

Claire Hynes

University of East Anglia

24 Henderson Road, Norwich NR4 7JW

Claire.Hynes@uea.ac.uk

Room

Room (n.)

A space that can be occupied or where something can be done.

The first conversation took place in the university Council Chamber seven years ago. A Professor of Literature, the author of many books, was being honoured, although I wasn't sure exactly why. He was dressed for the occasion in a rumpled suit yet he was an imposing figure all the same. He had a grey bush of a beard and eyebrows which resembled wings. I forget the title of his best-known publication at the time but I think it had something to do with post-structuralism. I was winding my way through the intellectual crowd – the only woman of colour at the occasion as usual – towards the food table at the back. The food at these affairs was fairly elaborate: smoked salmon, cold meats, tartines, croquets, puff pastries, that sort of thing. My usual lunch was a £1 veggie samosa from the university shop or nothing, so the catering was a key attraction. Anyway, I found my pathway suddenly blocked by the star of the occasion. The Professor was regaling his chums about a keynote speech that he had delivered.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. But he didn't seem to hear me.

As he gesticulated to emphasise a point he elbowed me in the ribs, and slopped wine onto my best trainers, purchased long before, back when I earned a good income. He apologised, and apologised some more over his wine glass, and when he'd finished, asked: ‘Who are you? What are you studying?’

I told him that I'd finished studying some time ago, and that I was in fact teaching in the same department as him. My answer seemed to come as a surprise.

‘Really?’ His voice seemed to echo around the high windowless walls, ‘What are you writing?’

I explained that my writing was pretty much on hold due to my commitments preparing seminars and lectures, marking papers and looking after my four-year old. I didn't let on about the broader chaos: spare rooms, makeshift beds, clothes in the car, waits in Law Centres. I didn't let on either that much as I loved teaching, I was planning to ditch academia at the end of the year. Zero-hours contracts, I'd decided, were better suited to young people with inheritances.

'Have you read Virginia Woolf?' he said.

'Some...*Orlando. Mrs Dalloway. To The Light...*'

'You must read Woolf,' he interjected. 'And if you want to write, you must read her essay, *A Room of One's Own*. It's one of the most extraordinary texts of the twentieth century. Every woman *must* read it.'

The Professor turned back to his friends and that was the end of our conversation. When I reached the food table, I found the platters had been emptied.

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A doctor ushered me into the small hospital room earlier this year and asked me to sit down. I knew the drill. The slow careful words, the slight awkwardness, the chronology of events relayed in a medical language, some of which I understood, much of which I didn't. The scene was familiar from the movies. Except the doctor was a black Antiguan woman. And after I was led to a curtained cubicle where my mum lay motionless on a hospital bed, and after I'd held her hand, I walked – or drifted, perhaps – into a warm night breeze and the sound of chirping crickets.

In the morning, after the woman who'd called the ambulance had explained how my mum tek one sup of milo and she head roll to one side, I lay motionless on a sun lounger at a villa near Long Bay. I watched my daughter Zora swimming with my young nieces in the pool. The surrounding villas were uninhabited. Some were still partly built. A beach below was

deserted. Zora emerged from the pool, dripping water onto me and said: ‘Grandma was monumental, wasn’t she?’

My mum Iva Eloise Williams was born in the village of Swetes in Antigua, the daughter of Irene Williams, a schoolteacher and Ernest Emmanuel Williams, a trades union leader. Mum landed the nickname ‘Leonardo’ growing up, after the Renaissance painter. She was rarely seen without a sketchbook in her hands. She liked to sit on the porch step to draw the flowers in the yard, hibiscus, bougainvillea and poinsettia. Local people would stop by to look at her drawings and praise her genius. In 1960 at the age of 16, she left Antigua for the Mother Country. I expect she had high hopes for her new life in Britain.

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‘For we think back through our Mothers if we are women’, Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One’s Own* (Woolf 57). She argues that women need a room and money of their own if they wish to write and create, and she demonstrates her thinking by discussing the lives of women writers including Jane Austen, the Brontes, George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell, Aphra Behn, the Countess of Winchelsea and ‘Judith Shakespeare’, the fictional sister of Britain’s best-known sixteenth-century playwright. The essay prompted me to think about the important women in my life; the rooms and spaces they have occupied, the money they have acquired (or not), and how we remain connected.

