

# Out of hand

Jackie Kay

Today has the unmistakable quality to it. Definitely a hand-day. She may as well write the day off because she knows it is out of hand the minute she wakes and stares at them. That will be her till bedtime. Sitting, looking, is not an unpleasant way to pass the day. And there is not a lot she can do about it.

Rose McGuire Roberts holds her hands up to the light, turns them, this way and that. There are things hands can do happily; there are things hands instinctively disdain. Sometimes life gets out of hand. Her hands with their long beautiful fingers (so she used to be told). Her hands with her half moon nails, quite pink. Smooth, black, aching, memorable hands: dark life line, dark heart line, small lighter branches of children waving at the edge of her palm. Somebody counted six once when she was young; six children bending round the side of her hand. Thank God they didn't know what they were talking about. Fifty years ago, these were the hands that clapped, then came to England. Willing.

Twenty-six years old they were then. In their prime with their nails filed and shining. No calcium spots. No loose skin. No wrinkles on the back of themselves. Twenty-six year old hands. Dancing hands, talking hands, story hands, moving, working hands. On the go the whole time, rarely still, rarely silent. Twenty-six years old, they arrived, elegant, black, skilled, beautiful hands. Ready and willing. Ready was the left hand; willing the right. What a thing for a hand to get to do. What a way to tend a hand. They held onto the ship's cold rail full of their own sense of importance. She rubbed them together and told them to stop shaking. She gripped one onto the other to stop the trembling excitement. To stop her hands flapping into flighty birds. To contain herself. Her breathing was fast. Her chest tight with anticipation. England, England, England! Here she comes!

Fifty years ago, hand over heart, Rose McGuire Roberts stepped off the Windrush with her good hands, her dab hands, her handy hands.

### **Many hands make light work**

Today is a hand-day. They just come up, days like this, and grab her from nowhere. She is propelled into her favourite seat to sit and think and contemplate her hands. And the more she thinks, the more she sees. Her daughter rushes about forgetting herself. Her grandchildren sit in front of computers all day long, pressing buttons and killing people. Pow! Gotcha! Bad! Snide! Her son is so concerned about money, he hardly sees her. He could lose quite a bit of money just sitting chatting to his mother and having dinner. When he does come, he gets out one of those mobile phones and spends quite a portion of the time swearing at the battery which is always running out. So that's family. Her husband, Alexander, is dead. Dead and buried in the wrong country. That's life. They always talked, Alexander and she, of going back; but somehow it stayed just talk. Lots of talk. But talk just the same. And a strange thing started to happen in these talks with Alexander; it was like the pair of them were just imagining their country. The images got so vivid maybe they were afraid to go back. If it was a disappointment - what then?

So she is just sitting. Let everybody else rush, rush. Let them all think their rushing is important. Running rushing feet. Let them run round London up and down the escalators, in and out of the city like mad dogs. She sucks her lips and makes a sound that she is still teaching her twin granddaughters. They are quite good at it you know. Surprising.

**F**ifty years in England and look at the change in her hands. They are still her hands; she can recognise them. But they are wrinkled on the back of themselves and swollen between her knuckles. And one of them, the right one, the willing one, is giving her quite a bit of bother. She can't use it properly: hold a pen, or a duster, turn a knob or twist a bottle top, clean her glasses, whisk an egg. Actually if a person were to look only at her hands they would think that she was older than seventy-six. Her face looks younger. Everybody says so. 'You don't look seventy-six, you know.' 'Don't I now?' she says. 'Well, I don't feel like any spring chicken.' She likes that expression - 'spring chicken.' 'Oh yes,' they'll say, 'You don't look sixty-five if you are a day.' 'If you are a day,' she repeats to herself. 'If you are a day.' Like she should be pleased. What's the matter with looking seventy-six., what's the matter with looking eighty? But she is pleased, a little. If she admits it. Pleased her face is smooth with hardly a wrinkle.

Her hands are older than her face. That is the simple truth of the matter. Almost as if they came into the world a good five years earlier than she did and were hanging around disembodied, picking things from trees and stroking smooth materials, snapping their fingers and sucking their thumbs until the rest of her came along and they found themselves attached. Perhaps they did have a life of their own for a while. The thought is a comfort. Because once they came to England they certainly had no life *of* their own! At all at all at all.

**R**ose McGuire Roberts came down those Windrush steps. She already felt the moment momentous as she was doing so. Step by step and staring down into the waiting crowd.

