



Recorded Events

Title: 2011 Seattle Reads “Little Bee”: Book-It Repertory Theater, May 17

Speaker 15:

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Steve Wolf:

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Steve Wolf, and I'm currently the president of the Seattle Public Library Foundation's Emeritus Board. And it's my distinct pleasure to be able to welcome you this afternoon to this Seattle Reads event with Book at Repertory Theater and author Chris Cleave. This is going to be a fun event, I know. Each year, the library does literally thousands of free public programs like Seattle Reads, anything from computer classes to children's story times, even seminars on how to search for a job. But I think Seattle Reads is special because it brings us all together around one title, and then we have a shared experience together. These special events also give us a chance to get together with some of the foundation's most important supporters, members of our Legacy Society. Legacy Society members are those who have included the library in their will or estate plan.

I'd like to extend a special thank you to the members of the Legacy Society who are here with us today, and acknowledge their decision to support the Seattle Public Library as part of their own personal legacy. I should also mention, if you're interested in learning more about the Seattle's Public Library's Legacy Society, feel free to contact me or one of the foundation staff members after the program. Today, we also have the pleasure of welcoming members of the many book groups who borrow titles from the library's book group collection, which is funded by the Seattle Public Library Foundation. And I'm sure everyone here knows the feeling of opening a book and entering a different world. And certainly Little Bee by Chris Cleave is a case in point. So I think we're very lucky to enhance our experience today. We have the author himself and Book at Repertory Theater. So now, I'd like to introduce Joanna Ward. Joanna's the executive director of the Seattle Public Library Foundation.

Joanna Ward:

Thank you, Steve. So just a little bit of information here. The foundation, we are celebrating our 30th year as an organization that exists to raise money for the library. We enhance the collections, we support technology, programs, and some of the capital investments such as this. But ultimately, you

don't often hear about the foundation because we're behind the scenes. And so with this 30 year celebration, we've been looking back and reflecting upon some of the things that have been accomplished by donors and supporters. And over the rest of the year, you'll be seeing little stories and things. But one of the reasons the foundation has been so successful over the years is because of donors like you that are in the audience, those of you who are part of Legacy Society, and certainly some of the foundation board members.

And so I want to take a second and just even recognize Steve. He actually has this title of emeritus chair for life. He doesn't seem to have any chance to get out of that role. But in reality, he actually got involved with the foundation board in 1987, and stayed involved with the board really till now. He was on the board from 1987 through 2000, and then moved on to the emeritus board. He's still involved with our finance committee as well. And I was thinking about that so long that there's a lot of people that don't stay married that long. So your years with us have been many. And you know, Steve has been a donor through those years. He's also included the Library Foundation in his estate plan. And so we like to think of him as one of those uber supporters who has done so much for this library system. So thank you. Before I hand over something to Steve, I do want to say, we've got a couple emeritus board members and foundation board members here in the audience.

So raise your hand. Thank you emeritus board members. Alrighty. So on behalf of the foundation, on behalf of the people of Seattle, here's a little gift. Thanks for letting us have this chance to recognize Steve's many, many years of support. And with that, I'm going to introduce Chrissy Gashi, who's the head of Center for the Book. There you go.

Chrissy Gashi:

Okay, I promise we're going to stop yakking in a minute and get on with the show. So I've had the tremendous pleasure of seeing these book at readings from Little Bee three times. So I can say without question that you're really in for a treat. They did these readings at Douglas Truth, West Seattle, and Greenwood Ranches where community members and book groups and the public just packed the meeting rooms. So let me first point out the adapter of these readings today, Myra Platt. Myra is the co-artistic director of Book at Repertory Theater. And Annie LaRoe. Where are you, Annie?

Annie is Bookit's director of touring, and she directed these readings today. So we are really excited to host Book at Repertory Theater doing these staged readings, and especially to present today's performance for all of you and for Chris Cleave. Some of you will remember three years ago when Bookit did staged readings from the Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears by Dinelle Mengesto, that was our 2008 Seattle Reads title. Myra and Jane, the co-artistic director, so loved the novel that they requested and got permission to do a full stage adaptation of the following season, which was pretty fantastic. So we're hoping that might happen again.

Okay. So we are recording today's performance. If it's a good enough quality, it will be available for podcasts on the library's website. Before you leave today, I really would ask you to take a few minutes to fill out the evaluation form that you got on your way in. Your comments help us to plan future library programs and also to assess the effectiveness of our efforts to deepen appreciation of and engagement in literature through reading and discussion. So thanks for doing that. Okay. Following the performance,

Chris is going to come up, Myra and Annie, to join in a discussion with all of you. After that, Chris will sign books if you've brought them. So now, let's just enjoy the show. Thanks very much.

Speaker 4:

All rise. Nigeria's called obey to service with love and train and faith. The labor of our heroes perhaps shall never be in pain to serve with heart and mind.

Speaker 5:

Most days, I wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl. Everyone would be pleased to see me coming. A pound coin can go wherever it thinks it will be safest, and leave the sound of gunfire behind. A girl like me gets stopped at immigration, but a pound coin can leap the turnstiles and jump straight into a taxi. "Where to, sir?" "Western civilization, my good man, and make it snappy." You see how nicely a pound coin talks? It speaks with the voice of Queen Elizabeth II of England. I am only alive at all because I learned the queen's English. English is the official language of my country, Nigeria, but the trouble is that back home, we speak it so much better than you. For example, the queen would never say, "There was plenty of [inaudible 00:09:47] that girl then used her bottom to engage my number one son and anyone might have foreseen that she would end in [inaudible 00:09:53]."

Instead, the queen must say, "My late doctor-in-law used her feminine charms to become engaged to my number one heir, and anyone might have foreseen that it would not end well." I was 14 when I came to your country. I became a woman under white fluorescent strip lights.

Speaker 4:

In an underground room, in an immigration detention center.

Speaker 5:

40 miles east of London.

Speaker 4:

There was no seasons there.

Speaker 5:

It was cold.

Speaker 4:

Cold.

Speaker 5:

Cold. The African girl they locked up. She never really escaped. In my soul, she is still locked up in there forever, curled up on the green linoleum floor. Some of the older girls explained...

Speaker 4:

To survive, you must look good or talk even better. The plain ones and the silent ones. It seems that paperwork is never in order and they get sent home early. Like this country is a children's party, something too wonderful to last forever.

Speaker 5:

But the pretty ones and the talkative ones are allowed to stay. This way, your country becomes more lively.

Speaker 4:

And more beautiful.

Speaker 7:

To the bat mobile.

Speaker 4:

Batman. Batman. Batman. Batman.

Speaker 7:

[inaudible 00:11:24].

Speaker 8:

My four-year-old son Charlie removed his Batman costume only at bath times. I ordered a twin costume that I substituted while he splashed in the suds so that at least I could wash the sweat and grass stains out of the first. It was a dirty green knee job fighting master criminals. If it wasn't Mr. Fleas, then it was penguin, Batman's deadly foe. At four years old, asleep and awake, my son lived at constant readiness. There was no question separating him from the demonic bat mask, the Lycra suit, the glossy yellow utility belt, and the jet black cape. And there was no use in addressing my son with his Christian name. He would only look behind him, cock his head and shrug, as if to say, "My bat senses can detect no boy of that name here, Madam."

Speaker 7:

Warden Jenkins to in processing, Warden Jenkins to in processing.

Speaker 5:

The morning they let me out of the detention center.

Speaker 7:

The immigration officer handed out transport vouchers.

Speaker 5:

Transport vouchers?

Speaker 7:

You can telephone for a cab.

Speaker 5:

Thank you, sir. May God move with grace in your life and bring joy into your heart and prosperity upon your loved ones.

Speaker 7:

Jesus. Pointing down the corridor, he said, "There is the telephone."

Speaker 5:

There were two girls in front of me in the queue waiting for the telephone. It was a bright, sunny morning in May. The corridor was dirty, but it smelled clean. That is a good trick. Bleach is how they do that.

Speaker 7:

The officer sat behind his desk.

Speaker 5:

He was not watching us girls.