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Every time I read Woolf’s essay of 1929 about women and what they write and what they don’t write and why, I discover some new marvel. I’m in awe of the rich, meandering arguments. And I’m struck by the intimacy of the voice, despite our differences. Here was a privileged white British woman supported by cooks, cleaners and housekeepers her entire life, a woman with a Queenly predilection for using the word ‘one’, rather than ‘I’. But she questioned the effect of poverty on the mind. She understood that material conditions mattered.

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I hadn't planned on buying the Woolf book. I came across it by chance sitting in a charity shop – smooth, innocent and on sale for a mere 50p. I examined the woman pictured on the cover. She was seated at her writing bureau in a room – her private study perhaps – dressed in a flowing 1920s-style dress. Her bureau had a pull-out writing desk and below three drawers with decorative brass hands and locks, and above smaller drawers and compartments to store her writing paper and stationery, no doubt. She was a white woman but sunlight streaming in from a vast window made her skin creamy yellow.

I began reading at the back of the shop next to a rack of fusty men's jackets. I wanted to shout out in agreement. Yes, I needed my own room so that I could think freely to write! Yes, I needed enough money to cover the cost of decent place to live, tampons, coconut oil, the odd toy and book, and proper meals! I would have continued reading but the shop assistant switched off the light above my head and called over: 'Sorry love, I need to get home.'

As I wound my way towards the charity shop counter, I noticed that I shared a similar hairstyle with the white woman with the near yellow skin on the cover. Her hair was drawn into a plaited side bun. My hair was plaited to the side in a single bunch (courtesy of a Trinidadian Environmental Science student who charged £30 a time).

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Apparently, we women carry at least three unique cell populations in our bodies – our own, our mothers', and that of our children if we have them – creating what biologists call a microchimera, named after the Greek fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. We are not distinct, autonomous beings (as the Father of Western philosophy Rene Descartes argued), we are constituent and made of many.

Unfolding scientific research it seems is catching up with ideas that African societies have long held true ('I am because we are,' rather than 'I think therefore I am,' for instance, is part of the 'ubuntu' philosophy). The talented artist, it seems, is not quite so solitary after all. In my own family, shared female connections can't easily be forgotten. The night my mother died was the night of my daughter's birthday. It was also 100 years to the day since my late grandmother Irene's birth.

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The room was a little larger than the single bed I shared with Zora. Built into one corner was a wardrobe which smelt like stale mushrooms. Squeezed into another was a beaten-up desk and chair. Through the window a row of terraced houses loomed so close I felt barely able to breathe.

The room was mostly in darkness when I began to read. But light from the street lamps shone in through the thin curtains onto the pages. At midnight they were shut off due to council budget cuts and I resorted to my mobile phone torch. The beam was like an instrument of interrogation and I feared my Zora would wake.

I was perhaps halfway through the second chapter when my daughter thrashed about suddenly kicking me in the groin. My thoughts about the women in Woolf's book and in my life were brought to a halt. I feared what would happen if Zora woke up in this still strange room. She missed the guinea pigs that I'd given away. She missed the trampoline in the old garden. She missed her bed with the bird stickers on the headboard. A friend of a friend, Maria, slept with her toddler in the room next door. Through barely-there walls on the other side, a neighbour who also parented alone, shared a room with her baby. I imagined Zora's wails triggering a domino trail of young children and babies waking and bawling up and down the squashed-up row of Victorian houses.

I swiped off the phone light and lay in the darkness listening to Zora's breath and pondering the day ahead. I had to get Zora to school for 8 a.m. I had to teach an undergraduate class on Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* at 9 a.m. I had to call the bank about my overdraft. I had to speak to my solicitor about the next divorce hearing. I had to buy Zora her favourite chocolate cereal bar before school pick up. I had to prep my Sam Selvon lecture for the following week. I had to find a new place for Zora and myself to live.

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I know about my great-great-great grandmother Missy Williams from the stories passed down in Antigua through the generations. At the age of 17, Missy Williams escaped the man she was ordered to call Master after he raped her on Pinchin estate – a short walk away, coincidentally, from the villa where I spent the day after my mum passed away. Men and dogs were sent to track Missy down and bring her back. If caught, she would be whipped, shackled, hung, beaten, burnt, branded, raped (again) or drowned.

An announcement would have been published in the national newspaper, declaring, in the language of the day, that the young woman had done a runner. Judging from the notices in *The Antigua Weekly Times* in the early part of the nineteenth century, it might have read something like this:

ABSENTED herself, a Negro Woman named Missy, about 5 foot 6 inches high, speaks good English, belonging to Mr Williams. A very liberal Reward will be given on her apprehension, by application to the Subcriber.

