



NATIONAL BESTSELLER

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER
KINDRED

FOREWORD BY
JANELLE MONÁE

KINDRED

Octavia E. Butler

**BEACON PRESS
BOSTON**

*To Victoria Rose,
friend and goad*

Contents

PROLOGUE

THE RIVER

THE FIRE

THE FALL

THE FIGHT

THE STORM

THE ROPE

EPILOGUE

READER'S GUIDE

Critical Essay

Discussion Questions

Prologue

I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm.

And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone. When the police released Kevin, he came to the hospital and stayed with me so that I would know I hadn't lost him too.

But before he could come to me, I had to convince the police that he did not belong in jail. That took time. The police were shadows who appeared intermittently at my bedside to ask me questions I had to struggle to understand.

"How did you hurt your arm?" they asked. "Who hurt you?" My attention was captured by the word they used: Hurt. As though I'd scratched my arm. Didn't they think I knew it was gone?

"Accident," I heard myself whisper. "It was an accident."

They began asking me about Kevin. Their words seemed to blur together at first, and I paid little attention. After a while, though, I replayed them and suddenly realized that these men were trying to blame Kevin for "hurting" my arm.

"No." I shook my head weakly against the pillow. "Not Kevin. Is he here? Can I see him?"

“Who then?” they persisted.

I tried to think through the drugs, through the distant pain, but there was no honest explanation I could give them—none they would believe.

“An accident,” I repeated. “My fault, not Kevin’s. Please let me see him.”

I said this over and over until the vague police shapes let me alone, until I awoke to find Kevin sitting, dozing beside my bed. I wondered briefly how long he had been there, but it didn’t matter. The important thing was that he was there. I slept again, relieved.

Finally, I awoke feeling able to talk to him coherently and understand what he said. I was almost comfortable except for the strange throbbing of my arm. Of where my arm had been. I moved my head, tried to look at the empty place ... the stump.

Then Kevin was standing over me, his hands on my face turning my head toward him.

He didn’t say anything. After a moment, he sat down again, took my hand, and held it.

I felt as though I could have lifted my other hand and touched him. I felt as though I had another hand. I tried again to look, and this time he let me. Somehow, I had to see to be able to accept what I knew was so.

After a moment, I lay back against the pillow and closed my eyes. “Above the elbow,” I said.

“They had to.”

“I know. I’m just trying to get used to it.” I opened my eyes and looked at him. Then I remembered my earlier visitors. “Have I gotten you into trouble?”

“Me?”

“The police were here. They thought you had done this to me.”

“Oh, that. They were sheriff’s deputies. The neighbors called them when you started to scream. They questioned me, detained me for a while—that’s what they call it!—but you convinced them that they might as well let me go.”

“Good. I told them it was an accident. My fault.”

“There’s no way a thing like that could be your fault.”

“That’s debatable. But it certainly wasn’t your fault. Are you still in trouble?”

“I don’t think so. They’re sure I did it, but there were no witnesses, and you won’t co-operate. Also, I don’t think they can figure out how I could have hurt you ... in the way you were hurt.”

I closed my eyes again remembering the way I had been hurt — remembering the pain.

“Are you all right?” Kevin asked.

“Yes. Tell me what you told the police.”

“The truth.” He toyed with my hand for a moment silently. I looked at him, found him watching me.

“If you told those deputies the truth,” I said softly, “you’d still be locked up—in a mental hospital.”

He smiled. “I told as much of the truth as I could. I said I was in the bedroom when I heard you scream. I ran to the living room to see what was wrong, and I found you struggling to free your arm from what seemed to be a hole in the wall. I went to help you. That was when I realized your arm wasn’t just stuck, but that, somehow, it had been crushed right into the wall.”

“Not exactly crushed.”

“I know. But that seemed to be a good word to use on them—to show my ignorance. It wasn’t all that inaccurate either. Then they wanted me to tell them how such a thing could happen. I said I didn’t know ... kept telling them I didn’t know. And heaven help me, Dana, I don’t know.”

“Neither do I,” I whispered. “Neither do I.”

The River

The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It was also the day I met Rufus—the day he called me to him for the first time.

Kevin and I had not planned to do anything to celebrate my birthday. We were both too tired for that. On the day before, we had moved from our apartment in Los Angeles to a house of our own a few miles away in Altadena. The moving was celebration enough for me. We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order. Now he was closeted there either loafing or thinking because I didn't hear his typewriter. Finally, he came out to the living room where I was sorting books into one of the big bookcases. Fiction only. We had so many books, we had to try to keep them in some kind of order.

“What's the matter?” I asked him.

“Nothing.” He sat down on the floor near where I was working. “Just struggling with my own perversity. You know, I had half-a-dozen ideas for that Christmas story yesterday during the moving.”

“And none now when there's time to write them down.”

“Not a one.” He picked up a book, opened it, and turned a few pages. I picked up another book and tapped him on the shoulder with it. When he

looked up, surprised, I put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him. He stared at it unhappily.

“Hell, why’d I come out here?”

“To get more ideas. After all, they come to you when you’re busy.”

He gave me a look that I knew wasn’t as malevolent as it seemed. He had the kind of pale, almost colorless eyes that made him seem distant and angry whether he was or not. He used them to intimidate people. Strangers. I grinned at him and went back to work. After a moment, he took the nonfiction to another bookcase and began shelving it.

