

JOAN RILEY

Joan Riley was born in St Mary, Jamaica. She was educated at Sussex and London universities, where she gained a master's degree, and has since worked for a drugs advisory agency. She has written a number of novels, including *Waiting in the Twilight* and *Romance*, which have dealt with various themes surrounding black British women. *The Unbelonging* was her debut novel.

The Unbelonging is the story of Hyacinth, who, at eleven, is summoned to England by a father she has never known. She leaves her Jamaican idyll for the gloom of inner-city life and being the only black face in a sea of hostile white faces at school. At home, she faces violence and indifference from her father, and escapes into dreams of her homeland. But reality constantly intrudes.

from *The Unbelonging*

She sat up with a start, a feeling of dread following her through layers of sleep into a reality of clammy wetness. The damp nightdress clung to her in increasingly cold folds every time she shifted. Her mind grappled with the problem. Rejected it. She told herself it was perspiration, that the nights were warmer and she was sweating in her sleep. Filled with dread, mingled with hope, her fingers groped, found and recoiled from a soggy wetness that no amount of perspiration could have brought. A shiver shook her as her nose gradually became aware of the smell of fresh urine all around her. She could imagine it seeping through the bed, penetrating the mattress till it gradually dripped into a pool on the worn carpet underneath, as it had done the last few times. Fear crawled in her belly as she thought of the morning, and she wondered what time it was. Eyes strained to pick up signs of tell-tale lightness in the impenetrable darkness of the room.

She prayed that night would never end, and that when she woke tomorrow it would be a dream and the bed would be dry – anything but that she would have to face another stinging beating on her already tender back. Her heartbeat increased with the anticipation of

what was to come, but she pushed it to the back of her mind, and slid down into the bed, curling round to avoid as much of the wet as possible. The more she tried to relax, the more her heart raced, while anticipation and fear made her mouth dry; but finally she slept, a restless sleep full of terrifying, nightmare images.

Morning found her waiting in fearful anticipation, unable to move, filled with horror at what must come. He was working nights that week, and the ritual of bed-checking would come soon. The sound of a key in the front door brought a wave of shaking to her limbs, and she lay there, unable to move, sweat breaking out all over her body. A few moments later, the bottom but one stair groaned as a weight was lowered onto it. She squeezed her eyelids closer together, breathing deeply as she had been taught in PE, hoping that this would slow her racing heart. Her mind followed the ritual up the stairs without thought. First to come off would be the large brown boots, laces carefully loosened. Then the socks. Then would come the sound of the stair settling as the weight was lifted from it. His coat would come off next, followed by the railway jacket he was so proud of. Last the red railway tie would be loosened, and the top two buttons of the grey shirt undone.

Now mind-image merged with reality and the stairs creaked slowly, each one nearer, each bringing a fresh wave of fear shaking through her body. She did not dare look up as the door was pushed open, but stumbled to her feet as he came into the room.

'This room stinks,' he said mildly, a humourless smile on his face. 'Did you wet the bed again?'

Hyacinth nodded, keeping her eyes averted from him, not trusting herself to speak. He walked over to the narrow bed, pulling down the blanket with a quick tug, exposing the brown-edged stain she had hidden in her shame.

'Why did you wet the bed?' The words mingled in her ears with the painful pumping of blood and ragged breathing. She kept her head bent, ears straining desperately, as if to pick up the blow before it landed.

'I don't know,' she said faintly, pleadingly.

'Don't know was made to know,' he said ominously.

Hyacinth felt the desperation bubbling up inside. How could she tell him how it was? How could she explain the dream, the dream that had haunted her for so long? He would never understand how it felt to get up in the middle of the night, to creep down the stairs, along the

dark corridor, the glimmer of the street light casting long, monstrous shadows in her way as she darted through the kitchen, the strange wailing of the congregating cats the only sound to be heard. He could never understand what it was like to sit on the toilet, hands braced against the seat, feet pressed hard against the cold lino. Then came the straining, the pushing to get it over quickly, all the time holding back the fear that lapped at the dark corners of her mind, and lurked in anticipation somewhere out of sight, somewhere along the route she had come. It had always been like this. Fear driving her to hum songs to God, to mutter 'Get thee behind me Satan', in a hushed and frightened voice. Aunt Joyce had always understood, but he never could. He would never understand her panic as it started to rise in warm wetness around her thighs, to run in rivulets down her legs. She could never explain the suffocating fear of waking to a freshly wet bed.

