

# Red Dust Road\*

Jackie Kay

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## Chapter 1

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Nicon Hilton Hotel, Abuja

Jonathan is suddenly there in the hotel corridor leading to the swimming-pool area. He's sitting on a white plastic chair in a sad cafe. There's a small counter with a coffee machine and some depressed-looking buns. He's dressed all in white, a long white African dress, very ornately embroidered, like lace, and white trousers. He's wearing black shoes. He's wired up. My heart is racing. 'Jonathan?' I say.

'Yes,' he says, standing up and turning slowly to meet me.

I hadn't meant to meet him here. I'd been sitting in the swimming-pool area at a nice table by the bar, waiting for two hours, looking up at every elderly man coming through the opening in the wall. It's a strange thing, looking at one black man after another wondering if he is your father. It seemed this morning that everyone was. Several handsome men appeared, all of an age with Jonathan, wearing more and more elaborate outfits in all sorts of vivid colours – bright green, bright blue, burnished gold, tangerine orange. It was like sitting watching a fashion show of old black men walk the gangway to the pool bar.

Each one made some kind of entrance, it seemed, because each one could have been my father.

I wasn't sure that the staff at the hotel reception would definitely pass on my message to send him to the pool bar, so I kept going back to check. Jonathan had said he would arrive sometime in the afternoon.

Everybody told me that afternoon in Nigeria could be anything between noon and 5 p.m. I went to the reception and asked if anybody had called for me. 'No, nobody,' they said. Then I rushed to my room to check again by phoning the hotel operator. 'Yes,' she said, 'somebody called for you.'

'When?'

'About three minutes ago,' she said.

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I tore along the corridor and pressed the lift button. Downstairs I saw the man in white sitting in the odd little cafe. It's the first time I've ever seen anybody sit there since I got here yesterday.

'Can we go straightaway to your hotel room?' he asks me.

'Can we go to my room?'

'Yes, I would like to go to your room now.'

We walk along the corridor to the lift and all the lights suddenly go out. Another power cut. I take his hand and lead him towards the lift in the dark. I grope about in the darkness holding my father's hand. Then the lights suddenly come back on again and we get into the lift. He doesn't talk. I know he won't talk until he gets into the room. He doesn't look at me. He looks down at his black shoes and clasps his hands. He's carrying a plastic bag. A white plastic bag. When I met my mother, she was also holding a plastic bag. Both my birth parents, on first sight, looked like some homeless people look, who carry important papers in carrier bags.

I had been told they met in 1961 in the dance hall in Aberdeen. Jonathan was a student there and my mother was a nurse. They kept in touch during my mother's pregnancy, then Jonathan returned to Nigeria and my mother went to a mother-and-baby home in Edinburgh to have me. I was adopted five months later by a couple in Glasgow – the people who are to me my real parents. They are lifelong and committed socialists. When I traced my birth mother some years ago I discovered that after her relationship with Jonathan, she had become a Mormon. The Latterday Church of Jesus Christ Saints or whatever. The Mormons, she told me, believe that adopted people cry out to be adopted while they are still in the womb. When I told my mum that my mother was a Mormon, she said, 'Oh, Jesus, that's the pits. Why not have a wee half bottle and forget all about it.'

And now we're in the room. I'm about to have a conversation with my birth father for the first time.

Jonathan is moving about from foot to foot, shifting his weight from side to side, like a man who is about to say something life-changing. He begins: 'Before we can proceed with this meeting, I would like to pray for you and to welcome you to Nigeria.' I feel alarmed. Extreme religion scares the hell out of me. It seems to me like a kind of madness. But it is obvious to me that Jonathan won't be able to talk at all if I try and skip the sermon. So I say, 'OK, then,' and he says, 'Sit, please.' And I sit.

He plucks the Bible from the plastic bag. Then he immediately starts whirling and twirling around the blue hotel room, dancing and clapping his hands above his head, then below his waist, pointing his face up at the ceiling and then down to the floor, singing, 'O God Almighty, O God

Almighty, O God Almighty, we welcome Jackie Kay to Nigeria. Thank you, God Almighty, for bringing her here safely. She has crossed the waters. She has landed on African soil for the very first time. O God Almighty!' He does some fancy footwork. He is incredibly speedy for a man of seventy-three. He's whirling like a dervish. Suddenly, he takes off his shoes and puts them on my bed and kneels on the floor and reads the first of many extracts from the Bible. He seems to half read and half recite them; he appears to know the Bible by heart. As he recites he looks at me directly, quite a charming look, slightly actorish. The sermon for him is a kind of performance; his whole body gets thrown into it.

