

The green room

Jacob Ross

The speeches had been made, the prizes awarded and Catriona Daly-Truth (Deets to the few friends she kept) rushed out of Herbert Hall, her cheeks burning. She quick-stepped towards the green room, her mouth in a tight sour knot. She thought about the grief that Ranella, hostess, organizer and dogsbody of Sugar Island Lit Fest, had to submit to: inviting a gaggle of over-fed businessmen and paunchy government officials on stage and oiling their egos with a string of inflated 'thank-yous'. All that with a smile wide enough to leave the poor woman with a serious case of facial rhabdomyolysis.

Pure chat! Three whole damn hours of it!

But, she supposed, Ranella had no choice. Every drop of sweat under those too-bright lights, every pinch from her cruel-looking, high-heeled shoes, was an investment in next year's round of funding from those chicken hawks!

The green room was humming with young women when she entered. They had already laid out small regiments of canapés on tables pushed against the left wall of the room. Now they were busy topping up fat silver flasks with coffee and water. Away from the heat and ruckus out there, the small air-conditioned office of the green room felt like a consecrated space, though the peace wouldn't last for long because those vindictive vultures would soon be here.

No wine, she noted wistfully. A king-sized glass would have helped to calm her down.

She nodded at the girls and smiled. They looked as if they were caught off-guard. Alarmed, in fact. Perhaps they'd already heard.

Catriona lifted a tiny paper plate from the table, selected three cheese straws, two stuffed peppers, and a micro-roti, laid them neatly on the plate, then retreated to a chair at the back of the office, the corners of her mouth pulled down ever so slightly, her eyes unfocused but all-seeing.

She placed her notepad at her elbow and poised a cheese straw a couple of millimetres under her chin – a ‘do not disturb, or else’ demeanour that she’d cultivated and deployed in all sorts of places and climates, among people as varied as the food on the table.

She wished Andrea, her reader, friend and – she had to admit it now – protector was here with her.

From the time she’d started doing the Commonwealth circuit she’d been given a reputation – rooted in resentment. The ones who hated her, she’d learned, had conspired to call her Effy.

Now, even the young ones – the just-arrived, the hot-and-sweaty scribblers, brusque and edgy, with their attitudes of entitlement, had picked up the nickname. None of them had ever dared to say it to her face, though.

That was the thing: when you listen and do not speak, other people’s words fly in your face from all directions.

Effy as in F? she’d wondered. F for what – Frivolous? Friendly? No way! Forbidding, perhaps? Definitely not forgiving – that she certainly was not! The other possibilities of what that F might point to, well... She’d never given a damn.

Now here they came, flocking through the doorway: writers, pen pushers, one-finger typers, even rappers and ad-libbers; and of course the usual fussy, fawning fan-girls, books clutched to their chests, clucking away behind the males – all of them pretending not to notice her.

She watched the gathering of querulous, quarrelsome Commonwealthers (she had serious doubts about the ‘wealth’ part of the word), and her eyes

settled on that woman with the plume of bleached hair sprouting from her scalp – a grey crowned crane if she'd ever seen one: *Balearica regulorum*, was it? The woman was throwing dirty under-eyed glances at her, then bringing her mouth to the ear of that balding jowly old fowl-cock they referred to as The Don. Started a war with the judges – those two. Then came the insults, the snarling verbal stoning. The prize was rightly theirs, they claimed.

The other one – he who had assaulted her, behaved as if she'd snatched his birthright.

A big smile, a wink and a fluttering of fingers at her from the Polymath at the far end of the room: poet, novelist, biographer, playwright. Garrulous, gorgeous, gay. Nice to look at and he knew it. Good writer, though. Still young, with such important things to say!

The rest were pecking at their food and chuckle-clucking, enough to wake the dead with a headache.

As for Mr Birthright, with his back now turned to her: green linen shirt, pressed corduroy trousers; fortyish – a prissy sandal-wearer with two long-legged young women – children! – at his side. She watched him under narrowed lids, as he peacocked his way across the length of the room, looking to see who was looking at him. What was it he called her? To her face?

A dumb fuckwit.

The words had stung her – had swung every head in the hall in her direction, and chased her out of the place.

Catriona looked up when she heard her name called. Ranella – a picture of indignation and concern – strode across the room, pulled up a chair and sat facing her. 'I demanded that he apologize to you, Deets. He refused. Says you've been hogging all the prizes, from time.' Ranella looked exhausted despite the fresh makeup – her brown droopy eyes still hinting at the fire that kept this fighting woman going. 'He only said it because he knows

you can't...'

Reply, Catriona filled in, in her head. Not yet.

'They all know that you are...'

Mute.

Ranella held up the book. 'This won well. This novel deserved the prize.' She handed it to Catriona: thick, mango-yellow cover, an image of the curled petal of a hibiscus flower in free-fall. Directly under the photo in blue embossed lettering, *The Unfurled Tongue: Catriona Truth*.

This won well – what a lovely way to say it! And suddenly the knot in Catriona's throat dissolved. Yes, she needed to remind herself that it was not the same everywhere. Throughout Asia, the Americas, the Pacific, she'd only been met with light and warmth and graciousness.

Now, she was suddenly revisited by a memory: a book-signing in Sri Lanka. A young woman standing just outside the queue – quiet, bright-eyed, luminous in the slatted light coming through the window of the ancient library. At the end of Catriona's signing, the young woman had approached, holding out a small green book. She'd placed a finger on her lips, then gestured at Catriona's mouth – as if to say, I too know the articulacy of our silence. They'd hugged, held hands, exchanged their work and left.

And these Commonwealthers here, despite the moments of attrition, weren't they all doing the same thing: wrestling with words; chipping away at the unsayable and unsaid? At silences.

Catriona signed Ranella's book and handed it back.

Still smiling her thanks, she reached out a hand and brushed Ranella's cheek. She dropped the hand and scribbled fast across her notepad, then turned it towards her friend: Go and rest little giant. Reward yourself with sleep.

‘When’s the sequel out, and what’s it going to be about, this time, Deets?’ Ranella’s smile was real.

Poultry, Catriona wrote, raising her eyes at the room.

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Jacob Ross is a novelist, short story writer, editor and anthologist. Ross teaches Narrative Craft internationally. His crime novel, *The Bone Readers*, won the inaugural Jhalak Prize in 2017. His literary novel *Pynter Bender* was shortlisted for the 2009 Commonwealth Writers Regional Prize and selected as one of the British Authors Club’s top three Best First Novels. Ross’s collected short fiction, *Tell No-One About This*, was listed by the 2017 Bocas Literary Prize among the best Caribbean fictional works. His most recent crime novel, *Black Rain Falling*, was published in spring 2020.

A recording of this story can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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