

extract from *The Darks* by Richard Skinner

The first things Jeziah had seen when he arrived in Britain were the cranes of Barry docks. They looked like huge sleeping storks. He stepped off the Dutch banana boat after ten days at sea and surveyed the vast, grey landscape of the docks, its stacks of containers and its warehouses. The sense of space was enormous, but in a negative way, because most of it would be put to no good use. It was one of the most godforsaken places he'd ever been to. The weather was sulky, though it was supposed to be late summer – the whole sky was the same shade of grey and it was cold, colder than Jeziah had ever experienced before. But he welcomed that, if nothing else. He relished the sensation of cool air around his neck and face.

One of the warehouses had been set up as an Immigration Centre, where Jeziah was led by a uniformed official and told to wait. There were dozens of people laying down on rows of makeshift beds and huddled at tables, waiting for their immigration papers. The scene looked like something out of a film about the Depression. Jeziah chose a bed next to a far wall and put his suitcase (bought from a man on the boat over to replace his flimsy, makeshift case) underneath it. He avoided talking to any one, killing the time by watching the unloading of cargo.

After days of studying them, Jeziah gathered some idea of how the docks worked. He was impressed by the efficiency of the cranes – they could move from one end of the quayside to the other in just a few minutes, rolling on casters which were set on rails. Because the wheels were set much wider at the base than at the top, the load on each was less and so the crane was more stable and could move more quickly. It never ceased to amaze him how many of the enormous containers the cranes could lift high into the air at any one time. The cranes worked round the clock, neatly piling one container on top of the other, the dull blues, rust reds and dirty whites resembling pieces of lego. Jeziah liked to wander in between the containers, stacked so high that he felt as if he were walking among the skyscrapers of some strange, evacuated city, before being warned off by a man carrying a clipboard.

His immigration papers came through in less than two weeks, after which he was dispatched to London with two addresses in his hand – one for the bed & breakfast assigned to him and one for the nearest DHSS office. He remembered little

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of the train journey from the tiny Welsh town to the capital, other than the length of time it took to pull into Paddington station itself. There seemed to be endless rails feeding into or crossing one another, and long unexplained delays. Once there, Jeziah spilled out of the train with the crowds and into the chaos around the station. Cars and taxis roared by at high speed, people walked unnaturally fast in all directions and he knew straight away that he would never get used to this place.

To his surprise, he found his way by tube to south London easily, and after asking a couple of people outside Brixton station, made his way to the B&B on Vassall Road. He was shown to his room by a woman with a bad cough. She had taken the piece of paper given to him by the Immigration Office and slipped it into the pocket of her housecoat without so much as a word. The room had a small gas ring and a washbasin with no hot tap. He would have to boil water if he wanted to shave. There was a wardrobe filled with multi-coloured hangers, which rattled every time the door was opened. 'All mod cons', she said. He had never heard the expression before.

He went to the DHSS office where, he had been told, he would have to attend an interview in order to assess his employment status. The woman sitting at her desk didn't bother to look at him while she asked him question after question, ticking various boxes when he answered. She wore a gold ring on every finger. He lied and told her that he'd only had menial jobs since leaving High School. When she had finished, she handed him a form to fill out, telling him it was for Council Housing.

Jeziah was quickly offered, and took, a cleaning job in an office block. When he finished each afternoon at around 4pm, he walked home, where he pulled off his sweaty clothes and tossed them into a corner, and then showered in the communal bathroom down the hall. Afterwards, he lay on the bed, arms and legs outstretched, waiting for the glistening sweat to evaporate away. The wall above his bed was smudged with the fingerprints of strangers. He was exhausted, but knew straight away that he wouldn't be able to sleep, so he turned on his side and listened to the sounds coming through his open window. After a couple of weeks of this, just when he was getting used to the work, the contract was suddenly terminated. He had no idea why, and no one at the DHSS seemed to know either.

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Over the course of the following three years, Jeziah took on several cleaning jobs, all of which ended, sooner or later and he always found himself back where he started. There was never any warning or explanation and the lack of control over this gradually ate away at Jeziah. It wasn't as if he was asking for much – he was happy to live on a small scale, within himself, but the humiliation of trying to make money this way was worse than having no money at all. What did he have here that made up for leaving Trinidad? Where was trouble going to come from next? There were people who seemed to be followed throughout their lives by a beggar to whom they owed much but had given nothing. Jeziah often felt like one of those people.

He waited for weeks and then, just as he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of ever having emigrated to England at all, he received an offer of Council accommodation – Flat 1109, on the eleventh floor of a high-rise block, not far from Vassall Road. He moved in as soon as he was allowed, taking just his suitcase and a few pieces of furniture he picked up second-hand. The flat was sparse and small, but his. A dark hallway led to a kitchen and a living room. Further down the hall were the two bedrooms, one slightly bigger than the other. He would have to buy a bed, or build one from pallets, as his father used to do in Trinidad. It was unbelievable that this flat was his. He hoped it would allow him to stay and build a new life. In time, he thought he would be able to put proper furniture and belongings in these rooms, but for now, he was content with solely occupying them.

There was a small concrete balcony off the living room, with a set of doors leading to it. He opened them and stepped out, holding his breath for a moment because of the height. The only thing keeping him from falling were the few iron railings that he stood on. It seemed impossible that he didn't fall through the bars and plunge to his death. He could see grass between the gaps. He studied the view to the north – the Post Office tower and Centrepoint rose far above any other buildings. Over to his left, the sun had set and the sky was a deep orange, but the heat was still insufferable. It rolled over him like a drop of amber, arresting any movement, trapping him for a moment in time.