Speaker 7:

He was reading a newspaper.

Speaker 5:

There was a white girl in the newspaper photo and she was topless. If I was explaining this to my big sister, Naruka and the other girls back home from my village, I would have to stop right here and explain to them, topless does not mean that she did not have an upper body, it meant that she was not wearing any garments on her upper body.

Speaker 4:

Oh, wait, not even a [inaudible 00:13:42]?

Speaker 5:

Not even a [inaudible 00:13:45]. I would have to start my story again.

Speaker 4:

Listen.

Speaker 5:

My sister would interrupt me.

Speaker 4:

Just so we are clear, the girl in the newspaper photo, she was a prostitute, yes, a night fighter? Did she look down at the ground from shame?

Speaker 5:

No. She looked right at the camera and smiled.

Speaker 4:

Dean, it is not shameful in Great Britain to show your boobies in a newspaper?

Speaker 5:

No. The boys like it, and there is no shame.

Speaker 4:

Do all the girls that walk around with the boobies bouncing in church and in the shop, and in the street?

Speaker 5:

No, only in the newspaper.

Speaker 4:

Why do they not all show the breasts if the men like it and there is no shame?

Speaker 5:

I do not know.

Speaker 4:

Where?

Speaker 5:

I would have to explain.

Speaker 4:

A linoleum and bleach, and a magic of the British pound coin.

Speaker 5:

But with you, I can just say the duty officer was staring at a photo of a topless girl, and you would understand the situation straight away. That is the reason I spent two years learning the queen's English, so that you and I could speak like this without interruption.

Speaker 7:

Step forward.

Speaker 5:

We stood in the queue waiting for the telephone, and they handed out all of our possessions in a see-through plastic bag.

Speaker 7:

One Colin's Gem pocket English Dictionary, one pair of gray socks, one pair of gray briefs, and one United Kingdom driver's license.

Speaker 5:

That was not mine. The first girl in the queue, she was tall and she was pretty. Her thing was beauty, not talking like the queen. This girl had plucked her eyebrows out.

Speaker 4:

And didn't drawn them back on again with a pencil?

Speaker 5:

This is what she had done to save her life. On the girl's brown legs, there were many small white scars. And I ask you right here to please agree with me that a scar is never ugly. That is what the scar makers want us to think. But you and I, we must make an agreement to defy them. We must see all scars as beauty, okay? This will be our little secret, because take it from me, a scar does not form on the dying. A scar means I survived.

Speaker 4:

Hello? Dexie. You come pick me up, yeah? Good. Oh, where me come? Me come from Jamaica, darling, you better believe that, yeah. What? Oh, where me come right now? Okay. Wait, please. She turned to the second girl in the queue. "Listen, darling, what name is this place where we are right now?"

Speaker 5:

But this girl just stood there.

Speaker 4:

She was not pretty, and she was not a good talker.

Speaker 5:

But there was one thing that can save you from being sent home early.

Speaker 4:

She had her story written down and made official.

Speaker 5:

Her see-through plastic bag was full of letters and documents.

Speaker 4:

All crumbled and creased. There were rubber stamps at the end of her story that said in red ink, "This is true."

Speaker 5:

She told me her story once, and it went something like...

Speaker 4:

"The men came and they burned my village, tied my girls, raped my girls, took my girls, whipped my husband, cut my breast. I ran away through the bush, I found the ship across the sea. And then they put me in here."

Speaker 7:

All the girls' stories started out...

Speaker 4:

"The men came and they..."

Speaker 7:

And all the stories finished...

Speaker 4:

"And then they put me in here."

Speaker 5:

In a few breath times, I will speak some sad words to you. But you must hear them the same way we have agreed to see scars now. Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means this storyteller is alive. And then one day, something fine will happen to her, something marvelous, and then she will turn around and smile.

Speaker 4:

"Hey, do you know the name of the place, where we is at?"

Speaker 5:

The name of this place? It is the Black Hill Immigration Removal Center.

Speaker 4:

You kidding with me? What kind of name is that?

Speaker 5:

I pointed at the little metal plate screwed on the wall above the telephone.

Speaker 4:

Sorry darling, I cannot read it. All right now. Listen, mister. The place I is right now is called Black Hill Immigration Removal. I know. What?

Speaker 5:

Oh, what is wrong?

Speaker 4:

[inaudible 00:18:34], "Pick up from this place." Then he say, "You people are scum." You know this word?

Speaker 5:

I took my Collins Gem, the English dictionary out of my se-through bag and looked up the word. You are a film of impurities or vegetation that can form on the surface of a liquid.

Speaker 4:

We did not understand what to do with this information.

Speaker 5:

I was holding my see-through bag.

Speaker 4:

And she was holding her see-through bag. What you staring at? [inaudible 00:19:17]? How farming only get with one eyebrow pencil and one tweezer and three pineapple slice? And then the second girl...

Speaker 5:

... Had become the first girl in the queue.

Speaker 4:

She whispered into the telephone.

Speaker 5:

Her language sounded like butterflies drowning in honey. Please, you must try and talk to them in English.

Speaker 4:

The girl just stared back. Here, give me that. And she grabbed the phone. It just did dial tone. You have to dial a number first darling, and didn't tell the taxi man where you want to go. This woman ain't got no motivation. It's up to you, darling. You got to talk us out of here, lock us back up again.

Speaker 5:

Good morning. I would like a taxi, please, for three passengers.

Speaker 8:

Where from?

Speaker 5:

From the Black Hill Immigration Removal Center, please.

Speaker 8:

Now, you listen to me.

Speaker 5:

Please, I know you do not pick up refugees. It is okay, we are not refugees, we are cleaners. We work in this place.

Speaker 8:

You're cleaners?

Speaker 5:

Yes.

Speaker 8:

And that's the truth, is it? Because if I had a pound for every bloody immigrant that got in the back of one of my cabs and didn't know where they wanted to go and started prattling onto my driver in Swahili.

Speaker 5:

We are cleaners.

Speaker 8:

All right.

Speaker 5:

It's true, you don't talk like one of them. Where do you want to go? Kingston, please.

Speaker 4:

No, darling, anywhere but Jamaica, the mens be killing me the minute I catch there.

Speaker 8:

Kingston?

Speaker 5:

Kingston upon Thames.

Speaker 8:

That's bloody miles away, isn't it, that's over in what?

Speaker 5:

Surrey.

Speaker 8:

Surrey? You are three cleaners all from leafy Surrey, is that what you're trying to tell me?

Speaker 5:

No, we are cleaners from here, but they are sending us on a cleaning job in Surrey.

Speaker 8:

Will you pay in cash or is it going on the detention centers?

Speaker 5:

We will pay in cash, Mister, when we get there.

Speaker 8:

You'd better.

Speaker 5:

I pressed my hand down on the cradle. I dialed [inaudible 00:21:20] a number. The business card was damaged by water. I cannot tell if the last number was an eight or a three. I tried an eight.

Speaker 7:

Who is this? It's bloody six in the morning.

Speaker 5:

Is this Mr. Andrew O'Rourke?

Speaker 7:

Yeah. Who are you?

Speaker 5:

Can I come see you, Mr.?

Speaker 7:

Who the hell is this?

Speaker 5:

We met on a beach in Nigeria two years ago, Mr. O'Rourke. I am in England now. Can I come see you and Sarah? I do not have any other place to go.

Speaker 7:

Who is this? I'm warning you, I get nutters like you on my case all the time. Leave me alone, or my paper will have this call traced and have you arrested.

Speaker 5:

You do not believe it is me? I will come to your house, that way you believe it is me.

Speaker 7:

No. Just leave me alone, understand? I don't want to hear about it. All that stuff happened a long time ago and it wasn't my fault.

Speaker 5:

I do not have any other place to go in this country. Mr. O'Rourke? My heart was pounding so fast. I thought I would vomit right there on the linoleum floor. The other girl stared at me.

Speaker 4:

Well?

Speaker 5:

I hung up quickly.

Speaker 4:

They taxi, darling, what about the taxi?

