

Cyril Dabydeen

Zeena

She was back at work just three months after giving birth, but Zeena kept thinking about her newborn, contemplative as she looked. *Whack-whack* came the sound all around her, the other women wielding their cutlasses against the stubborn blacksage shrub. When Zeena did the same, the others seemed ready to ridicule her. “Look at she, eh,” one hurled and wiped sticky perspiration from her neck. Grimaces, as the fierce sun beat down on them; as Zeena tried fighting off tiredness by lifting her cutlass again, but it remained heavy in the air. Faheem, the oldest of the women, glanced at Zeena, keeping an eye on her.

Whack! that sound again.

Let them talk, Zeena muttered to herself, as her son Hatim’s giggles came to her, his small hands and feet . . . toes . . . mouth, his pleasant smell, everything came back. She loved no one or anything as much. *Her baby!* But giving birth was pain she didn’t want to go through again. Oh, Hatim’s giggles!

Slowly the other women drifted off to form a cluster among the acacia. Insects whirled, and the heat grew more intense. “You know . . . whose child is it, eh?” Shanti, one of the women, asked, referring to Zeena again. The others simply scoffed. But with Zeena out of earshot, tongues kept wagging. “Whose is it?” echoed Doreen, an African among the Indian women; Doreen was sometimes blackguarded in the way she laughed, crazy-like, the others noted, and also laughed.

“Zeena’s bound to keep it a secret from us,” smirked Finey. “As long as she dead,” grated another, watching Zeena a few yards away pull an acacia branch from her face.

“Dead?” quizzed another, noting Zeena again wipe her sticky neck, then brandish her cutlass at the wasp hovering close to her. Faheem, with eyes like a hawk’s, also looked at Zeena, more steadfastly than the others, as around them the forest heaved in a fresh gust of wind. Oh, Faheem really wanted them to get on with the work before DeVries, the Driver, came to supervise their work.

Eyes roved across the hedge of carrion-crow brush . . . and Faheem now drew near Zeena. A strange dryness in her throat, Faheem felt, as the other women in a bunched knot kept talking about Zeena, indeed the youngest among them. And whose child had Zeena borne with her being without a husband?

Faheem watched DeVries—a “red man” as they sometimes called him—approach; and everyone dreaded his “power.” With sinewy arms the women heaved their cutlasses almost vengefully against the stubborn

brush, clearing the forest away, they figured even as they averted their eyes.

DeVries merely looked at Zeena: how she twisted her head sideways, also to avert his attention on her; and now it was his pretence at inspecting everyone's work. Not Zeena's only?

Faheem immediately felt her lips become dry; but she concentrated on the work that had to be done to help set up a fledgling cocoa plantation not far from the sugar estate.

From behind an embroidery of leaves DeVries seemed, well, cock-eyed; and he never told them how much they would be paid for their "piece work," Faheem thought to herself; he would only mutter glumly, "You have to work hard"; and to Faheem, "The others look up to you." Did he mean Zeena only look up to her?

More dryness Faheem felt, her lips chapped; and it was because she was getting old for this kind of work, wasn't it?

DeVries laughed right then, his mouth expanding like rubber, as the wind right then seemed to carry the sound far. DeVries took out from his hip pocket a short comb and passed it through his thin hair, and maybe he thought he was attractive to the women. Not just to Zeena? Faheem's eyes flitted from him to Zeena once more in the expanse of sage brush, an embroidery of greenery all around; and indeed, everyone had learnt to *tolerate* him, as DeVries kept making promises of better wages, thinking he owned the plantation.

Now DeVries could *pick and choose* among them also, even get them fired. Get Zeena fired too? *Oh, never!* And Zeena figured she shouldn't have come back to work so soon after giving birth and instinctively she put her hand to her breast still primed with milk. But she needed the money—pittance—hard as the work was in clearing the forest to start the cocoa plantation. *Really?*

Once more Faheem looked at Zeena, and thinking that they must keep chopping the brush in their weeding gang, as it was called. Vaguely Faheem thought too that DeVries lived with a woman in the town, as rumour had it, one who wore rouge and bright-red lipstick. Indeed, DeVries' flirting ways with other women did not go unnoticed. Right then Doreen laughed waywardly, it seemed like, with desultory time passing by; and the other women wiped perspiration from their faces, the heat overwhelming their senses.

