

WINDRUSH
CHILD

For my twin sister Velda, because I really want her to
read a book, and she should start with this one.

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WINDRUSH CHILD

**BENJAMIN
ZEPHANIAH**

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Author's Note

Warning. This story contains strong language that some readers might find offensive. In reality, when you are on the receiving end of some of these words you are very offended, but I think I would be cheating readers if I were to gloss over some of the language that is used by racists. As a young boy in school, I remember people saying, 'Sticks and stone may break my bones, but names can never hurt me,' and I didn't believe them. Names hurt me. I was called names because of the colour of my skin, because I was dyslectic, even because of the way I spoke, and those words really hurt. Fortunately, I used words to fight back, and I became a writer.

Now I use my words to give voice to people like Leonard, the main character of this book. He's just doing what people have been doing for thousands of years, moving around the planet. When people move they always have to deal with the trauma of leaving

the country of their birth, and then the struggle to fit into their new home. I've heard adults talking about this for years, but I wanted to explore what it was like for their children. So, mind your language, and please understand that the language contained in this book is here because the author, a Windrush child, is keeping it real.

Prologue

I didn't just appear here. I've been on a journey. I've lived a life. I wasn't blown in by the wind. I didn't land here by chance. My roots are deep. They run deep in the memories of my ancestors. As deep as the foundations of the first civilizations built on this earth. As deep as the deepest roots of the oldest African tree down in this earth. Deep. Deeper than the human imagination will allow. Deep, I'm telling you. So I shouldn't be judged by where I am now. Yes, I'm desperate; yes, I'm in need, but I'm no beggar. I sit in this horrendous place alone and in need of others, but I am a family man. I'm told that men have died in places like this. I am told that men have died in this very place, but I have no intention of dying here. I have lived too long, and come too far, to die in the hands of those who do not love me. I have worked too hard, and struggled too much to die on this cold, concrete bench, alone. They call me old, but

I must live.

I have cried, but trust me, that is not a sign of weakness. Crying made me strong. Crying made me human. Crying reminded me that the biggest man you ever did see was once just a baby, and he cried too. I'm a man, and I cried. It's the injustice that hurts. As I sit in the windowless room, with its cold magnolia walls that are covered in distressed graffiti, and the last messages of hopeless, miserable men, I seek love and strength. Because I know my place, and it's not here.

Chapter One

I love history. I am history. We made history. We were the people of Maroon Town, Jamaica. This is where I was born on 15 October 1947. But long before I was born – I’m talking hundreds and hundreds of years ago – the Taíno and Arawak lived in Jamaica. They were farmers who used to create fertilizers to help grow cassava, peanuts, corn and beans. They used to trade pottery, woodcarvings and crops with other Amazonian tribes, and although it wasn’t perfect – they lived in peace for hundreds of years. I didn’t learn any of this at school in Jamaica. In school I just got taught English history. It was my grandma, my mum and the elders in Maroon Town who told me about the real history of Jamaica. It wasn’t written down, but passed on by word of mouth, from one generation to the next. They even taught me songs and poems about our history, but we weren’t allowed to sing those songs in school. Instead we had to sing ‘God Save the Queen’

and 'Rule Britannia'.

In the hills outside Maroon Town lived my favourite family friend, Brother Book. He had very dark skin and long golden dreadlocks. He lived a natural life, up high in a hut with no electricity and no running water. He didn't even have any books, but he was called Brother Book because he had so much knowledge. He would come to our house for food sometimes. One afternoon, as I sat with Grandma eating cashew nuts, he asked me a question.

"So, young Leonard. Tell me, who discovered Jamaica?"

I thought the answer was easy. "Christopher Columbus," I said enthusiastically.

But as I looked at my grandma, she raised an eyebrow, so I knew something was wrong.

Brother Book smiled and stroked his long beard as he spoke to me with his deep voice.

'So what about de Taíno an' de Arawak people? Christopher Columbus only came here in 1494. People have lived on this island for thousands of years before dat. So how comes you don't think one of them discovered it?'

'That's what it sey at school,' I replied. 'That's what it sey in all of de books.'

'Yes. But who wrote the books?' he said. 'Europeans

wrote history from their point of view. We must remember that when Christopher Columbus landed his ship here, flying a Spanish flag with a Spanish crew, everything changed. The Taíno, the Arawak, and all the other people who were here were killed by the Spanish. Those that weren't killed by them died from the diseases they brought with them.'

Then Grandma joined in.

'Then de Spanish began to bring Africans here by force, and mek dem work as slaves. Many slaves would run away an' live in de mountains an' some of dem would try to fight de Spanish. Dem fight very hard you know, but they were outnumbered.'

Brother Book interrupted gently.

'Other European countries were trying to tek control of land in Africa an' de Americas to expand their slave trade, but de Spanish held on to Jamaica.'

We all chewed on our cashew for a moment when a question came to me.

'So why don't we speak Spanish?'

'Because,' replied Brother Book with eyes wide open, 'in 1665, de English fought de Spanish for Jamaica an' won. More an' more Africans were then brought to de island to work in de sugar plantations. De English were getting tea from India, an' so they needed sugar for their tea an' cakes.'

I was surprised. ‘All dat for tea and cakes?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ said Grandma. ‘Later they started to deal in cotton an’ all kind of minerals, but it started because Europeans had sweet teeth. Now you know Manchester in England?’ she asked, looking at me.

‘Yes, Grandma,’ I replied.

‘Well not far from Manchester there’s a port called Liverpool. Ships sailed from there an’ other ports like Bristol an’ London, an’ they travelled to Africa. In Africa they captured people, and sometimes they got corrupt Africans to capture people for them an’ they took those captured Africans to Jamaica or other Caribbean islands to work as slaves.’

‘We are descended from those Africans,’ said Brother Book.

‘That’s right,’ Grandma continued. ‘Then, before they returned home they filled de ships with sugar, fruits an’ other goods for de people in England to enjoy.’

‘This,’ Brother Book said, ‘was called the transatlantic slave trade. A triangular trade route across the ocean from Africa, to the Caribbean then on to Britain. This evil slave triangle made de slave traders a lot of money for many years.’

Brother Book and Grandma went on to tell me that the slave trade continued until the nineteenth century, and that it wasn’t just the English and the Spanish who

were doing it. The Dutch, the French, Danish and even the Swedes were making money by enslaving human beings.

‘But,’ said Brother Book, waving his finger in the air as in the direction of England. ‘It was de English who boasted that they were de biggest and the best, followed closely by de Portuguese.’

I used to love sitting on the veranda talking with Grandma, and it was even more special when Brother Book was there. The more I learned about slavery, the more terrible it seemed, but I wanted to learn as much as I could.

In Maroon Town I could see that most of the people were of African descent but there were also people from China, India and Syria. I used to wonder where they came from until Brother Book explained to me that when slavery was over the British brought lots of Chinese and the Indians to Jamaica to work. They were paid very little, some were not paid at all, and most people thought it was not much better than slavery. The Lebanese and the Syrians came as refugees, and there were other Europeans who came simply because they wanted to live in a warm, beautiful country.