Speaker 5:

The taxi man said a cow will pick us up in 10 minutes. He said we ought to wait outside.

Speaker 4:

Oh. My name is Yvette from Jamaica. What'd they call you?

Speaker 5:

My name is Little V.

Speaker 4:

What kind of place you come from, they go around and call a little girl the names [inaudible 00:22:59].

Speaker 5:

Nigeria.

Speaker 4:

Nigeria. We the United Nations, say it. And today, we is all following Nigeria.

Speaker 7:

The three girls walked.

Speaker 5:

Passed the security desk.

Speaker 4:

Toward the door.

Speaker 7:

The detention officer looked up from his newspaper. A uniform that's too big for you, a desk that's too small for you, an eight-hour shift that's too long for you, and suddenly here comes a girl with three kilos of documents.

Speaker 4:

And no more [inaudible 00:23:35].

Speaker 7:

Another girl from Nigeria.

Speaker 4:

Who is named after a Honeybee.

Speaker 7:

And a noisy woman from Jamaica.

Speaker 4:

Who laughs like the pirate bluebird.

Speaker 7:

Exactly the type of situation that make a man's elbow itch. Ladies.

Speaker 5:

He was going to tell us that there had been a mistake.

Speaker 4:

How far could we get if we run? If they came after us with dogs...

Speaker 5:

I could drown myself in the nearest stream.

Speaker 7:

Best of luck.

Speaker 4:

We walked toward the light.

Speaker 5:

Pushed open the door, then bright sunshine.

Speaker 4:

And the smell of wet grass. What the hell you're waiting for, darling?

Speaker 5:

I'm scared, Yvette.

Speaker 4:

Me spin [inaudible 00:24:22] months locked up in that place. And if you think me wait one second longer, you about to think two times. [inaudible 00:24:28].

Speaker 5:

And I flew backward.

Speaker 4:

The whole world was new and bright.

Speaker 8:

They say that in the hour before an earthquake, the clouds hang laden in the sky, the wind slows to a hot breath, and the birds fall quiet in the trees of the town square. Yes, but these are the same poor tents that proceed lunchtime, frankly. If we overreacted every time the wind eased up, we'd be forever laying down under the dining table when really we should be laying plates on top of it. I woke up with the phone ringing and my body predicting some event that had yet to happen, although never imagined it would be so serious. Andrew?

Speaker 7:

Picked up the phone in his study.

Speaker 8:

Before it could wake our son. I heard Andrew's voice quite clearly from our bedroom.

Speaker 7:

Leave me alone. All of that happened a long time ago and it wasn't my fault.

Speaker 8:

I found him in tears. Who was that on the phone? You finished your column?

Speaker 7:

My opinion of the Middle East, you mean, a region I've never visited, have no specialist knowledge of?

Speaker 8:

I take it you were up all night again then. Listen, since Charlie's asleep and we're both awake, I pulled my husband away from the phone and into the bedroom.

Speaker 7:

We made love.

Speaker 8:

It was a bright May morning in Kingston upon Thames. I remembered the way he moved like a clock with its main spring running down. I held his face close to mine. God, Andrew. Are you all right?

Speaker 7:

He just moved faster.

Speaker 8:

And we fled into each other's moaning.

Speaker 7:

In wordless desperation.

Speaker 8:

I saw our son standing in the doorway watching us through his mask. I pushed Andrew.

Speaker 7:

Oh God, Charlie.

Speaker 8:

What is you and daddy doing, mommy? Are you getting the baddies?

Speaker 7:

Charlie.

Speaker 8:

Are you getting the baddies, Charlie, not is you.

Speaker 7:

Charlie.

Speaker 8:

Batman, mommy, not Charlie. Are you getting the baddies?

Speaker 7:

Yes, Batman. That's exactly what we're doing.

Speaker 8:

I dressed against the clock while Andrew lay naked on the bed and watched me.

Speaker 7:

Deadline day?

Speaker 8:

Yes, I always dress up for deadline days, heels, skirts, smart green jacket. Magazine publishing has its rhythms, and if the editor won't dance to them, she can't expect her staff to, right? He didn't say a word. Before I close the bedroom door...

Speaker 7:

He opened his mouth to say something.

Speaker 8:

But I was running late and turned away.

Speaker 4:

It's safe out here.

Speaker 5:

But they have released us, we are free to go.

Speaker 4:

Ain't that simple, darling. There's freedom as in you girls as free to go and then there is freedom as in you girls is free to go till we catches you. They call it being an illegal immigrant. Where all of us going to go? Wherever they taxi take us and then we take it from there. We going out of there in England. She pointed her finger out through the open gate. We were at the top of the hill.

Speaker 5:

There was a long road winding from our gate.

Speaker 4:

There was no traffic.

Speaker 5:

On both sides of the roads.

Speaker 4:

There was fields. It is big. We just got to get to London. We know people there. I do not know people. I do not know anyone. How come do no one here to help us? How come my caseworker, she not here to fetch me? How come they give us no release papers? Now, where is that damn taxi?

Speaker 5:

The man on the phone said 10 minutes.

Speaker 4:

They're like 10 years already, true?

Speaker 5:

I don't understand, Yvette. Why did you say that we aren't safe?

Speaker 4:

I made a trick to let us get out of there.

Speaker 5:

What sort of trick?

Speaker 4:

Oh, look.

Speaker 5:

There was our taxi pulling up.

Speaker 4:

It stopped. The side window was open and there was music blasting out.

Speaker 7:

We are the champions, my friend.

Speaker 5:

I knew this song. An attention officer showed me a photo of a band called Queen. One of the musicians had a lot of hair that went down his neck, all the way past his shoulders. Now, I understand fashion and your language, but this hair did not look like fashion, it looked like a punishment. The officer pointed to that musician and said, "What a cock." I could see the cock referred to the man's hair. This taxi driver, he had exactly that kind of hair.

Speaker 4:

Let her do the talking, [inaudible 00:29:39].

Speaker 5:

I needed to show the taxi driver that we were British and not refugees. Hello. I could see that you are a cock.

Speaker 7:

Well, they don't teach you monkeys manners in the jungle, eh? And he drove off.

Speaker 4:

The cows and the sheep all watch the taxi...

Speaker 5:

Disappear down the hill.

Speaker 4:

Maybe we should've let no name here do the talking.

Speaker 5:

What do we do now?

Speaker 4:

Let's just walk, okay? What about you, Little Miss no name, you're coming with? If you agree, say nothing. Good. We all in, [inaudible 00:30:23]. We all walk in out of this place.

Speaker 7:

Nixie Springs, number one fashion magazine.

Speaker 5:

Nixie.

Speaker 8:

I arrived at the office around 9:30. London is a beautiful machine. The city was bright, fresh and inviting. I was excited about closing the June issue. I stood outside for a moment. I wondered what Andrew had been about to say. He had never been at a loss for words before. His long silences only began two years ago ever since we were on holiday. Above me, the magazine's named Nixie stared at me in three foot high pink neon letters.

Speaker 9:

Yahoo.

Speaker 8:

Clarissa. My features editor walked up. We kissed once.

Speaker 9:

Twice.

Speaker 8:

Three times.

Speaker 9:

We'd been friends since school.

Speaker 8:

She hooked her arm around mine...

Speaker 9:

And we pushed open the door.

Speaker 8:

Clarissa, you're wearing yesterday's clothes.

Speaker 9:

So would you be if you'd met yesterday's man.

Speaker 8:

Clarissa, what am I going to do with you?

Speaker 9:

Payrose, strong coffee, paracetamol.

Speaker 8:

At Vogue, all Marie Claire [inaudible 00:31:38] editorial staff would be at their desks by eight.

Speaker 9:

Dressed in Chloe and sipping green tea, yes. On the other hand, they wouldn't still be there at midnight scrolling. [inaudible 00:31:49] they were returning to a venerable Paris fashion house.

Speaker 8:

Grin and Barrett, dear.

Speaker 9:

Yes, well. Are you all right, Sarah?

Speaker 8:

I'm fine.

Speaker 9:

Okay, then. We have more editorial material than space. So first big decision today is...

