

TLC Showcase

PAULINE WALKER

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Introduction to *The Truthteller's Tale*

The Truthteller's Tale is a dystopian novel set in the near future.

Claudia and Alec are a modern, mixed-race couple. Their lives are shattered when the far-right New Britain Party (NBP) wins the General Election and immigrants are classified as non-citizens. Pregnant Claudia, along with her parents and brother, are interned in the government's flagship Community Housing Project, while Alec infiltrates the government and attempts to bring down the oppressive regime from within. But it's not going to be easy when you're the Prime Minister's estranged son and your wife and her family are none the wiser.

The story was inspired by the debates in the media after the leader of the BNP's appearance on the BBC's Question Time in 2009. I asked myself the question, what would happen if immigrants and their descendants were made to leave the country they called home?

The novel was becoming unwieldy, ranging far and wide over time, filled with too many characters. Whose story am I telling? How do I manage this material? How do I get to the heart of what I'm trying to write? I wanted to give up but then I found The Novel Studio from City, University of London which gave me the confidence to go for the thrust of the story and develop the characters at the heart of it. After the course ended I became part of a writers' group, formed with the writers from my course. We met regularly to continue workshoping our work. Then I won a competition which had a prize attached to it, TLC's Chapter and Verse mentoring. My mentor Tom Bromley was fantastic. The deadlines helped keep me on track with producing work and Tom's reports have been incisive, objective and encouraging. I completed the first draft soon after the mentoring finished; a relief and a victory over doubt. Now, I'm doing my favourite part, re-writing and editing, bearing in mind the advice that Tom has given me. The next step for the novel is a full manuscript assessment and I'm looking forward to receiving the feedback. Recently, I received more encouragement when I attended TLC's Industry Day. Literary agent, Jonathan Ruppen, liked my pitch and asked me to send him the manuscript when it's ready.

Extract from *The Truthteller's Tale* by Pauline Walker

Chapter One Family

Some things you can see coming, like when sunlight fades, dusk falls, darkness rushes to pervade. It's inevitable. Like Enoch's rivers of blood, staining London streets in '81, '85, 2011; like successive, regressive immigration acts; like institutionalised racism; like the outpouring of disgust following the Windrush scandal; like Brexit and the eruption of barely dormant racism, a slap in the face, figurative and literal; like life and its ups and downs. Like change, it's cyclical, it's inevitable.

There's a family in SW9 who are the descendants of the Windrush generation. They saw change coming but were slow to react. Too slow.

Late Friday afternoon, the day after the NBP's emphatic result in the general election, Claudia Smyth-Caro lets herself into her parent's house, a four-bedroom, three-storey, Victorian semi. She sags against the back of the door, trembling. It's recent and overwhelming, this surge of pregnancy hormones, the swirl of emotions she can't stop, which makes her unlike herself, weepy. She feels everything more keenly, danger everywhere, fight or flight. A book, hideous, found shoved in her bag, in the bottom drawer of her desk, as she packed up to leave for the day, INVITATION TO JOIN THE GOVERNMENT OF BRITAIN, NEW BRITAIN PARTY MANIFESTO. A sticky note stuck on it, YOU CAN GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM. The office was empty, all her colleagues out visiting clients, she slumped in her chair, succumbed, tears soaked the report waiting for a signature. After the tears, she sniffed, trying to inhale determination. On Monday. She'll find out who it is then. For now, she takes a deep breath in and out, lifting and dropping her shoulders, waiting for calm.

The kitchen door at the end of the hall, past the living room and the dining room, is half open. Inside are Claudia's parents, Suzanne and Robert. Suzanne holds a glass under a running cold tap as she stares out of the window into the back garden, her

plump lips clamped between teeth; a weird grimace. Her hand is drenched, slowly chilling, but she doesn't notice; her eyes are fixed on the shed, a once-solid man cave, built by her father over thirty years ago on concrete foundations, but another prolonged storm, like Karen, will see it finally giving up the ghost and collapsing. She'd rather think about the shed than the election and what it really means for them, their friends, the community.

Robert leans across Suzanne and shoves the kettle under the deluge, 'Good thing we don't have a meter otherwise you'd be bankrupting us.'

Suzanne tightens the tap.

'Hi,' says Claudia.

Suzanne glances up at Claudia, who is two inches taller than both her parents, and gives her a brief smile before she turns back to the window. 'How much did your new shed cost, Claudia?'

Claudia pushes out a sigh and strokes the swell of her stomach. 'Three hundred and fifty.'

'For that doll's house?' says Robert. His fingertips dive into his short, grey-speckled afro.