The notice would have been published alongside advertisements for codfish, black-eyed peas, and men, women and children brought from Africa.

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‘Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at’, writes Woolf, in *A Room* (Woolf 38).

Alice Walker’s essay ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,’ published over 50 years later in 1983, responds to Woolf’s idea about the fate of talented women through history. Walker imagines the lives of black women who demonstrated their creative genius some 200 years ago – women who didn’t go mad or wade into a rivers laden with stones (like Woolf), or top themselves by any other means. These women decorated the walls of their hut in imaginative ways, or sang soulfully and sweetly, or wove stunning mats or told incredible stories.

My foremother Missy Williams trekked through canefields and wild bushlands barefoot, no doubt, hiding her trails along the way. Eventually she discovered a cave (or a ‘jar’ as it was called then) where she survived for many years until emancipation laws were passed. Missy would have grown her own food in secret, collected water, trapped wild game and perhaps fished. She would have made good use of her knowledge of plants and herbs. She came from a tradition of women healers who treated all manner of ailments and illnesses. Often the ‘Bakkra’ would send for these women healers, whose cures were considered more effective than those of white doctors.

Missy needed intelligence, creativity and innovation in abundance to escape her owner and to survive all those years alone in the cave. No books have been written about her, no statues honour her memory, but Missy’s achievements are remarkable all the same.

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We were on a trip to the British Museum to learn about Egypt. I was one of thirty school kids on board the coach, twenty-nine of them white. The journey from Hoddesdon, our suburban

home town, was loud and raucous. By the time we passed the Tesco superstore off the A10 the coach stank of half-eaten packed lunches and our teachers had given up yelling.

‘What do you call it when a girl on her period goes swimming?’ Melanie called over my head. Melanie was a squat girl with a curtain of black hair. ‘A blood bath,’ she announced, amidst whoops and screams.

‘Like, imagine,’ Melanie continued, ‘if when you went for a swim on the blob the pool really did turn red. Everyone would be calling up the police.’

‘I wouldn’t,’ I muttered.

‘What are you on about?’ said Melanie. I hadn’t intended for her to hear.

‘I would never call the police,’ I said. I explained that when I visited my family in Brixton, I’d see black boys and men lined up against walls—trousers pulled down to ankles, arms splayed. Their offence apparently Walking While Black. Once in the indoor market off Electric Avenue by a stall selling yams, plaintain, okra, spinach, I’d come across a group of police punching and kicking a boy not much older than me. A group of women wheeling trolleys shouted at the officers to stop but they took no notice. I caught a glimpse of the boy, through the mass of uniformed legs and arms. His face was sticky with blood and sawdust.

When I finished speaking, the girls became silent. Then Melanie David cocked her head to one side and said: ‘I don’t fink so.’ She erupted into laughter and her friends joined in.

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Woolf’s narrator describes her experience in the dining hall at the men’s college at Oxbridge. The dinner starts with ‘soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream’ (Woolf 8). At the women’s college, she finds that dinner starts with ‘a plain gravy soup’(Woolf 14). Woolf goes on to discuss the different worlds men and women inhabit. She writes of ‘the safety and prosperity of one sex and the poverty and

insecurity of the other and the effect of tradition and of lack of tradition upon the mind of the writer' (Woolf 12).

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Devil's Bridge is a tourist attraction in Antigua located on the north-east side of the island, outside the village of Willikies. For hundreds of years waves from the Atlantic crashed into limestone rock, causing a natural arch to form. The water below seethes and foams. It is said that no land exists in the space between Devil's bridge and Africa three thousand miles to the east. Black women born into slavery generations ago would bring babies and older children to this place. They would hold hands and jump together towards Africa. They chose this spot because the path to Africa was clear. They believed that their souls would return home.

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I have a black-and-white picture of my mum aged sixteen standing outside the Royal Free Hospital in London. She is dressed in her nurse's uniform and surrounded by other white-uniformed doctors and nurses. Everyone smiles pleasantly at the camera apart from her. Never one to go along with the crowd, she throws her head back in laughter. When I look at the picture I'm reminded of the woman in Maya Angelou's poem 'And Still I Rise,' who laughs like she had gold mines digging in her back yard (Angelou 8).

I remember, on my seventh birthday dancing around our living room in a white apron bearing a red cross and a hat to match. I'd received the outfit as a gift from a distant relative. In the corner of the room by a large cheese plant, my mum was bent over her sewing machine, surrounded by a mass of orange fabric. Her afro bobbed and her hooped earrings shook as she sewed.