Speaker 5:

Yvette, what is this trick you have done?

Speaker 4:

Me did a favor for one of the immigration men, all right? He make a few changes on the computer, just put a tick in the right box, and pow. Up come the names for release. So here we is, free and easy.

Speaker 5:

Except we don't have any papers.

Speaker 4:

Yeah, but I ain't afraid.

Speaker 5:

I am.

Speaker 4:

Don't be.

Speaker 5:

Do you know anyone in this country?

Speaker 4:

Sure, darling. William Shakespeare. Lady Diana. Battle of Britain, me know him all. London names on a citizenship exam, you can test me.

Speaker 5:

No. What I meant is do you know anyone?

Speaker 4:

Sure, darling. I got people in London, I got here for Jamaica living down on Cold Harbor, probably bitching and mourning on hell. They begs about all the Nigerians living next door. How about you? You got family there?

Speaker 5:

I showed her the small plastic card with Andrew O'Rourke's photo on it.

Speaker 4:

What is this?

Speaker 5:

It's a driver's license. It has the man's address on it. I am going to visit him.

Speaker 4:

Okay. This is a white man, [inaudible 00:33:29].

Speaker 5:

I know that.

Speaker 4:

Okay, just checking to see if you're blind or stupid. Why you not come to London with me? For sure, we're going to find some of your people down there.

Speaker 5:

I will not know if I can trust them.

Speaker 4:

What? And you trust this man?

Speaker 5:

I met him once. Excuse me, bug, but this man don't look like your type. I met him in my country.

Speaker 4:

What the hell was this man's business in Nigeria?

Speaker 5:

I met him on a beach.

Speaker 4:

They told me you was a virgin.

Speaker 5:

It was not like that.

Speaker 4:

Don't tell me it was not like that, Little Miss Sexy Bug.

Speaker 5:

His wife is there too, Yvette.

Speaker 4:

You must have done something to make him want to give you this valuable document.

Speaker 5:

His wife was there too, Yvette. She is a beautiful lady. She is called Sarah.

Speaker 8:

I like the Bad Dad piece.

Speaker 9:

So do I, Sarah. Of course I do. But it's a great article.

Speaker 8:

You'd rather go with the new kind of orgasm you can only achieve with your boss?

Speaker 9:

Look, the Baghdad piece is the one we'd have run with five years ago.

Speaker 8:

No question.

Speaker 9:

Five years ago, our circulation was so low, we had to take those risks.

Speaker 8:

And that's how we got big by being different. That's us.

Speaker 9:

Getting bigs different from staying big. You know as well as I do, Sarah, we can't be serving up morality tales while the other majors are selling sex.

Speaker 8:

But why do you think our readers got dumber?

Speaker 9:

Oh, it's not that. I think our original readers aren't reading magazines anymore, that's all. They've moved on to greater things, the same way you could if you just played the bloody game. Maybe you don't realize just how big you are now, Sarah. Your next job could be editing a national newspaper.

Speaker 8:

How thrilling. I could put topless girls on every page. My missing finger itched. I looked out the window and saw a police officer getting out of his patrol car. Let's go for a drink after work, Clarissa. You can bring your new man. I'm bringing Andrew.

Speaker 9:

Seriously, out in public with your husband? Isn't that terribly last season?

Speaker 8:

Terribly five years ago. No, I need to stop and remind myself how much I once loved Andrew. I need to think about this. On our honeymoon in a beach front villa, we talked and talked.

Speaker 9:

You talked on your honeymoon?

Speaker 8:

Yes. We talked and talked. The ocean covers seven tenths of the earth surface, and yet my husband could make me not notice it, that is how big he was for me.

Speaker 9:

And now?

Speaker 8:

And now... My desk phone rang. I looked at the time on its screen, 10:25 AM. Will you get that, Clarissa?

Speaker 9:

It's reception. There's a policeman here.

Speaker 8:

Oh, what does he want?

Speaker 9:

He says he wants to shoot a porno film in the office. He says he's not a real policeman and his willy is simply enormous.

Speaker 8:

God's sakes, let him in, it's police.

Speaker 9:

Relax. They can't bust you for conspiracy to run a serious feature piece.

Speaker 10:

The policeman entered.

Speaker 8:

He was blushing horribly. I'm so sorry.

Speaker 10:

Sarah O'Rourke?

Speaker 8:

Summers.

Speaker 10:

Excuse me, madam?

Speaker 8:

Sarah Summers is my professional name.

Speaker 10:

This is the personal matter for Mrs. O'Rourke.

Speaker 9:

Of course, I'm leaving.

Speaker 8:

Can I get you a coffee or tea?

Speaker 10:

Perhaps you better sit down, Mr. O'Rourke.

Speaker 8:

My mobile chime brashly on the glass desktop. A text message arriving. That would be Andrew.

Speaker 10:

Got some bad news for you, Mrs. O'Rourke.

Speaker 8:

What do you mean? It came out more aggressive than I intended. I needed to look at the text message. I saw him staring at the stump of my missing finger. Oh, this? I lost it on holiday.

Speaker 10:

Very sorry, Mrs. O'Rourke.

Speaker 8:

Oh, don't be. It's fine, really. I'm fine now, it's just a finger.

Speaker 10:

That's not what I meant to this-

Speaker 8:

Unless you think it's a big deal and then you learn to use the other hand, and I still feel it, my finger, I mean, the missing one. Sometimes it actually itches and I go to scratch it and there's nothing there, of course. And in my dreams, my finger grows back and I'm so happy to have it back, even though I've learned to do without it. That's silly.

Speaker 10:

The young officer looked down at his notebook. "Your husband was found unconscious at your property shortly after 9:00 this morning, Mrs. O'Rourke. Your neighbor heard cries and placed a 999 call to the effect that a male was apparently in distress. Police forced entry to an upstairs room at 9:15 AM when Andrew O'Rourke was found unconscious. I'm very sorry to tell you, Mrs. O'Rourke, your husband was pronounced dead at the scene. Here we are, 9:33 AM.

Speaker 8:

The policeman closed his pad.

Speaker 10:

We're very sorry, Madam.

Speaker 8:

I picked up my phone. The new text was from Andrew. "So sorry." He was sorry. I switched the phone and myself onto silent mode.

Speaker 4:

So why he give you his driver's license?

Speaker 5:

It is hard for me to think about the day I met Andrew and Sarah.

Speaker 4:

People think Jamaica be all sunshine and Ganja [inaudible 00:39:31]. But you get on the wrong side of politics, bug, they're going to make you suffer. And they're going to make your family suffer, like you wake up in your children's blood, and suddenly your house is real, real quiet.

Speaker 5:

We cannot do anything without papers, Yvette. If we had stayed, if we'd gone through the proper procedure, maybe they would have released us with papers.

Speaker 4:

It don't work like this. Get this into your head, darling. There is only one place for the proper procedure and where it ends, and that is deportation. If they deport us, we got to be killed when we get back home, right? This way, at least we got a chance. Darling, you better believe it. Now, what are we going to do when we get out of this place?

Speaker 5:

Maybe we can find work somewhere, somewhere where they do not ask us for papers.

Speaker 4:

Easy for you. You smart, you talk nice. Plenty work for a girl like you.

Speaker 5:

You talk nice too, Yvette.

Speaker 4:

Me talk like a woman who swirled at home and who talk nicely.

Speaker 5:

Leaving Yvette was the hardest thing I had to do since I left my village. Now, all I have is the echo of Yvette laugh. Sometimes I feel as lonely as the queen of England.

Speaker 8:

Early on that morning, I remember looking down from the bedroom window of our house in Kingston upon Thames. Out by the pond, Batman was poking at baddies with a plastic junior golf club. Beyond our garden, I could see the whole streets back gardens curving away like a bent green spine with barbecues and faded plastic swings for vertebrae. These bloody suburbs are purgatory. How did we all wash up here? My husband is dead. Andrew O'Rourke, the celebrated columnist, has taken his own life. We don't have a grownup language for grief. I knew I ought to feel devastated, my life had fallen apart [inaudible 00:42:09] that the phrase. But Andrew had been dead a whole week now, and here I was still dry-eyed with the whole house wreaking of gin and lilies. There was no longer one single reason for me to be here. Far from the center of my heart cast away here in his suburbs.