Zeena again felt a tingle in her breasts nevertheless, as her thoughts once more went to Hatim, her son. Moving closer to her, Faheem muttered something inaudibly. *Whose child is it really?* Ah, Zeena's yet rounded form and her full breasts, she also thought; and did it happen when they were working in the forest? Faheem's thoughts whirled as she felt unlike her usual self. *Or did it happen in village darknes . . . Zeena being with her lover?*

What was she really thinking? Faheem recalled a time when she looked not unlike Zeena with firm hips and breasts, and beautiful long hair. But she'd never borne a child . . . not like Zeena did. Between

overhanging branches the two women once more looked at each other, then a smile flitted across Zeena's mouth. Faheem stirred with the itchiness still in her throat. And the others had called Zeena a . . . *slut*, didn't they? Doreen had even remarked that some people behaved just "like cat an' dog." Really?

DeVries grinned, watching Zeena in particular now. Not watching Doreen, who grinned strangely because she felt the Driver's eye should be on her, wayward-looking as she was; besides, she always worked the hardest, African as she was with extra vigour, she believed. Wasps rose in a cluster, hurling against an indecipherable object close by. As Zeena kept thinking about her son maybe bawling out at home though a young relative acted as a baby-sitter. Oh, mother's milk he wanted? Right then the ground somersaulted under Zeena's feet, it felt like.

And Faheem, well, needed . . . a drink; but water wasn't around. Again she watched Zeena bring down her cutlass hard, slicing through the bamboo next to her. The sun was now a mirage, everywhere. A white rose fluttered, petals falling on the ground. Ants flew in a dizzying spiral. Again Faheem rubbed her throat and sighed, "Oh Gawd."

Zeena also sighed a few feet away. Finey and the others laughed, becoming almost ribald, as they felt like it. DeVries drifted off, disappearing in a moment's tumult, it seemed.

Faheem let out a hissing noise next, as she acknowledged Zeena's presence once more among them, in their tangled knot.

A tug in Zeena's breasts . . . Hatim's lips, mouth, pulling at the nipple. *That, eh?* Faheem closed her eyes, still recalling her youthful days in a strange reminiscence. Oh, small hands now clutching at Zeena's breasts; the ducts primed. A sudden flush covered Zeena's face. Faheem's too?

Now where was DeVries? Doreen once more laughed.

Leaves rustled in a driving wind. And Zeena kept thinking how much she needed the money; and did she really give in to DeVries, as the others gossiped about? Now imagine Hatim one day become a red child, wouldn't he? What was she really thinking in the heat? A small mouth opening, closing; and the clouds above moving in an almost dizzying fashion. A far sky, far universe; and why did they have to be here?

Instinctively Faheem edged closer to Zeena. Doreen and the others laughed again. Faheem blinked with almost leaden eyelids. The wind changed course. A scorching feeling everywhere it was.

"Look at DeVries eyeing Zeena, eh?" Shanti scorned.

"Really . . . her!"

"Who else?"

Doreen let out a sound, a rattle almost. "But the other woman, his wife wid lipstick an' rouge, heh-heh!" rasped another, looking at Doreen only. Faheem merely wanted to tell them to get on with the work, even as they conjured up DeVries pinning Zeena to the ground: this blood-spot. Not pin Doreen to the ground? *Who else?* The forest now grew strangely quiet.

Zeena and Faheem stood alone now, it seemed.
A growing strangeness, everywhere.

A sudden threat of rain, squalls at this time of the day. Faheem looked up, then down. Zeena merely felt a strong pulse beat. What *is it really?*

“You okay?” Faheem asked Zeena, now with an unbearable thirst . . . or hunger? Zeena nodded. The ducts, blood vessels, tangled nerves. Did Faheem mean something about DeVries, no one else?

“Keep away from him,” hummed Faheem.

“Eh?” rasped Zeena.

Words without significance, maybe; though Zeena was grateful for the older woman’s attention now . . . and she pulled away a branch from her face. But Faheem reached out with one hand like a tentacle . . . coming towards Zeena, which Zeena no doubt expected.

Zeena’s face, mouth . . . she smiled. Faheem mumbled something, and also smiled. “How’s de child?” she asked.

“Hatim okay. But he cry a lot.”

“Boy-child like that.”

“Yes-yes . . .” Faheem’s pulse grew stronger; but it was her thirst, nothing less, and Zeena held her breath as Faheem clasped her shoulder, the sleeves of the dress pulled sideways.