'I'm a nurse like you were,' I shrieked, as I spun around. 'D'you like my uniform?'

My mum looked up from her work: ‘Well no darling. I don’t like your uniform,’ she said in clear, enunciated English (she’d won school awards for her oratory skills as a child) ‘The last thing I wanted was to wipe the dirty backsides of the good people of England.’

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The biographical preface in *A Room of One’s Own* attests to the importance – the grandness even – of Virginia Woolf (born Adeline Virginia Stephen on 25 January 1882). Even her childhood address (22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington) carries a whiff of literary glamour. Woolf’s father Leslie Stephen was the son of Sir James Stephen, a noted historian, and the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Her uncle Sir James Fitzjames Stephen was a distinguished lawyer and writer on law. Her father’s first wife was daughter of Thackeray. Mother Julia was an admired associate of the Pre-Raphaelites. And Woolf herself was, of course, a member of the artsy, intellectual group, named the Bloomsbury set—along with writer E.M. Forster; biographer Lytton Strachey; painter Duncan Grant; art critic Roger Fry; Woolf’s sister, painter Vanessa Bell; and her brother-in-law, art critic Clive Bell, among others.

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In 1959, the white American journalist John Griffin passed temporarily as a black man with the aid of medication and staining agents and travelled through New Orleans and Mississippi. He wrote afterwards of his experiences, that he wished he could take white people into the rooms inhabited by people of colour. It’s interesting that he doesn’t make the usual suggestion that white people meet others of a different background, what he’s saying is that new spaces must be entered (Ware and Back 276).

Rooms, for Woolf, can be spaces of freedom and enlightenment, or spaces of restriction and confinement. And where what happens outside the room is significant too: ‘I thought how

unpleasant it is to be locked out, and then I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in' Woolf writes in *A Room* (Woolf 19).

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I imagine Virginia Woolf in contemplation at her home, Monk's House, in the village of Rodmell, East Sussex. It's a cold, bright morning in 1929 and she is sitting in her favourite armchair in her writing lodge. Across her knees is a portable writing table which holds a tray containing pens and inks. The writing desk will be in use later on when she will type up and edit her morning's work. She gazes out of the window at the orchard of apples, plums and pears in the garden designed by her husband. A tapestry of flowers bloom: geraniums, zinnias, dahlias, roses, irises, echinaceas. Out of view are the water-meadows and fields which lead to Mount Caburn. Three men in flat caps unload materials needed for the building extension work on the eighteenth-century cottage she fell in love with and bought at an auction ten years ago. She will have a separate bedroom built for her on the ground floor. It will open out onto the garden.

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The sentence is three lines long. It is tucked at the end of a very long paragraph which described how men seek fame, while women want anonymity. Men can't manage to pass a signpost (an old wooden one presumably) without wanting to carve their names on it. Women are not so brazen, apparently: 'It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her' (Woolf 39).

There she is. A Black woman. No, a 'negress.' Here is my (monumental) mother, Iva, my grandmother Irene, through to Missy Williams and beyond.

The Manx cat which appears early on in the essay pausing on the lawn at Oxbridge as if to question the universe is written with greater sensitivity than the objectified black woman.

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Woolf wanted to create a narrator who was fluid and changing, a woman who can't assume any single identity. I imagine the white woman, in her encounter with the 'negress,' assuming many forms. The peach-skinned lady in flowing satin painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in the eighteenth century. The pious 'Angel in the House' praised in Coventry Patmore's famous poem (and despised by Woolf) published a century later. The gap year student who Instagrams pictures of herself hugging sick Ugandan babies at the clinic.

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The History of Mary Prince, was first published successfully in 1831. It's a significant book in the history of women's writing and details the life of Mary Prince who was born into slavery. Virginia Woolf makes no mention of the autobiography in *A Room*, despite her fascination with genius women who shared the name Mary. The book cover shows a black woman chained and kneeling. 'AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER' reads the emblem which surrounds her.

I discovered on the internet one night in a temporary room – I can't remember which – that Mary Prince was represented in court by Woolf's great uncle George Stephen QC in an (unsuccessful) attempt to return to Antigua a free woman. George Stephen was the youngest son of Woolf's great-grandfather James Stephen, a lawyer for the abolitionist movement and an MP. Mary Prince lived for many years in Bloomsbury a few streets away from the Stephen family fifty years before Woolf was born. I was intrigued to discover the connections and disconnections between these two women.