I could take Charlie, my credit card and my favorite pink shoes, and we could all just get on a plane together.

Speaker 5:

Hello, Sarah.

Speaker 8:

For the longest time, I simply stared at her. Please, come in. I sat her down on the sofa. Black girl in a stained red and white shirt, sofa from habitat, memories from hell. "I don't know what to say. I thought you must be dead.

Speaker 5:

I am not dead, Sarah.

Speaker 8:

You look very tired. You need some rest, I should think.

Speaker 5:

Yes. You're right. I need some rest.

Speaker 8:

How on earth did you... How did you survive? How did you get here?

Speaker 5:

I walked.

Speaker 8:

From Nigeria?

Speaker 5:

Please, I'm very tired.

Speaker 8:

Oh, yes. Of course. "Do you like a cup of ... You know? I didn't wait for the answer, I fled. I fled Little Bee, sitting on the sofa, propped up on my vogue cushions, and I ran upstairs. I dialed someone, a friend, more than a friend, actually. Lawrence?"

Speaker 10:

What is it?

Speaker 8:

You sound cross.

Speaker 10:

Oh, Sarah, it's you. God, I'm sorry, I thought you were the nanny. She's late, and the baby's just been sick on my [inaudible 00:44:09], shit.

Speaker 8:

Something's happened, Lawrence.

Speaker 10:

What?

Speaker 8:

Someone's turned up, so I wasn't really expecting.

Speaker 10:

Funeral's always like that, all the old skeletons coming theatrical out of the closets.

Speaker 8:

Yes, of course, but this is more than that.

Speaker 10:

It's the funeral. You're going to feel a bit scatty, aren't you? I wish you'd just let me come, but how are you feeling?

Speaker 8:

I don't feel anything. I feel numb. Just waiting for the undertaker now.

Speaker 10:

Right.

Speaker 8:

Pressed my left-hand flat against the window pane and stared at the stump of my last finger, second finger, first and second [inaudible 00:44:48].

Speaker 10:

Sarah, deep breath. Just focus on today for now, will you? And hold it and get the... Stop smearing the fucking toast on the computer. Sorry, that was the baby, he's got to piece of butter on the toaster that he's wiping it on... Sorry, I have to go.

Speaker 8:

Lawrence hung up. I sat on the bed. I waited. Why couldn't I cry? I would have to tell my son the whole story someday. Where would I begin? The summer of 2005, when Andrew had begun his long slide into the depression that finally claimed him. It should never have happened, of course. There are countries where it is unwise to travel. But clever me, I went on holiday somewhere different. That season in Nigeria, there was an oil war. Andrew and I hadn't known. The struggle was briefed, confused, and scarcely reported. The British and Nigerian governments to this day deny that it even happened. God knows they aren't the only ones who tried denial. I went upstairs. Little Bee was still sitting there on the sofa. Her eyes blinked at me. Why did you come here?

Speaker 5:

I did not have any other place to go. You and Andrew are the only ones I know in this country.

Speaker 8:

You hardly know us.

Speaker 5:

We met, that's all. You and Andrew are the only ones I met.

Speaker 8:

Andrew is dead. We're going to bury him this morning. It'll be just blinked, do you understand? My husband died five days ago.

Speaker 5:

I arrived just too late.

Speaker 8:

To find Andrew alive?

Speaker 5:

Yes.

Speaker 8:

You're just in time for his funeral. We're going to have a funeral, it's a kind of a ceremony in a church. It's what we do in this country.

Speaker 5:

I know what you do in this country.

Speaker 7:

The undertaker, his height, impeccable tailoring and sober demeanor.

Speaker 5:

Mommy, it's Bruce Wayne.

Speaker 7:

Ready when you are, ma'am. The undertaker indicated the hurt and the long black limousine.

Speaker 5:

Is that your batmobile?

Speaker 7:

Sorry?

Speaker 8:

No, Charlie. Thank you. We would rather walk. Mismatched and dazed, we walked to my husband's funeral. We looked as if we'd been cobbled together in Photoshop. One white middle class mother in a dark gray skirt, one skinny black refugee girl wearing her Hawaiian shirt, and one small dark night from Gotham City wearing an expression of absolute joy. Does he understand what happened to his father? I've been explaining heaven to him all week. There doesn't seem to be any point explaining to a four-year-old superhero that his father is dead. Batman doesn't believe in the physical possibility of death.

It was cold in the church. I sat in the front pew with Little Bee on my right and Batman between us. 10 days earlier, I'd woken to the sound of the telephone ringing. Suddenly, I began to tremble. Staring at his coffin, I thought Andrew was once a passionate, brilliant, loving man. But there was no release of tears. There was no quick grief for Andrew because Andrew had been slowly lost, first from my heart, then from my mind and only finally from my life. My husband had been doomed since the day we met Little Bee. After it was all over, I clung to Charlie in the backseat of whoever's car. When we got home, Little Bee took Charlie out into the garden to play, marveled at how quickly they'd become a team. No, wasn't going to work anymore, denying her or denying what had happened in Africa. A memory can be banished, but a Nigerian girl alive and next to you is a different thing entirely. Governments may brush her off as a statistical anomaly, but a human being cannot.

Speaker 5:

I woke up on Sarah's sofa. At first, I did not know where I was. The sun was coming in through tall windows. It had curtains made of orange velvets that reached all the way down to the floor. There was a coffee table with a glass top. There were magazines on it, one about fashion and one concern with how to make the home more beautiful. I put my feet on the floor, which was covered in wood.

Speaker 4:

How can a table be made of coffee? And what is this thing called, velvet? And how come that woman let her wood lying all over her floor instead of in a pile like everyone else, or was she very lazy?

Speaker 5:

The wood on Sarah's floor was not fire wood, it was a Swedish engineered floor manufactured using ethical forestry practices. Whenever I go into a new place, I must always work out how I would kill myself there in case the man came suddenly. I make sure that I am ready.

Speaker 8:

Would you like some tea?

Speaker 5:

So we drank tea in Sarah's kitchen.

Speaker 8:

We need to talk about what happened. Are you ready to talk about that, about what happened after the men took you away down the beach? Please Bee, I need to know.

Speaker 5:

I did not want to talk about it, but if this woman was going to make me do it, then I would do it quickly and I would not spare her. Okay, Sarah. So I told her everything about what happened. I cannot stop talking because I had started my own story and it wanted to be finished. We cannot choose where we start and stop. Our stories are the tellers of us.

Speaker 8:

I stopped talking then, and we sat there holding our cold cups of tea. Sarah's face was completely white. Your beautiful sister. My God. Jesus. Look, do you want to stay here with me and Charlie for a while?

Speaker 5:

I am illegal, Sarah. The men can come any minute and take me back to my country.

Speaker 8:

Why did they let you out if you're not allowed to stay?

Speaker 5:

They made a mistake. If you look pretty or if you talk good, sometimes they make mistakes for you.

Speaker 8:

But they couldn't just come for you, Bee, this isn't Nazi Germany. There must be some appeal. I can tell them what will happen if you have to go back.

Speaker 5:

They will tell you Nigeria is a safe country, Sarah. My eyes searched the garden for something to kill myself with in case the men came suddenly.

Speaker 8:

Look, I edit a magazine. I know people. We could kick up a stink.

Speaker 5:

There was a shed at the far end with the large guarding fork leaning against it, a fine implement. I will run with that fork, and I will throw myself onto those sharp, shining points.

Speaker 8:

You're so young. All you've seen his trouble and so you think trouble is all you're going to get.

Speaker 5:

Trouble is like the ocean. It covers two thirds of the world.

Speaker 8:

I feel so bloody guilty.

Speaker 5:

It's not your fault, Sarah. I've lost my parents and my sister, and you have lost your husband.