A stinging slap brought her sharply out of her thoughts, head lifting fearfully.

'I ask you if you don't have no shame.' His eyes had narrowed to slits, the smile replaced by a frown which multiplied the lines on his forehead, bringing a fresh wave of fear. She felt helpless in the face of the question. To say yes would be insolent, no, arrogant. Jumbled, half-formed sentences raced through her mind, mingling with her pounding heartbeat which seemed to echo there.

'This dumb insolence has got to stop,' he said ominously and Hyacinth tensed in readiness for the next blow. Time seemed to drag, agonizing seconds in which she dared not look at him, wished she had the courage to run, or at least to fight back.

'Strip the bed and tell Maureen you are to have a cold bath.'

Hyacinth hid her surprise, keeping her head averted; he was going to let her off. Yet the hope just born was short-lived as he continued, 'And when you finish, I want to see you in the front. And Hyacinth,' - he had been walking towards the door, but now he stopped - 'don't let me have to come for you.'

It was later, the numbness of the cold bath still deep in her fingers and toes, that she pushed open the dull pink door to the lounge. Down in her stomach she could feel the beginnings of the shaking he always inspired and, as she closed the door, she felt it spread. She had to clench her teeth to prevent them chattering as she stood stiffly in front of his chair, knowing from experience that to betray fear was to invite early punishment. He was drinking barley wine this early, and a wave of hate and disgust made her clamp her teeth together harder. Two

years she had watched him drink that stinking brew, two years of beatings and mistreatment, and she was sure that same barley wine had been the cause of some of it. She had read somewhere that you couldn't drink so much without becoming violent.

'I am not going to beat you today.'

Hyacinth blinked in surprise. Her mind had been painstakingly avoiding acceptance of the beating to come, and now she found she was safe after all.

'I am going to take you to the doctor,' he continued. 'Something must be wrong with you, for you to keep bed-wetting like this.'

Hyacinth nodded eagerly, fear pushed to the back of her mind in the sudden relief. Why hadn't she thought of that? Of course something was wrong with her. Nobody wet the bed, not at her age. She wondered if she would have to go into hospital, have an operation maybe. It would be nice to get away from him, especially as a girl at school who went there once said that all the nurses were Jamaican.

'If the doctor say nothing wrong with you, God help you!' he warned. She didn't care about that, she knew there was something wrong with her, that the doctor would say as much. At least now the beatings wouldn't be so frequent. There would be less excuses to find for curious schoolmates and prying teachers asking about the raised red weals and broken skin on her legs, arms and back. Then she was free to go and, as she closed the door, relief flooded her. She took the stairs two at a time, not noticing the skinny woman at the top until she almost collided with her.

'Your father he never beat you, eh?' There was malice in her eyes as she reached out to give Hyacinth a vicious pinch. 'You think he like you, make you get away with it? Well you do anything and see if he going to let you off so easy.'

Hyacinth shrugged off the bony hand, pushing impatiently past the woman. 'Why don't you get lost, you big-eyed toad,' she said in sudden anger, as the other reached out and cuffed her.

'What did you say?' the woman asked angrily, eyes glittering with spite. 'Say that again and see if I don't tell your father how you insult me. Then is he you will have to deal with.'

'Tell him what you want,' Hyacinth said indifferently, walking away with head held high, not even trying to hide the smile on her face. She knew he hated Maureen as much as he hated her. After all, why else would he beat her, and in front of his friends too? The only thing he would punish her for was hitting the woman. What

she said to her was their business.

