me. Job took me fishing and we hunted birds in his calaban. My sisters washed my clothes and cooked special foods for me. His mother told me stories of maroons and the struggles of her grandfather who fought with Paul Bogle. She gave me bread as hard as stone. I slept on crocus bags, with Job, on the floor. It was cold. It was very cold there. I got sick. I got very sick there. I got so sick my father took me home after just two weeks. I remember the night he took me home. My mother screamed when she saw me huddled, sneezing, crying, wheezing – wrapped in blankets, smelling of crocus bag and Rexo polish that the waters of the St. Thomas springs could not wash away.

She tore me from his hands. I fell prostrate on the floor. She would not let him touch me. It was Charlie who picked me up and took me to my bed. She did not let him in. She did not offer him a drink. She did not thank him for carrying me home. From my room I heard her screaming for him to go away. Screaming at him for trying to kill me. For trying to kill her pickney. I heard her tell him to leave, that she would call the police if he stayed. Not even Charlie could calm her that night. Then I heard the gate slam as he departed. And I heard my mother's final words, "I don't want you near my pickney again." And in the darkness listening, I wished he would stand up to her, I wished he would assert himself – be less unsure. Am I not his pickney too?

I had contracted Bronchitis. I was sick for six months and did not recover until I went to live with my mother's sister in Mandeville. They thought the air would do me good. I got a job there, in Mandeville and lived and worked there for seven years. I never saw him all that time.

I went to look for him one day. By now they had disbanded the JOS and had made him redundant. But I knew where to find him. He was still there, at the bar. Only now, since he had no job, he did not just come in the evenings, he was there all the time. Most of the times he would be sitting outside on a little chair, leaning lazily against the wall, looking out onto the streets where Jolly buses used to fight the garbage and the muck of Orange Street. Now there was no JOS. Now there were no more Jolly buses. Now there were mini-buses with loud angry men who have no time for bars. Who eat their lunches on the streets, men who are drivers conductors and mechanics all in one.

I saw him one last time as I passed with my wife, a year after we had married. He was sitting there, at the bar, leaning against the wall. A slight figure now, his beard grey, his eyes soft, his bushy eyebrows as white as a Barble Doves' breast. He said he missed me. Wondered how I did not come to look for him anymore. I told him I would try to see him as much as I could. The next time I passed he wasn't there. They said one day he just stopped coming.

Every now and then when my mother would come by, or we would be talking on the phone; she would ask casually, when was the last time I saw him. I would not know what to tell her, and I would mumble something like "I see him when I get a chance."

And she would mumble guiltily, "You must look for him you know, you must look for him, even though..." and her voice would always trail away as she would catch herself in the middle of confessing something. And somewhere in the back of my mind I wish she would get the courage to tell me the *hows* and *whys* and the *who* of what she must suspect I already know.

Every now and then he shuffles by in the smell of white

rum, cheap perfume, musky bars and stinking streets muddy after rain. I hear him in the echoes of the empty space, that gaping hole inside that fathers fill. I see him when I touch my children, when I hold them close, when they smile at me and my face is reflected in their eyes.

WAKE RASTA

[FOR BOTHER MARKS (JAH) MY FRIEND]

"Come we go rob the dread," the man said. "Come we go bruck him shop."

There were three of them; a man, a boy and a child. The man was only nineteen, he had killed before. The boy was fifteen, he had used a gun before ... he was almost a man. He had a cruel curl to his lips. When he spoke, he could have been seventeen, even twenty. "Come no." The child was but eleven.

It was about one o' clock or so in the morning. Monday had just begun to come around.

They had just come from the movies in Thunda's back yard down the lane and sat skewed on the lowest steps of the overhead bridge near the Pentecostal church.

The man pulled a large knife from his waist and began to hone it carefully on the concrete of the bridge. It made a grating sound. After a few strokes he stopped, wiped it against his pants, then tested its edge. He looked thoughtfully at the boy then he shifted his gaze beyond the bridge and the dark hills behind Zion Hill Lane. When he was a boy, he lived there. Way up beyond the hill, close to where a silver water tank stood out against the sky.

He never liked school. He loved the river. He wanted to be a fisherman like Rygin or Brownman from Zion Hill Lane. All he cared to do was roam the riverside and the cane fields and dive for sand fish when the river came down. At fifteen he knew fishing holes that few men knew. He knew what time to dive them, when to find the most fish in them and when to let them sit. At fifteen he could stay for five minutes underwater to surface with four fishes, two in his mouth and one in each hand. He was good. He was the best for his age. He could have been as good as Rygin, or even Brownman from Zion Hill Lane.

But politics came – thundered down the Spanish Town

Highway, thundered down and split the Village into two: Labourites on one side and Socialists on the other. Politics came and caught him near the river, on the side of the road across from where he lived, across from where his family lived – politics found him there, and suddenly his brother was the enemy. Those on his side were hunting his cousins to kill them, and he hunted too – suddenly he had no friends, no family. He had three letters painted with hatred in his head – stamped by a hand he had never seen before. He became a certain 'P'.