Speaker 8:

I didn't lose Andrew, Bee, I destroyed him. I cheated on him with another man. That's the only reason we were in bloody Nigeria in the first place, we thought we needed a holiday to patch things up.

Speaker 5:

Maybe I will only be able to stay for a little while, but while I am here, I will love you as if you were my mother, and I will love Charlie as if he were my brother. God be just a mess at the moment.

Speaker 8:

It's okay, Sarah. It's okay. You're right. Got to get a grip. We can't let ourselves be the things people things happen too. What I'm going to do is I'm going to track down your caseworker and find out where we can make an appeal. Then we could... God, who could that be? Go with Charlie.

Speaker 5:

Come on, batman, let us play a game.

Speaker 8:

I pulled myself together and went through the house. I opened the door to Lawrence.

Speaker 10:

Hello, Sarah.

Speaker 8:

Suited, travel bag slung over his shoulder.

Speaker 10:

I didn't know if I'd got the right address.

Speaker 8:

I'm not sure you have.

Speaker 10:

Thought you'd be pleased.

Speaker 8:

We can't do this. What about your wife?

Speaker 10:

I told Linda I was going on a management course, Birmingham, three days, leadership.

Speaker 8:

You think she believed you?

Speaker 10:

I just thought you might need some support.

Speaker 8:

Thanks. I've got some.

Speaker 10:

Who?

Speaker 8:

Look, it's all got a bit complicated. Little Bee turned up here this morning.

Speaker 10:

Who?

Speaker 8:

One of the Nigerian girls from that day on the beach.

Speaker 10:

Jesus. I thought you said the men killed her.

Speaker 8:

I'm sure they had. I saw the men dragging her, kicking and screaming up the beach.

Speaker 10:

And she just turned up at your doorstep?

Speaker 8:

This morning, two hours before the funeral.

Speaker 10:

And you let her in?

Speaker 8:

Wouldn't anyone?

Speaker 10:

No, Sarah, most people would not.

Speaker 8:

I could hardly just slam the door on her face. She got out of the country and came here, and she was two years in an immigration center in Essex.

Speaker 10:

Christ, what did she do?

Speaker 8:

Nothing. They just lock them up when they get here.

Speaker 10:

For two years? How did she find you?

Speaker 8:

Apparently she had Andrew's driver's license, he dropped it in the sand.

Speaker 10:

Oh my God. Is she still here? Is she threatening you? Tell me you've called the police.

Speaker 8:

It's not like that. She's played really nicely with Charlie all afternoon. He was Batman, she was Robin. They made quite a team.

Speaker 10:

But what is she doing here? What does she want?

Speaker 8:

I suppose she wants to stay here for a while.

Speaker 10:

I want you to call the police. What if she turns nasty? What if she's crazy?

Speaker 8:

My son would know, Lawrence. His bat senses would tell him.

Speaker 10:

Fuck, Sarah, this isn't funny. Call the police.

Speaker 8:

I'm not going to call the police. I'm going to let her stay.

Speaker 10:

That's her, is it? Is she legal?

Speaker 8:

I don't give a shit, do you?

Speaker 10:

I work for the home office, Sarah, I could lose my job if I knew you were harboring an illegal and didn't do anything about it. Technically, if I had the slightest doubt, I could be sacked, even if I just step through the door.

Speaker 8:

So don't.

Speaker 10:

This isn't comfortable for me either, Sarah. It'd be nice if I love my wife, and it'd be super if I didn't work for the forces of darkness. I wish I could be idealistic like you, but that's not me, Sarah. I can't afford to

act as if I'm someone. I'm nothing. Even my cover story is nothing. Three days in Birmingham, Birmingham, fuck. I'm not ashamed of my adultery, Sarah, I'm ashamed of my fucking cover story.

Speaker 8:

Sort of remember why I like you.

Speaker 10:

Are you letting me in then?

Speaker 8:

I closed my eyes and felt the resolve draining out of me. Don't get used to it. Little Bee came up and stood just behind my shoulder.

Speaker 5:

Do not worry about me. Officially, you cannot even see me. You are in Birmingham and I am in Nigeria.

Speaker 10:

I wonder which one of us will be found out first.

Speaker 8:

Is you my new daddy?

Speaker 10:

Batman stared at him.

Speaker 8:

Batman, this is Lawrence. Lawrence is mummy's friend.

Speaker 10:

His bat senses must have told him something.

Speaker 8:

Is you a goodie or a baddie?

Speaker 10:

Honestly? Well, I think I'm one of those innocent bystanders you see in the background. I'm just a man from a crowd scene.

Speaker 5:

Batman, will you show Robin where you go to sleep?

Speaker 8:

Okay, upstairs.

Speaker 10:

Robin?

Speaker 8:

Thank you, Bee.

Speaker 10:

What? What did I do?

Speaker 8:

Might have made an effort.

Speaker 10:

Well, guess what? I thought I'd be alone with you tonight. It's not an easy situation to adjust to.

Speaker 8:

She's my guest, Lawrence, the least you could do is be polite.

Speaker 10:

I just don't think that you know what you're getting yourself into, Sarah. I don't think it's healthy for you to have that girl staying here. Every time you see her, you're going to be reminded of what happened.

Speaker 8:

I've spent two years denying what happened, ignoring it, letting it fester. That's what Andrew did too, and it killed him in the end. I'm not going to let it kill me and Charlie, I'm going to help Little Bee and make everything right, and then I can get on with my life.

Speaker 10:

Yes, but what if you can't make it right? You know most likely the outcome of that girl, don't you? They'll deport her.

Speaker 8:

I'm sure it won't come to that.

Speaker 10:

Sarah, we have an entire department consecrated to showing that it will come to that. Officially, Nigeria is pretty safe and-

Speaker 8:

I can't not try.

Speaker 10:

You'll be dragged down by the bureaucracy, and then they'll send her home anyway. I can't help you if all your focus is on that girl. You're going to have to choose between your life and hers. Charity is lovely, Sarah, but there has to come to a logical point where it starts. Will you

Speaker 8:

Tell me where the logical point is to stop something that started like that? I slammed my damaged hand down on the table.

Speaker 10:

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come and I'll get a hotel.

Speaker 8:

Oh, Lawrence.

Speaker 10:

I just feel so bloody silly. I had it all worked out, I got the time off work, I made up the story for Linda.

Speaker 8:

Come here. Thank you for coming. Please stay.

Speaker 10:

I don't know if I...

Speaker 8:

Stop before I change my mind. That night, Sarah looked into my room. I'm glad you're still awake. Thanks for helping with Charlie. Look, Lawrence is staying overnight. I realize it might look a bit sudden, so I just wanted to have this chat with you. I just wanted to help you understand.

Speaker 5:

It is not hard to understand. We are all trying to be happy in this world. I'm happy because I do not think the men will come today and kill me, and you are happy because you can make your own choices. And Lawrence is your choice, right? I do not think you are wrong for living the life you were born in.

Speaker 8:

Wow. That was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Bless you for understanding. I hope you can rest. Goodnight.

Speaker 5:

Happiness for Sarah was a long future where she could live the life of her choice. I woke up very early and went into the kitchen.

Speaker 10:

Lawrence was there.

Speaker 5:

Wearing a bath robe, and he stood there in his bare feet.

Speaker 10:

Tea or coffee?

Speaker 5:

Tea, thank you.

Speaker 10:

Suppose Sarah needs to rest this morning. Look, I think you and I need to make a plan for your welfare. I'm going to be very clear about this, I think you should go to the local police and report yourself. I don't think it's right for you to expose Sarah to the stress of harboring you. I don't think it's right for you being here. I don't think it's good for Sarah.

Speaker 5:

Do you think you are good for Sarah?

Speaker 10:

Yes. Yes, I do.

Speaker 5:

She's a good person, she saved my life.

Speaker 10:

I know Sarah very well. She told me the whole story.

Speaker 5:

So you must believe that I am only here to help her.

Speaker 10:

Well, I'm not convinced you're the kind of help she needs.