She had not always been so bold with Maureen, of course. Once she had been almost as afraid of her as she was of him. At first when stung to respond, she had waited with pounding heart for him to hear of it. Yet nothing had come of it. She soon realized that as long as she was not rude to Maureen in front of him, he didn't care what she did. Sometimes, when her conscience troubled her about her disrespect, she would remind herself how much the woman hated her. Maureen had made her hatred known from the start, had announced her intention of getting Hyacinth out from the day the girl walked through the door.

Hyacinth remembered those first days with bitterness, remembered Maureen telling her that her two children were the only children of the house, and she, Hyacinth, only there on sufferance. God, if they only knew how much she wanted to leave that bleak, unhappy house. How much she longed for the sun-bleached cheerfulness of the grey wood shack that had been her home for the first eleven years of her life. How different it had been from this peeling, black-painted house full of fear and hate. Now her whole life seemed to be one endless round of work and fear, cleaning, cooking, beating and bed-wetting. It had been so nice with Aunt Joyce, who had always understood, had never treated her badly. She had been popular, with lots of friends. No one had teased her, taunted her. Now her only happiness was sleep, for that was when she could go home again and take up her interrupted life.

It was peaceful in the brown-carpeted surgery, most of the hard grey chairs empty in the silent waiting-room. Hyacinth sat quietly beside her father, hardly daring to move for fear of attracting his attention, willing her knees to stop shaking. She couldn't understand it. How was it that her knees shook even when he was not about to beat her? Straining her eyes to try and pick out the words from the murmur of voices coming from the partially open door of the doctor's surgery, she tried to judge how long the fat woman who had just gone in would be. It was her turn next, and she couldn't wait to escape from his company. It seemed like forever, but finally she found herself being ushered into the room by a large, white-coated nurse, her father following close on her heels.

'Hyacinth Williams,' the woman announced as she opened the door, and she walked in on a wave of importance, her father temporarily forgotten in the thrill of hearing her name called so officially.

'What can I do for you?' the doctor asked, when father and

daughter were both seated on chairs facing his desk. To Hyacinth's surprise, her father took off his cap, looked servile.

'Hyacinth keep wetting the bed,' he said respectfully. 'This two year since she come to England, she wet the bed non-stop.'

The doctor looked at the notes on the desk in front of him, but made no comment.

'She is thirteen last birthday,' Mr Williams continued awkwardly after the pause had stretched on for some time, 'and I feel something wrong with her.'

'Have you taken her to a doctor before?'

Mr Williams shifted uncomfortably. 'No, I thought she would grow out of it,' he said defensively. 'Is only 'cause she getting worse that I decided to come.'

Hyacinth squirmed in the seat beside him, feeling the prickly heat of shame rise in her face, sting on her back, cause her scalp to itch, as the doctor turned his gaze on her.

'What happens when you wet the bed?' the doctor asked, his voice reassuring.

'I don't know,' she mumbled.

'Speak up when the doctor speak to you!' The voice, like the crack of a whip, caused her to jump and fresh shaking to start in her body. She had not expected that from him, here.

'Mr Williams, perhaps it would be better if you waited outside,' the doctor suggested quietly.

'I don't think so, doctor, you don't know her like I do. Hyacinth is a liar,' Mr Williams blustered. 'She refuses to tell the truth and I have to watch her.'

Hyacinth felt the sting of tears and she stared hard at her hands, trying to force the tears back, not wanting the white man to see her cry, not daring to do so anyway, with her father there.

'I am sure I can detect lies from truth,' the doctor said coldly, dismissively.

'But you don't know her, sir. You wouldn't be able to tell, she so good at it,' Mr Williams persisted, and Hyacinth curled her toes in her shoes in shame.

'Nevertheless, I would still like you to wait outside,' came the reply. Once he had gone, Hyacinth felt herself relax, some of the tension leaving her.

'Are you afraid of your father?' the doctor asked suddenly. Hyacinth stiffened, mingled pride and fear warring with a sudden