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Woolf scholar Jane Marcus in her 2014 book *Hearts of Darkness* writes that her ideas towards the writer's work shifted when she taught students in multi-racial New York classrooms. She began to wonder how people of colour could read Woolf's work with pleasure and she came to this conclusion:

I have been complicit as a critic in producing a radical and sympathetic ‘Virginia Woolf’ for readers who want to hear that voice. Woolf gives us the text for this reading. But that is not all she gives us. She gives us texts for many other readings, including one that mourns the loss of empire (Marcus 13).

I love Marcus’s fierceness. She is like the good cop who delves around behind her bosses to expose wrongdoing.

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A contemporary defence of Woolf might go something like this: Virginia Woolf was born towards the end of the nineteenth century. She was a feminist. She loved women. She shagged Vita Sackville-West. We have to understand the time she was living in. She didn’t really get to meet black women in her day (sad face emoji).

Another modern day response might be: ‘Let’s cancel Virginia Woolf.’

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Zora Neale Hurston was born in the US in 1891 (although she fibbed about her age during her lifetime. Zora worked, at different times of her life, as a manicurist in a barber shop, a maid for wealthy families and a waitress to fund her education through school and university. She travelled widely as a writer, folklorist and anthropologist, (from Harlem and New York through to the Deep South and the Caribbean), sometimes with money, often without. Zora wore trousers, smoked cigarettes, drove cars and travelled alone, at a time when it was considered unthinkable for women to do so.

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During the time after my marriage ended, when I had no stable home, I kept a few of Zora’s books in my mum’s old clip-down travel case—usually my favourite, *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God lay on top. I carried the books with me from temporary room to temporary room. I felt grounded and safe with them nearby.

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I couldn't find a language in which to articulate poverty. But one night, in one room I lifted Zora's *Dust Tracks on the Road* from the travel case and read this: 'There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet; impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in a sickly air. People can be slave-ships in shoes' (Hurstun 116). I put the book back in the case and could not read it for some time afterwards.

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In 1928, an essay by Zora entitled 'How It Feels to Be Colored, Me,' was published in a journal called *World Tomorrow*. That same year Woolf presented lectures at Cambridge University which would form the foundations for *A Room of One's Own*. 'Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry,' Zora writes in her essay. 'It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me' (Hurstun 155). I wonder whether, if Virginia Woolf had read Zora's beautiful and witty essay – really read the words and thought about them – and if she'd followed Zora's extraordinary writing; and shared ideas about women with Zora – in a smoky jazz club, perhaps, surrounded by the poetry of black speech – the nameless black woman in *A Room* might have developed a voice. Woolf might have improved her understanding of women had she unlocked her own room more often.

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Eatonville, the Florida town where Zora was raised, was the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. Zora's family bought their own land, built their own home, and made trips to nearby lakes to fish and picnic. Her father John was elected twice as the town mayor. Her mother Lucy encouraged her daughter to 'jump at de sun' (Hurstun 21). And Zora clearly

refused to stay in the shadows throughout her life. Eatonville, as described by Zora, has ‘five lakes, three croquet courts three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty of guavas, two school, and no jail-house.’

Zora had no awareness of herself as a ‘black person’ in the town.

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There is a book about Zora which has the longest title I have come across, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*. In the introduction, Mary Helen Washington notes that Zora worked consistently without a room or money and that her work represents only a fraction of what she might have accomplished.

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From a young age until her death, Zora lived in up to 50 different addresses. She could not be confined, her university professor Darwin Turner remembered.

‘The strangest thing about it was that once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go,’ Hurston writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I would wander off in the woods all alone, following some inside urge to go places’ (Hurston 32).

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The next time I met the professor he was staring at the photocopy machine on the first floor.

‘Playing up?’ I said.

He let out a dramatic groan. ‘What’s wrong with the damned thing?’ he said, as the machine blinked its warning message.

I checked instructions, opened and slammed compartments, pressed buttons and leavers. It was in my interest to get the thing fixed. I needed to organise printed handouts in time for my class.

Finally a sheet of paper, emerged, crumpled from the belly of the machine. ‘Thank you, thank you,’ he said, as if I had performed some miracle. ‘I should have introduced myself. Excuse my rudeness,’ He said his name.

‘Yes, we met at your event last year,’ I said. ‘In the Council Chamber. ‘Top-notch catering.’

I held up the book I planned to copy so that he could read the title: *The Autobiography of My Mother* by Jamaica Kincaid. ‘Have you read this?’ I asked.

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