Speaker 5:

I'm the kind of help that will look after her child like he was my own brother. I'm the kind of help that will clean her house and wash her clothes and sing to her when she is sad. What kind of help are you, Lawrence? Perhaps you are the kind of help that only arrives when it wants sexual intercourse.

Speaker 10:

I'm not going to take offense at that. You're one of those women who has a funny idea about men.

Speaker 5:

I'm one of those women who have seen men do things that are not funny.

Speaker 10:

Oh, please, this is Europe, we're a little more house-trained over here.

Speaker 5:

Different from us, you think? A wolf must be a wolf and a dog must be a dog.

Speaker 10:

Have you understood how serious your situation is? I don't think you'd smile.

Speaker 5:

If I could not smile, I think my situation would be a lot more serious.

Speaker 10:

We drank tea.

Speaker 5:

I watched him and he watched me.

Speaker 10:

Without blinking.

Speaker 5:

What will you do if I do not go to the police?

Speaker 10:

Will I turn you in myself, you mean? I'll do what's best for Sarah.

Speaker 5:

You are frightening me, Lawrence.

Speaker 10:

I'm reacting to the situation, that's all. That's what Andrew didn't do. He was like a stuck record. He stuck to his principles, and he left this thing with you overwhelm him and Sarah, that's why he lost her.

Speaker 5:

Don't you have principles too?

Speaker 10:

My principle is that I love Sarah. You can't imagine what she means to me. I will do anything to keep Sarah, anything, do you understand?

Speaker 5:

You are worried that I will take Sarah away from you. That is why you do not want me here. It has nothing to do with what is good for her.

Speaker 10:

I'm worried that Sarah will change her focus, change her life more than she needs to right now in order to help you.

Speaker 5:

And you are worried that she'll forget all about you in her new life.

Speaker 10:

Yes. If I lost Sarah, I'd fall apart, I'd hit the bottle. Bam. That terrifies me, even if you think it sounds pathetic.

Speaker 5:

It is not pathetic. In my world, death will come chasing. In your world, it will start whispering in your ear to destroy yourself. I know because death started whispering to me in the detention center. Death is death. We are all scared of it.

Speaker 10:

Is it really death you were running from? A lot of your people, you just come here and they're after a comfortable life.

Speaker 5:

If they deport me to Nigeria, I will be arrested. If they find out who I am and what I've seen, the politicians will find a way to have me killed, or if I'm lucky, they will put me in prison. A lot of people who have seen what the oil companies do go to prison for a long time. Bad things happen in a Nigerian prison.

Speaker 10:

Whatever's going to happen to you is going to happen to you eventually, whether I do anything or not. This isn't your country. They'll come for you. I promise you they will. They come for all of you in the end.

Speaker 5:

I felt a rage exploding inside me so fierce, it made my eyeballs hurt. Sarah would hate you if you told the police about me.

Speaker 10:

Sarah wouldn't know. I've seen how the immigration people work. They would come for you in the night. You wouldn't have time to tell Sarah. You won't get to say a word.

Speaker 5:

I would find a way to tell her what you had done. And I would find a way to tell your wife too. I would break your family life and your secret life.

Speaker 10:

Lawrence looked out to the garden. When Sarah talked about you, I was imagining. I don't know, not someone like you anyway.

Speaker 5:

I've been in your country two years. I've learned your language and your rules. I am more like you than me now.

Speaker 10:

I really don't think you're anything like me. I'm a shit, huh? A loser. And you've got me over a barrel. You really won't tell Linda, will you?

Speaker 5:

We should be friends, Lawrence.

Speaker 10:

I've just admitted that I'd save you down the river if I could. You're the brave little refugee girl, and I'm the selfish bastard. I think our roles are pretty clearly delineated, don't you? Look at me.

Speaker 5:

He turned my face up towards his, so I had to look into his eyes.

Speaker 10:

I wish I could make you disappear, but I'm nobody. I'm just a [inaudible 01:07:15]. Now, I won't tell the police about you, not if you keep quiet. But if you tell anyone ever about Sarah and me, I will have you on a plane to Nigeria. I swear it will be the last thing I do before my life falls apart.

Speaker 5:

I am selfish too, you know?

Speaker 10:

No, you're really not.

Speaker 5:

You think I'm a sweet little girl, do you? It does not occur to you that I can be clever like a white person, that I can be selfish like a white person?

Speaker 10:

Selfish, you? You took the last biscuit out of the tin, did you, left the top off Sarah's toothpaste?

Speaker 5:

I left Sarah's husband hanging in the air.

Speaker 10:

What? Wait. What did you just tell me?

Speaker 5:

Stop it, [inaudible 01:08:05].

Speaker 10:

Shut up. Tell me what you've done. What happened?

Chrissy Gashi:

Myra, Annie, Chris.

Speaker 12:

Hi. How many of you have actually read the book? So you know what happens. Okay. Introduce.

Chrissy Gashi:

Oh, yes. I'm going to have you guys introduce yourselves.

Speaker 4:

Hello, my name is Kadria Shabazz.

Speaker 8:

My name is Natasha Anders.

Speaker 5:

Emily Grogan.

Speaker 7:

Sean Law.

Speaker 16:

Teresa Hancock.

Speaker 10:

Tom Dewey.

Speaker 12:

Well, it's always a little bit terrifying to know that the author of a book that we're doing is in the audience for the first time, but it's really lovely to have you all here today, and thank you so much for coming. I don't know, sometimes I think that Chris Agashi and Jane and my brain starts to meld because we had been reading this book when she called us and said, "We'd love to have you do Little Bee for the Seattle Reads." And I thought, oh my goodness. We've been talking about this book. And it is really just an amazing book. So if you haven't read it, you have to. And if you have read it, buy more copies and give them to all your friends. But I don't know where to start. Does anybody have any major questions?

Speaker 13:

Can I just say something?

Speaker 12:

Yes. Oh, yeah, of course. Would you like to say something?

Speaker 13:

I just wanted to thank you so much. It's an absolutely beautiful adaptation. I thought it was great. Beautifully adapted, beautifully directed, and superbly acted. Thank you all so much. What was so beautiful about it is you made the adaptation skipped all of the boring bits of the book. It cut straight to the chase in all of the scenes. And you guys, your comic timing, you just nailed it again and again perfectly, and it was beautiful. And I just thought fabulously directed as well. Just a wonderful, wonderful thing. As an author, you always want your work, hopefully, to be a starting point rather than an end in itself. And to see someone else take your stuff and do something beautiful with it like that is the most moving experience you could have. I'm really, really touched by it. It was one of the greatest moments ever for me, so thank you so much.

Speaker 12:

Where did these characters come from? Where did this story come from for you?

Speaker 13:

Well, I went to work in an immigration detention center by mistake. This is when I was 22. I was a student, and I was working in the summer holidays, trying to make some money to pay my way. And the job that I was doing was casual laboring. The deal was that they would just take you to a point every morning and take you in a bus to where you were working that day. And on this one particular day, they drove us to an immigration detention center, which was Britain's first immigration detention center. And it was five miles from where I'd been studying. And we were working there in the kitchens, and we were serving food in the line to refugees. So they were from Rwanda and from Sierra Leone and from Nigeria and from Jamaica and from the Balkans. And I got talking with them.

And this place was sold to us as a prison. They told us that we were going to work in a prison. And so I was trying to make conversation with the prisoners as I thought they were. And I would ask them questions like, "What did you do to get here?" And the answer is things like, "I walked across Africa." Someone told me that, "I walked across Africa." And this person had walked, actually, from Nigeria,

which involves walking across jungles, mountains, and a little thing called the Sahara Desert. And he'd been in Cairo, worked in Cairo, had paid a smuggler to take him to Southern Europe, and then he'd walked across Europe. The most resourceful, most extraordinary people I'd ever met, actually, in that place. And so when it came time to write a novel, I thought that's the story I'd like to tell because I honestly thought if you could tell a story of one human being who'd been through an experience like that, then people would understand what it meant to take someone like that and throw them into an immigration detention center.

That's all I wanted to do, just tell one human story, because I always think if you can tell one human story that's true, it makes a lot of political rhetoric false. So yeah, that's the point of the story.