'God has given you this talent. You are a writer. You have written books. You have been blessed. God already knows about you. Don't think for a second that God hasn't been waiting for you. Now all you must do is receive Christ and your talent will become even bigger and you will become more focused. Amen. From this moment on you are protected. God protects the talented. Amen. You can walk through fire, you won't get burnt. You can swim in dangerous waters, you won't drown. Don't even bother with your hotel safe. God is looking out for you.'

I shift uneasily in my seat. Christ Almighty, my father is barking mad. He spins and dances and sings some more, singing in the most God-awful flat voice, really off-key. The singing sounds like a mixture of African chanting and hymns. It's a shock. Despite the fact that he can't sing, his performance is captivating. I watch his bare feet dance round the room and recognize my own toes. He looks over directly into my eyes again to see if I'm persuaded. 'I see in your eyes that you are not yet able to put your full trust in God. And yet you know that that would make me happy. At every reading you do, you could take the message of our Lord. Think of the people you could convert.' (I think of the twelve people at a reading in Milton Keynes Central Library on a rainy Thursday night.)

'Think of all the people you could bring to the Lord if you get ready to receive Christ.' I look as noncommittal as possible. I start to think that I should try and get this to stop. It feels like a kind of assault. He senses me thinking this and says, 'Just one more extract from the Bible. I prayed to God you would be attentive and you are being attentive. I prayed to God you would be patient and you are being patient.'

He wants me to be cleansed, cleansed of his past sin. 'If animal blood can cleanse sins under the Old Law, how much more can the blood of Jesus Christ cleanse us and prepare us for glory?' As Jonathan says this, his eyes seem to light up from behind like a scary Halloween mask.

'For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctify the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the

blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?’

I realize with a fresh horror that Jonathan is seeing me as the sin, me as impure, me the bastard, illegitimate. I am sitting here, evidence of his sinful past, but I am the sinner, the live embodiment of his sin. He’s moved on now, he’s a clean man, a man of glory and of God, but I’m sitting on the hotel room chair little better than a whore in his eyes, dirty and unsaved, the living proof of sin. Christianity has taken away his African culture and given him this. I’m thinking about colonialism and missionaries and not properly listening. I hear his voice in the background. God knows how long it has all been now.

I keep trying to rouse myself to ask him kindly to stop. ‘And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood. And hath made us kings and priests unto God the father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.’ I’ve zoned out now, drugged by his voice. I go in and out of consciousness like somebody who’s very ill. I can’t see properly. Pages of the Bible are flying around the room like hummingbirds. I am desperate for a drink. My glass of wine is sitting on the table in front of me, but it seems disrespectful to drink alcohol in the middle of my own personal service.

‘Thank you for your patience,’ Jonathan says again after another half-hour facing up to eternity. The tears are pouring down my face. I can’t stop. It’s a flood. It’s self-pity. Jonathan is delighted to see them. He thinks maybe I am ready to receive Christ. He thinks I’m moved by his sermon. I am moved; my cheeks are soaking wet. I wipe them with my bare hands as Jonathan’s voice goes deep and he lifts his hands into the air and claps and spins like a windmill. I think maybe it’s nearly over.

Dear God; I’ll believe in you if only this will stop. I look at my watch. He’s been praying for a solid hour. The man can talk. We have that in common too. ‘I prayed you would be docile. Thank you for paying attention.’ I shuffle in my seat ready to get up. Then he starts up again, more whirling and twirling and shouting to God Almighty. More clapping and foot-tapping and spinning and reciting. A whole big wad of the Bible rolls out of his mouth like ectoplasm.

‘For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. Open your heart to him. Repent of your sins. Allow me to purify and cleanse you. I want to pour out my glory. Believe what I am telling you.’ I try to think of all my

sins. True, there are a lot of them. But the fact that I was born out of wedlock? That is not my sin.

Jonathan still wants me to receive Christ. 'You won't give me that assurance? Why won't you give me that assurance?' I don't reply at first because I'm not sure I'm supposed to answer. Then there is a tiny moment's silence where I say: 'I would like you to respect my beliefs as I respect yours. I'm not comfortable with being born again.' I don't want to hurt his feelings and if I told him that I was an out-and-out brutal atheist he'd have to sit down. Even if I said I was an agnostic, he'd feel dizzy. He tells me of meeting a man on the way to the Nicon Hotel in Abuja who was a non-believer and how much of a blow to him this man was, how he'd had to get away fast before the man pulled his spirits down.