Suzanne leaves the glass on the drainer and rubs her cold hand, brings it back to life.

'Geraldine came into the café,' she says. 'She's drumming up support, wants us to go to a prayer meeting. Will you come?'

'The pen is mightier than a prayer,' says Robert.

'What was the point of writing all those articles if they didn't galvanise enough people to go out and vote. Who knows what that ridiculous man and his government will do in the next five years.'

'Have a chamomile tea before you go, Mum. I could do with one.'

Suzanne notices the absence of the soft glow that had started to bathe Claudia's face a few days ago. Her baby's skin is dull and she looks frustrated; her job is too stressful. 'No, you sit. I'll make it. Where's Junior? School finished over an hour ago.' Suzanne stamps on the dustbin's pedal and the lid snaps up. She looks inside, decides there's

room for at least another day's rubbish. 'From Windrush to Macpherson to Brexit to this, demonising immigrants. Why can't things really change for the better?'

Robert opens his palms like he's waiting for the universe to give him the answers.

'You go Suze,' he says. 'Send my apologies to Geraldine.'

Suzanne pulls out her mother's shabby, St. James bible from the row of A-Z cook books on the worktop. She runs her finger down the broken, leather spine. 'You'll come with me?' she says to Claudia.

Claudia knows she's not really asking but she'll go, the singing is always uplifting.

'Give her a few minutes, Suze. I want Claudia's advice first.'

Claudia follows her Dad up to his office on the second floor. Junior's bedroom is opposite. On Robert's desk, in front of the sash window, are letter trays stuffed with old copies of the South London Gleaner, he likes to have them to hand despite the archive copies being available online. Next to his laptop is an old-school red telephone with a number dial, a happy reminder of when the in-laws were alive. Robert leans across his desk to the window and tugs on a string. The venetian blind flies up. Dust hangs in the air before drifting down past the stippled, grimy window. Robert clicks on the desk lamp and blows the settled dust from the laptop's screen and keyboard then presses the space bar. The screen lights up with a choice of headlines:

COUNTRY IN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE COUNTRY

COUNTRY IN CRISIS

BRITAIN'S LOOMING CRISIS

'This is so depressing Dad. Alec's still in shock and...' She gulps in hot chamomile to stop the tears from coming.

'And what?'

Claudia blows out tepid air. 'Some...idiot left the NBP's manifesto in my drawer with a sticky telling me to get my bags packed. It feels like we went to bed in a democracy and woke up to...what the hell.'

'You know who did it?'

'No proof, but I've got an idea. I'll sort it on Monday.'

'Idiot,' Robert says in a Jamaican accent.

Claudia channels her grandmother's voice, 'Plenty, plenty fool like 'im out dere.'

'It's good you're going with your Mum. She's been reading your gran's bible a lot lately. Sometimes I wish I could believe that all the world's problems could be solved with a prayer.'

'Maybe that's what we all need now. Some faith, hope for the future, that things won't change too much.'

'The size of the majority...'

'They can push through any legislation they like.'

Robert opens another document on his laptop and sends it to print. Claudia picks up the framed Evening Standard cutting on Robert's desk, propped against the window ledge. "We believe wholeheartedly that the common citizenships of the United Kingdom and Colonies is an essential part of the development of the relationship between this Mother Country and the Colonies." It used to hang on the wall behind the cabinet before it fell off years ago. Robert had got his arm stuck trying to reach it and, unable to shift the full cabinet, had had to wait until they got home to rescue him.

Claudia thinks of the Sunday lunches with her maternal grandparents, Harriet and James. James's pride, "We were invited by de Queen and country to come to Hingland, we were comin' to work, to build up Hingland and build up we selves too." She opens the top drawer of the cabinet, searches for the newspaper with the picture of the BBC's Black British History Plaque on the front page; 279,060 migrants coming from the Caribbean between 1947 – 1962. A familiar tingle on the back of her neck, knowing her grandparents were counted in that number, they meant

something. This house had been their home until they died, first James, three years ago, then Harriet seven months ago. Claudia places her palm against the wall, cool and solid, and looks down at her stomach. This is who you belong to. Don't let anyone tell you, you don't belong here. Then she says out loud, 'You belong.'

The printer is noisy, sucking in paper and spewing it out.

Junior's snuck into the house, crept up the stairs. He wants to be in and out before anyone notices but Claudia's at the top of the landing.

'Hey,' she says.

'How's school?' Robert hands Claudia a draft of his article.

Junior shrugs.