Speaker 12:

Does anybody have any questions from the audience? Yeah. Has this been adapted before for the theater?

Speaker 13:

Yeah, just once, but not on this scale. I did an event with the Santa Monica Public Library, Citywide Reads program there last year, and it was adapted as a short dramatic dialogue between Sarah and Little Bee. But nothing on this scale, this is like a world first. And it's going to be a movie, but I doubt if the movie will be as good as this.

Speaker 12:

Anybody else have any questions? The question is whether or not his experience has left him optimistic for the plight of these facilities.

Speaker 13:

It's a great question. I don't see change in a positive direction right now in immigration policy in my country, in the United Kingdom. I can't speak to how the United States treats refugees. I'm not an expert and I haven't done my research, so I excuse myself from talking about the situation here. But I can talk about Europe. And in Europe, I notice a hardening of attitudes towards refugees, which I think is sad because it means that people like me haven't done our job well enough. The job of journalism and of storytelling, of films and of musicians is to inform public opinion, and not to influence it, but just to put good information into the system so that we elect officials who support public policy that is good. That social change isn't happening in Europe right now, it's going the other way, which means that I haven't been doing my job hard enough.

I'm looking for the next level of persuasion. I'm always not acting alone either, by the way, as part of a bunch of people who are trying to raise awareness of what happens with refugees. We're just trying to think, well, what do you do next? There's been a lot of awareness raising that hasn't resulted in a public policy shift towards a healthy attitude to refugees. So a lot of us are thinking, well, what do we do next? What do we try to do to persuade people that refugees are part of the solution, not part of the problem? Oh, thanks. And it's true, this country, America and my country, the United Kingdom, they're built on

successive waves of immigration. And the idea that it was a very modern idea that we must now stop the clock and our countries are finished, which I don't agree with.

And if you actually look back at many of the famous figures who've shaped our history, they're refugees, they're immigrants. Everyone's favorite scientist, Albert Einstein, changed the world. One of my favorite novelists, Joseph Conrad, changed my world. And huge historical figures like Karl Marx love him or hate him, but you can't deny that he was an important historical figure. I think maybe that's the next level of persuasion, to try and talk about all of the people who have shaped our society who've been refugees. So in answer to your question, I don't see a positive change yet, but I think that means we need to work harder to make it happen. Do you have a sense you have a follow-up?

Speaker 12:

The difference between legal and illegal immigration, is it thoroughly, or is it just an economic issue?

Speaker 13:

It's a great question. I don't make a distinction anymore between legal and illegal immigration, between people who are moving for economic reasons or for reasons of personal safety. I'm always looking to the individual, and to say what is that individual going to contribute? I wish that people were judged on a case by case basis. I sometimes think when we were talking about what do we need to do next in terms of the persuasion that we do, I had this idea with a couple of friends for a TV format show called Refugee Idol. So we'd all be up on the stage here, and we would all be refugees seeking asylum, in the United States, for example, why not? And you'd be the TV audience or the studio audience. And we would all have to make a case. We'd say, "Okay, my name is Yvette. I'm from Jamaica. This is my character. This is what I do." And you would have to say yes or no, you could vote, you'd vote for one. And that person would get to stay.

Now obviously, that'd be a dumb format for a TV show. And it would also be very cruel for the people who got deported. And I don't want to make a joke about it, but what I did want to point out is that if you could persuade people to look at the individual rather than to look at the statistical problem, then you would actually start to see the potential in people. Another way to look at it is if you had to say, well, look, what if I had to invest my own money in that person?" You could look at a refugee and say, well, let's not think about statehood or let's not think about giving that person a passport or whatever, let's just think, what if I had to decide, am I going to invest in that person or not? Am I going to share my time with them?

Am I going to share my house with them? Am I going to lend or give them money? And there's a lot of people that I've met. I interviewed a bunch of refugees when I was researching the book, and a good three quarters of them, I would have personally invested in. If I'd had the choice, if the government had empowered me to sponsor one of them, then I would have done because you know that they're going to be an asset. And I think the next level of persuasion from all of us who are interested is to find new ways of getting people to look beyond the politics of whether someone is legal or illegal, or whether they're economically desirable or undesirable to look at the person and say, would I back that person to make it personal again rather than political, Because I find that people are much better at judging other people than governments are. We need to make it personal again.

Speaker 12:

I have to say that I do love the humor that you have in your book. And I'm glad you heard it today because I strive to keep that in there. I think it's very important that Little Bee has this not just resilience, but a desire to smile, a desire to see the beauty in the stories. And I just wondered if you might talk about that thread a little bit, because it really struck me reading the book, because otherwise it could just be horribly hard to read a story about refugees who are completely discarded and mistreated.

Speaker 13:

Well, a lot of the people that I met were really funny. And this is the really surprising thing, that you meet people who've been through stuff that I don't think I could survive, who've been detained in conditions that would probably psychologically break me. These are people who are extremely strong, and yet they're making jokes. I've made friends with people who have made jokes about the terrible things that have happened to them. And a lot of these people are really funny. And I started to think, well, why is that? I don't know. I have half a theory that you can take a lot away from a person. You can take their family away from them, you can take their friends away from them, you can take their livelihood away from them, you can take their passport away from them, you can take the shirt off their back, but if you can't take away their sense of humor, then they still have their dignity.

You haven't broken them. And I began to think that maybe a sense of humor is a survival mechanism that's extremely effective. It isn't just the icing on the cake to have a happy life and to find it funny, it's actually the cake to be able to see humor in things. And so I tried to write a character that was funny, she's funny. And I think that's what makes her strong. And more and more, actually, that's what I admire in people, is the ability not to take things too seriously.

Speaker 12:

Well, and she's funny because she just speaks the truth so easily. She holds up a mirror to our own, who we are in our society, and we get to laugh with her at ourselves too, in a way that is marvelous. Does anybody have a-

Speaker 13:

I'm never going to be able to think about my characters in the same way again after today, actually. I'm always going to be seeing you guys now, and that's good. I'm really happy about that. I thought this was wonderful, really wonderful. And no, it's really weird, I'm not a very visual person at all. I don't see my characters at all. And if you read my text, I think I hardly describe people. I don't think there's any physical description. In my first book, I forgot to give them names. I didn't really realize till the end what I'd done. And I'm really into scenes and dialogue and just trying to get the timing of dialogue to really work. And I talk aloud to myself when I'm writing and I try to make it flow. Even the narrative bits that aren't dialogue, I try to give them a certain rhythm. And I don't know, there's a certain rhythm that compels you to keep following the story, and I try to lock into that rhythm.

And yeah, I get to the end of books and I realize I have no idea what the characters look like or what they sound like or how they dress often. So I don't really have an idea of what the characters are like.

They're these disembodied voices. And that's why it's such a brilliant experience to see how other people interpret those characters and how they responded, actually imbue them with a lot more life than I had seen them with. And it's brilliant. And actually, that's the great thing about reading, isn't it? Every reader is reading a different novel. I'm always amazed by that when I'm talking with people about other novels that I've loved by some of my other favorite writers. It's like we've read a completely different book. And that's the mystery of the reading and writing thing, it's just like what a creative process reading is, and what a creative process a dramatic interpretation is, whatever. So yeah, in answers to your question, that was really different from the way I'd imagined it, and really better.

Speaker 12:

Let's do one more. So just one more time about the fact that as a journalist, he's such a good storyteller though.

Speaker 14:

Well, since you're a professional journalist and that's how you make your livelihood, I thought you were a marvelous storyteller. I listened to the book rather than read it because I can no longer read, and I just loved every bit of it. I couldn't call it a page turner, but it was a listener, a listening experience far into the night for the two days that I listened to it. And it was wonderful to have that format to be able to enjoy such a wonderful book as well as in the written form. So thank you for making that available in other formats rather than just in a book. Thank you.

Speaker 13:

Thanks very much.

Chrissy Gashi:

She also said that this performance today was at least as good as the recorded book, yeah. Okay. So thank you all. Thank you, Bookit. Thank you everybody.

Speaker 15:

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