Jonathan needs believers; he needs believers like some people need cocaine. He needs the fresh hit, the new blood of a beginner believer. I start to see him as a kind of holy vampire, dressed in white, ready to take me in, to help me receive Christ. There's not even a wee wafer or anything in the room. 'God has intended us to meet after I became a born-again Christian. We should deliberate on the issue of new birth. Your talents are even greater than mine. You are going to be very big and God is going to help you. All you have to do is receive Christ and every- thing will blossom from there. Your whole career. You won't believe the big changes that are going to be happening to you.' He's desperate. He's trying to bribe me with my own career! The writer in me perks up for a couple of sick, ambitious seconds. Nope – not even for my writing could I receive Christ. My head is pounding, a tight headache as if somebody has been banging nails into my forehead. Perhaps I'm being crucified! 'So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets; and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went into the city. Do you see it? Are you ready to take your city and our land for Jesus? Repent now of every single sin in your life. Receive healing. Follow the six steps to Salvation: Acknowledge, Repent, Confess, Forsake, Believe, Receive.' He has the whole list of extracts written down on a tiny scrap of lined paper which begins with 'Welcome Jackie Kay to Nigeria' in blue biro (chapter such and such, verse such and such). He starts up again. He's like a bad poet who doesn't know when to quit, reading one poem after another to a comatose audience. I think, Oh, fuck it, let me drink that wine. I reach out and knock the whole glass back in one gulp. It's been two hours, two hours of non- stop praying. I'm exhausted. All the blood has drained out of my face. I can feel how pale I must look. My father has drunk my blood.

I say: 'You definitely know your Bible,' and he beams with pride. There is clearly no compliment I could pay him that would be higher than that, except perhaps, 'You're a good-looking man for your age.'

And then all of a sudden it stops like the rain at the end of the rainy season. Jonathan sits down, shattered. 'I thank you again for your patience. And now the time is yours. I will eat with you. I will have a drink with you. I will stay for as long as you like. I am in no particular hurry.' I have a terrible headache; the idea of spending an indefinite period of time with my father is not now as attractive as it was on the aeroplane.

At the bar, I knock back another glass of wine and ask him if he is glad to meet me. 'Yes,' he says, 'because you are evidence of my past. Once I used to go clubbing and such, and drink wine and meet women and now I am a preacher. You are my before; this is my after. You are my sin, now I lead this life.' Sin again, how dreary it is to go on and on about sin. 'You obviously have my genes. None of my children are dullards. Not one of them. But if people were to know about you, they would lose their faith in God,' Jonathan says. Goodness, I think, I never knew I was that powerful. 'The only way I could be open about you would be if I was able to showcase you, and you agreed to be born again. Then I would take you to the church and say, "This woman is my daughter. She is my before. This is my after." But you have given me no assurance that you would receive Christ and even if you did I would still have to think about how all this would affect God. I have discussed it with God and God agrees with me that for the time being it is best to keep quiet about this. I have told nobody that I was coming here to see you today. I have not told my young wife. My wife is also high up in our church. She is head of the women, I of the men. If I was going to tell anybody I would tell her.'

So I'm a secret, a forty-year-old secret, and must remain one unless I accept the Lord. I'm surprised that it seems so difficult for him to tell his wife, given that she was not married to him at the time. 'What age is she?' I ask.

'She is your age,' he says. 'God – in his wisdom – has provided somebody for my sex drive. We are trying for a baby.' I like that: God – in his wisdom – has provided somebody for my sex drive.

'You are seventy-three!' I say.

'So? A man can do it at any age,' he shrugs. 'God would like us to have another baby.'

How lovely it must be to believe in such a God, to hide your past in God's name, not to feel a second's guilt. To be religious in this way must be great fun. When I tell my mum about it on the phone, down the incredibly clear

line from Abuja to Glasgow, how he doesn't want to tell any of his children, and how I must remain a secret, how he feels I am his past sin, she says: 'By God, did we rescue you!'

**Jackie Kay** is an award winning writer from Scotland, she has written of poetry, fiction and plays. She was appointed as the Scottish Poet Laureate in 2016.

## References

Kay, J. (2011) *Red Dust Road*. London: Pan Macmillan.

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To cite this article:

Kay, J. (2016). Red Dust Road: An Extract. *Feminist Dissent*, (1), 81-87.

Retrieved from:

<http://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/11>