Tilbury didn't look like England. A dock is a dock. There were people waiting to greet the boat, waving, welcoming. It was quite something. The ones waiting and the ones coming *off*. The willing hands. It was June. She never forgets the date: June 22, 1948.

It takes her a week to find a room. She dumps her heavy suitcase down and lines the drawer with paper so she has somewhere clean for her clothes. The room is sad and unfriendly like the landlady. But she is not yet discouraged. Things will pick up. She can make the room cheerful. Maybe she can make the landlady cheerful. Rose opens her door and Mrs Bleaney opens her door further down the stairs. Her head peeps out. (She was to see this nosey head peeping out many times in the next couple of years.) 'Going out are you?' 'I'm going to the cinema,' Rose says bubbling. The cinema, are you? Already? Don't be late back. I lock the door early.'

Rose McGuire Roberts sits herself down in the red seat. England, she is in England. She is in the cinema in England! How about that? Wait till she writes home to tell her mother. I wasted no time! The day I found my lodgings, I went to the cinema! Before *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, there is the Pathe news. And to Rose's absolute astonishment and disbelief, there she is up on the cinema on the news! It is herself right enough, coming off that ship. 'Last week in Tilbury 494 Jamaicans came ashore from the Empire Windrush. They have come to help the British economy. Many of them feel like they are coming home. Hundreds of people were gathered at Tilbury together. Welcome Home. Welcome Home.' Rose sees herself for a brief moment in black and white coming down the ship's steps with her red hat on. (Though only she knows it is red.) Her hat is tilted to the side and she is holding onto it. Her coat has blown open a bit

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and her smart navy dress is showing. She'd like to lean forward to the people in the seat in front of her and shout, That's me, that's me. That hat is red, that dress is navy. I know the colours she is wearing. She is me!' She watches herself come down the steps with the other willing hands. For a moment, sitting there on her red seat, she feels the false shyness of a movie star. Didn't the person in front of her recognise her and turn round and stare? She'll have to watch out. At the end of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, people might be asking her for her autograph! She practised it enough times before getting on the Windrush. People's handwriting in England will be very neat, she had thought to herself. Neat and elegant. English. English handwriting.

After the Pathe news, the movie begins. Rose leans forward in her seat. She has got a bag of sweets. She will wait till it is slap bang in the middle of the movie before she opens this bag of sweets. She strains to see the time on her watch in the dark cinema. She is all cosy, safe. 'The movie was all about three losers searching for gold,' she imagines writing to her little sister back in Jamaica. 'Humphrey Bogart was the star. Do you know who Humphrey Bogart is? They might get rich but they don't get lucky.'

People start leaving the movie before the credits are finished. A lot of people stare at her as they leave. They definitely recognised her! No question! Only the stare is not friendly like you would expect. Well, maybe they are jealous! Maybe they wanted to be on the Pathe news! She sits and waits till every name has been and gone on the screen. When the credits finally finish, she is the only one left in the cinema. What an experience.

Rose gets up and goes out into the tactless daylight. A little dizzy. It is a nasty shock after the cinema's chocolate darkness.

**R**ose McGuire Roberts can remember everything about those first few weeks in England in vivid colours. The red buses, red pillar boxes, red phone booths. The yellow jacketed underground men. The green green grass. When was it exactly it started to change? After two weeks? Just two weeks?

She is a skilled nurse. Highly qualified. In Jamaica she was the youngest ward sister in the hospital. At Westminster Hospital, she is put on night shift. She stays on night-shift for two years, even though she keeps trying to get off it. The night hangs to her back; she can't escape it. Well, she never minded hard work. It's not the hard work that's the problem. It's the fact that she's been landed all the rubbish jobs, all the jobs she shouldn't be doing. Making tea,

emptying rubbish, turning the patients in the night from left side to right on her own, cleaning the bed pans. Somehow she ends up with all the bed-pans to empty. Now how did that happen.' Is she imagining the smile on the other nurses' faces? Is she imagining that sly satisfied look?

**T**hat was the beginning of it, Rose thinks to herself looking at her hands. The back and the front. The right and the left. Old now, definitely. Old and vulnerable looking. When she was young she never imagined that hands would age along with the rest of you and that it would upset her so. Well you don't imagine age at all when you are young. Look at her twin granddaughters now. When she tells them about herself as a young woman, they think she is making it up! They think she is lying! As far as her twin granddaughters are concerned she has always been the old fat woman that she is right now. It is just as impossible for them to imagine her young as it was all those years ago to imagine herself ever getting old.