Oh, Zeena inhaled the older woman’s tangled hair and tousled it, like dried husks; but she was also afraid. Faheem’s mute words, only. Zeena’s eyes swirled. Hatim’s mouth on her breast, milk in her ducts, she imagined. “I am thirsty, oh Gawd,” Faheem moaned.

“Eh?”

“But no more . . .” Faheem kept gripping Zeena with both hands, and Zeena felt she would suffocate. Vaguely Zeena thought too of DeVries looking at them from behind an embroidery of leaves, branches.

Doreen’s idle laughter punctuated the air; and Finey’s, also. DeVries, where was he really now, if not once more moving towards the women, Doreen especially; but Doreen, shrill as she sometimes was, would want to accuse him . . . *of what?*

Faheem kept gripping Zeena, feeling like a last gasp. The clouds somersaulted, and Faheem’s face, mouth, grazed Zeena’s breasts. “You go be okay . . . ?” muttered Zeena, unsure of what was happening.

“Eh?” Then, “Your child, he go be strong-strong,” Faheem rasped, and swallowed.

Zeena let out a dull moaning sound.

Maybe DeVries was indeed looking at them. Looked at Doreen too, no? Or was he only focussing on Zeena’s bare breasts? Maybe Zeena wanted to *show* him, with her mother’s instinct . . . and desire, as Faheem no doubt willed it to happen, didn’t she?

Whiteness . . . against skin’s blackness, milk dripping down onto the

brown earth. Eyes looking, iridescent in the greenery. Wasps frenziedly darted left and right. Doreen, Finey, Shanti, let them watch even as they again raised their cutlasses in the air. Whack-whack! Ah, DeVries would really tell them that their work was coming to an end, as had been rumoured.

All the while Zeena thought of her baby-boy, and maybe he would one day become like DeVries. Maybe . . . but not red-looking, eh?

DeVries grinned. *Whose child really?* Were the women still asking, tired or exhausted as they were? Doreen's face was a strange grotesquerie, as she called out. *What?*

"Eh?" DeVries grunted back at her.

"P-l-e-a-s-e . . . tell us de truth."

About their work coming to an end? Then DeVries impulsively reached out to Doreen with all his man's might, as the others watched, one or two laughing. Doreen writhed. She pulled at DeVries's hair strand by strand, like pulling the hair out from the bloodied white roots.

But DeVries was strong, man-strong. The entire forest became a rushing noise.

Suddenly Doreen started running. DeVries chased after her, like a game they were playing with the blacksage shrub all around. Footsteps everywhere on topsy-turvy ground.

Right then Zeena saw someone . . . an image of her son, Hatim, standing before her, maybe man-strong, the ground beating. *Mom-ma.*

Hatim . . . you?

Faheem's words about Zeena's son becoming strong-strong, Zeena recalled, and rubbed her eyes. Maybe she wasn't seeing clearly anymore due to her tiredness in the fierce heat.

All the while Doreen kept running as DeVries came after her! Then maybe Doreen would turn around and burst out laughing, like more madness overtaking her, if not overtaking them all. The sound echoed, merely.

Faheem looked at the women, one by one, and wiped perspiration from her brows. It was time for her to quit working, she knew; she no longer wanted to be here . . . to clear away the forest. A fresh wind came, with the leaves now being a veritable choir. Wasps in a ritual circled because of the scent of milk. More insects flew in a jagged formation, everywhere.

Doreen's voice rose: "You bring bad luck to us," she hurled at Zeena. "You . . . you shouldn't have come back here! Wha' for?" Somewhere DeVries smirked.

But Zeena yet saw Hatim, as the sun dimmed. Shadows came in a swathe almost, and it'd indeed be a squall of rain before long. Ah, a broken branch, the cutlass slapping hard against bark and pith, always in a compelling motion. Cambium oozed. Chlorophyll and ichor . . . blood of a kind.

Hatim really working! See, Zeena needed the money. She turned and looked at Faheem. Pollen dust in the air. A wasp zoomed, hurled itself. Doreen quickly dodged sideways, her elbow forming an arc above the sage next to her; she gulped in air. The other women stood their ground. Zeena glanced at Faheem, only.

“Get on with it,” DeVries rasped, his command now more than an echo. But Faheem looked down at the brown earth, but white-stained also. Zeena looked too; and, indeed, Faheem contemplated her last days. A red hibiscus stirred in the wind.

Whack!

That sound which Zeena only heard . . . and never wanted to hear again.