'Geraldine has sent out a call to arms,' says Robert. 'They're going to sing and pray the NBP out of existence. She'd like you to join her at the prayer meeting.'

'Not happening,' says Junior.

'Come on,' says Claudia. 'For Mum?'

'I'm meeting my peeps at the library.'

'The library closes at five on a weeknight,' says Dad.

'The one on the hill closes at eight. You know Dad, if you want me to get into the LSE I've got to study. What you reading?'

Claudia gives him the article. Junior slouches in the chair, picks up Robert's mug and swivels as he drinks and reads. Claudia notices the new pattern in the fade cut on the back of his head, chevrons like you'd find on a motorway. She won't be his favourite person if she points that out.

'Yeah, it's good, Pops.' Junior tosses the article onto the desk and bolts out the door.

'Is that it?' says Robert.

Junior sticks his head back in. 'Push the angle about the global economic perils facing the UK if the Prime Minister implements everything in his manifesto and...' Junior pauses, 'the risk to the Union if Scotland get a second referendum and...'

Robert grins.

'...what's the future for young people like me going to Uni and not having a decent future to look forward to? Rubbish jobs, can't afford to buy a house, living at home until I'm forty-five, working till I'm one hundred and fifty before I get my state pension. The minute I get my degree I'm moving to Nigeria, biggest economy innit.'

'Hmm,' says Robert.

Junior leans against the doorjamb. 'Can I borrow the car, Dad?'

'Can you contribute to the insurance?'

Junior punches his fist against his heart and staggers back pretending he's been wounded.

'Junior?'

'Yeah, Pops.'

'This girl you're seeing? She'll be at the library too?'

Junior's shed his jacket and is tugging his shirt over his head like a jumper, his tie swings.

'Bring her for dinner next week. Curry goat and rice. See if she can deal with scotch bonnet peppers stripping her throat. Remember how Alec's eyes almost popped out of his head with his first mouthful.'

'Claudia.' Suzanne's voice rises from the ground floor.

Claudia leans over the banister.

'How does Dad know about Sadie?'

'Not from me. Seriously, I never said a word. He's a journo, they find out stuff.'

Junior disappears into his room.

Robert hunches over his laptop, holds down the delete button then bashes away at the keys.

'Bye Dad,' says Claudia.

'Yes,' he says without looking up. 'Don't stay too long, get home, look after my grandsons.'

'I'm not having twins.'

'My grandson then.'

'What if it's a girl?'

'I'll suppose she'll do?'

'She definitely will do.'

Junior comes out of his room. He's changed into jeans and is zipping up a black hoodie and twisting one foot into a trainer.

'Claudia.' Suzanne bellows. 'I can't wait for Junior anymore, otherwise we'll be late.'

Junior puts a finger against his lips then points at Claudia. His eyes start to bulge as he drags his finger across his throat, his head lolls on one side. Claudia rolls her eyes at him and shouts, 'Coming Mum.'

But she goes back into Robert's office and Junior follows her. Why can't she just leave, he thinks, so I can get out of here too. He dabs at his top lip, encouraging his skin to sprout to fill out his patchy moustache.

'Here.' Claudia thrusts a newspaper at him.

'Like I can ever forget.' He hates it when she patronises him. The back of his neck starts to prickle.

About the Writer

Pauline Walker is an award-winning short story writer and has had her work published in three anthologies. She loved reading from a very young age and getting lost in her imagination. She wrote her first short story in primary school and had her fifteen minutes of fame when it was pinned on a notice board for the whole school to read. Fast forward a few decades and after taking a creative module as part of her Literature degree at the Open University, her childhood love of writing was reignited and she began writing again. Her short story 'Left of Earth, Right of Venus' was published in the anthology [Shortest Day Longest Night](#).



Pauline was commissioned by [Tangle](#) to write a sonnet celebrating the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's 'I have a Dream' speech. She was also commissioned by [StrongBack Productions](#) to write short stories for storytelling events Rude Gyaals and Strong Back Tales.

In 2017 Pauline won the platinum prize from [Creative Future Literary Awards](#) with her short story 'The Wait' which was published in the winner's anthology [Important Nothings](#) featuring Kit de Waal, Sabrina Mahfouz and Dean Atta. 'The Wait' was also published online by [Wasafiri](#).

Pauline was invited by Spare Tyre to read excerpts from her novel-in-progress novel, *The Truthteller's Tale*, at their [Invisible Women Festival](#).

Pauline's latest short story 'Hingland' is in the anthology [Time and Tide](#) and was read at the Solstice Shorts Festival in December 2019.