He got his first gun when he was sixteen . . . his first real gun that is. It was 1976 and war was in style. Before, he used a popgun much like a metal slingshot with a sharp nail for a hammer, and a piece of galvanized pipe for a barrel. It fired one shot and had to be reloaded carefully. He had only used it once before when he fired at his cousin, the enemy, as he pedalled along the main street on a stolen bicycle.

But one night in 1976 he went with a group of badmen led by Bongo from Kingston, to raid a liquor store in Greendale. Bongo was a marksman and expert hole-in-the-roof robber. Four of them went that night. Two stood watch on the ground. Bongo and he climbed to the concrete roof adjoining the liquor store and quietly pulled away the rotting zinc. Then they climbed into the sealed space between ceiling and roof and stood on the rafters. Bongo then quietly sawed through the bagasse board that separated them from the store. Their sources had told them that the owner kept his money in the store overnight and did his banking in the morning. But their sources did not tell them that he also slept in the store with his money and that he had a gun.

He shot Bongo as he hung from the rafter through the hole about to drop to the floor of the shop. One shot and Bongo fell like a parakeet from a guinep tree. If the owner had realized that there were two of them, the boy, now a man, would have also been dead. But he sprang from the sealed space with the gaping hole and was halfway down the road to Central Village before he realized that he was holding Bongo's gun in his hand. He then recalled that Bongo had asked him to hold it before he lowered himself through the roof.

"Yes. Come no. Come we go rob the dread." The boy almost a man, was a child then. He was playing marbles in the street, when he met the boy with the gun. He was in the middle of the cross roads, where Straight Street made a T with Corkscrew Lane – where the bar stood at the end of the T and the grocery store sat on its shoulder.

As he knelt to fire his marble at the loaded ring, there was a crash. The boy with a gun came down the lane much too fast to make the corner with his bicycle. He slammed into the side of the bar and lay sprawling in the dust. His gun fell on the ground beside him. The sound of screeching tires and loud gunning engines came right behind him as police in plain clothes began to converge rapidly. Their eyes met at dirt level for an instant and the boy kicked the gun to the child. "Hold that," he said, "Hold that." The child took it quickly. So quickly, the other with whom he played hardly saw what transpired. As he took the gun in his hand, half kneeling in the dust, two police cars screeched to a stop bumper to bumper in a V, and blocked the crossroad. The child acted quickly. While all attention focussed on the boy on the ground, he slid the gun beneath the police car.

The police beat the boy on the ground. They beat him till he was almost senseless. They knew he was bad, that he robbed shops, shot men and drove fear into people's hearts but they could not shoot him that day. They did not shoot him because they had stopped in front of a bar where children played and old men drank white rum . . . and they could not find his gun. So they beat him senseless, threw him into the trunk of the car, and took him away.

He spent six months in jail. Then his boss went and got him. There was work to do. It was nineteen seventy six. When he returned, he had a limp and they named him after it but never said it to his face. He had grown in stature, he had new respect and the child, now a boy, who hid his gun, became his disciple.

It was the seventies and badness was in style. Manhood was measured by the sum of the hate on one's brow and the size of the gun in one's hand. It was the seventies, when men

sought men and killed them for the color of their shirts, how they pronounced certain words, and how they looked at certain politicians on T.V. – what food they ate, what bus they travelled on. It was the seventies, a time for force-ripe men and man-too children who sought out those of a different ‘P’ to gun them down, burn their houses and chase them like dogs into the street. Yes, it was the seventies when politics gave men the right to plunder and to rape and to destroy and to take what they never put down, to demand what they had no right to, to disgrace those who were better and drive fear in the hearts of ordinary people.

- The child fitted well into the times. He was small and wiry and brave. He could climb fences noiselessly to poison dogs and open people’s gates from inside. He could be shoved beneath cars to puncture holes in gas tanks so men could steal the gas inside. He could be lowered through holes in the roofs to gut poor people’s stores, his hands could fit through small holes and burglar bars, he could carry guns and bullets past police, and cross the street as if to go to school so he could spy on the enemies and families across the road. He could slip through crevices.

He was like a speck of slime.

One day he heard that a stranger was in the area visiting relatives. He did not know who it was. All he knew was that the man was a stranger wearing the wrong color. He went to call the boy with the gun. They waited till late evening when the stranger was leaving and accosted him near the same crossroads where the police had beaten the boy, and he had hidden the gun beneath the car.

The stranger was from the country. He did not know the correct answers to the strange questions. He did not understand the wild accusations. But he understood danger. So he ran. The boy with the gun and the child chased him till he ran out of paved streets and houses and shops and bars. They chased him till he fell tired in a pasture of blueberry bush and casha-macca trees. Then the boy now a man shot him. He shot the stranger in his back as he fell in the pasture of blueberry bush and casha macca trees. The child looked on. Then