All the bed pans in the world for her. Her willing hands. Emptying the steel pans with the terrible crunched bits of tissue in them and the strong smelling stools of the very ill. Well not so much stools as pouffes! Not even pouffes, pillows. Burst pillows! Explosions! That is better. English explosions! Night shift at Westminster hospital. Patients in the night are frightened. They shout out, restless. They want their mothers even if they are old women and men. They fear death is going to come and snatch them away. Sometimes death does come in the night with its long scratchy fingers to claim somebody. The white curtain gets pulled sharply round the round rail. The worried patient in the bed next door wakes to see the terrifying white curtain, the final curtain. The shuffling and whispering goes on. The thudding movements. In the morning, just before Rose goes off her shift, the patients stare at the empty bed, appalled. Once a woman shouts at her. 'You there! It's all your fault. You've brought your strange diseases with you! None of us would be in here if it weren't for you.'

What is so awful is not the nutcase of the woman who is shouting at her, but the fact that her fellow nurses are smiling in the weak daylight. The fact that not one of them does a single thing to help. Nobody tries to shut the woman up, so she continues. 'Practising your strange ways here, your black magic!' she screams.

Rose would have liked to wash her hands of the whole country right then and there. Because nobody took the woman in hand. Nobody got high-handed

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with her and said, 'Now now Mrs Wells that's quite enough!' Rose McGuire's twenty-six-year-old hands longed to slap the woman right across her face. To shout, 'Don't be so nasty!' She felt her skin burn.

And it wasn't just the one woman she had problems with. She was just the tip of the iceberg. She would never tell her twin granddaughters about all that now. She doesn't want them to know. She didn't even tell her own children.

**T**he next one, if she remembers right, was a man with a pinched face and a sharp irritable nose. Just as she was turning him over, he whispered hoarsely in her ear, go back to the jungle. She carried the sound of his fierce whisper all the way home. And home wasn't all that different because the landlady there had a look on her face that said more or less the same thing. And it got so bad at one stage that Rose could no longer tell which people had the look on their face and which didn't. That's how bad it got. It was difficult for her to trust anybody being nice. If somebody was nice, Rose would wonder why they were being nice. She never used to wonder that. She never used to carry this suspicion around with her under her tongue, sucking on it, like a poisonous sweet.

So what did she do? She went to the movies. Half the time she fell asleep in the cinema because of the night shift. She'd hear *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* in the background and think dozily to herself, 'Is that him telling another lie again?' It's *a Wonderful Life*, *The Red Shoes*, *Rope*, Lauren Bacall in *The Florida Keys. Give My Regards to Broadway* in technicolor, Bogart and Bacall again in *Key Largo*, Rita Hayworth with her pretty auburn hair bleached in the gripping, *The Lady from Shanghai*. 'It's true, I made a lot of mistakes,' Rita says in her dying breath. Rose watches Olivia De Havilland go crazy in *The Snake Pit*. Joan Fontaine in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Joan Fontaine has beautiful hands, Rose thinks to herself, stylish. James Cagney in *White Heat*. 'Top of the world, Ma' shrieks Cagney as he goes up in flames! Everybody is losing their mind, Rose thinks to herself, at home in the movies.

**A**nd one day. One day Rose McGuire Roberts stopped going to the movies. She came out of the cinema in 1958, a hot August day, with her husband, the year of the Nottingham riots, she came out of the cinema and a group of white people gathered round them and shouted, 'Go back to your own country.'

This is the question she asks herself the most on these hand-days. How

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come she thought England was her country? How did that happen? How was it that she thought when she got on that Windrush that she was coming home?

It is late in the evening. The river is running slow. She closes her curtains. She hand washes her pants. She gets into bed. Even having a family didn't take away that lonely feeling. Because nobody knew. And her husband was a cheerful man. Don't dwell on it Rose, it'll eat you up, he'd say. Don't dwell on it. But the thing about these hand-days are the more she dwells, the better she feels. Oh no! Never tell people to just forget it. She has got to remember. She can see herself on a big screen. Red hat. Navy dress. Coming down off the Windrush. She could almost applaud. Was that some other girl? No it wasn't. It was herself. Rose McGuire Roberts coming off that huge fiction of a ship. Stepping.