I bent to push him another box full, then straightened quickly as I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees. I heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, “What happened?”

I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. “Something is wrong with me,” I gasped.

I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of a woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming ...

Drowning!

I reacted to the child in trouble. Later I could ask questions, try to find out where I was, what had happened. Now I went to help the child.

I ran down to the river, waded into the water fully clothed, and swam quickly to the child. He was unconscious by the time I reached him—a small red-haired boy floating, face down. I turned him over, got a good hold on him so that his head was above water, and towed him in. There was a red-haired woman waiting for us on the shore now. Or rather, she was running back and forth crying on the shore. The moment she saw that I was wading, she ran out, took the boy from me and carried him the rest of the way, feeling and examining him as she did.

“He’s not breathing!” she screamed.

Artificial respiration. I had seen it done, been told about it, but I had never done it. Now was the time to try. The woman was in no condition to do anything useful, and there was no one else in sight. As we reached shore, I snatched the child from her. He was no more than four or five years old, and not very big.

I put him down on his back, tilted his head back, and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I saw his chest move as I breathed into him. Then, suddenly, the woman began beating me.

“You killed my baby!” she screamed. “You killed him!”

I turned and managed to catch her pounding fists. “Stop it!” I shouted, putting all the authority I could into my voice. “He’s alive!” Was he? I couldn’t tell. Please God, let him be alive. “The boy’s alive. Now let me help him.” I pushed her away, glad she was a little smaller than I was, and turned my attention back to her son. Between breaths, I saw her staring at me blankly. Then she dropped to her knees beside me, crying.

Moments later, the boy began breathing on his own—breathing and coughing and choking and throwing up and crying for his mother. If he could do all that, he was all right. I sat back from him, feeling light-headed, relieved. I had done it!

“He’s alive!” cried the woman. She grabbed him and nearly smothered him. “Oh, Rufus, baby ...”

Rufus. Ugly name to inflict on a reasonably nice-looking little kid.

When Rufus saw that it was his mother who held him, he clung to her, screaming as loudly as he could. There was nothing wrong with his voice, anyway. Then, suddenly, there was another voice.

“What the devil’s going on here?” A man’s voice, angry and demanding.

I turned, startled, and found myself looking down the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking I was going to be shot for saving the boy’s life. I was going to die.

I tried to speak, but my voice was suddenly gone. I felt sick and dizzy. My vision blurred so badly I could not distinguish the gun or the face of the man behind it. I heard the woman speak sharply, but I was too far gone into sickness and panic to understand what she said.

Then the man, the woman, the boy, the gun all vanished.

I was kneeling in the living room of my own house again several feet from where I had fallen minutes before. I was back at home—wet and muddy, but intact. Across the room, Kevin stood frozen, staring at the spot where I had been. How long had he been there?

“Kevin?”

He spun around to face me. “What the hell ... how did you get over there?” he whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“Dana, you ...” He came over to me, touched me tentatively as though he wasn’t sure I was real. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and held me tightly. “What happened?”

I reached up to loosen his grip, but he wouldn’t let go. He dropped to his knees beside me.

“Tell me!” he demanded.

“I would if I knew what to tell you. Stop hurting me.”

He let me go, finally, stared at me as though he’d just recognized me. “Are you all right?”

“No.” I lowered my head and closed my eyes for a moment. I was shaking with fear, with residual terror that took all the strength out of me. I folded forward, hugging myself, trying to be still. The threat was gone, but it was all I could do to keep my teeth from chattering.

Kevin got up and went away for a moment. He came back with a large towel and wrapped it around my shoulders. It comforted me somehow, and I pulled it tighter. There was an ache in my back and shoulders where Rufus’s mother had pounded with her fists. She had hit harder than I’d realized, and Kevin hadn’t helped.

We sat there together on the floor, me wrapped in the towel and Kevin with his arm around me calming me just by being there. After a while, I stopped shaking.

“Tell me now,” said Kevin.

“What?”

“Everything. What happened to you? How did you ... how did you move like that?”

I sat mute, trying to gather my thoughts, seeing the rifle again leveled at my head. I had never in my life panicked that way—never felt so close to death.

“Dana.” He spoke softly. The sound of his voice seemed to put distance between me and the memory. But still ...

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “It’s all crazy.”

“Tell me how you got wet,” he said. “Start with that.”

I nodded. “There was a river,” I said. “Woods with a river running through. And there was a boy drowning. I saved him. That’s how I got wet.” I hesitated, trying to think, to make sense. Not that what had happened to me made sense, but at least I could tell it coherently.

I looked at Kevin, saw that he held his expression carefully neutral. He waited. More composed, I went back to the beginning, to the first dizziness, and remembered it all for him—relived it all in detail. I even recalled things that I hadn’t realized I’d noticed. The trees I’d been near, for instance, were pine trees, tall and straight with branches and needles mostly at the top. I

had noticed that much somehow in the instant before I had seen Rufus. And I remembered something extra about Rufus's mother. Her clothing. She had worn a long dark dress that covered her from neck to feet. A silly thing to be wearing on a muddy riverbank. And she had spoken with an accent—a southern accent. Then there was the unforgettable gun, long and deadly.

Kevin listened without interrupting. When I was finished, he took the edge of the towel and wiped a little of the mud from my leg. “This stuff had to come from somewhere,” he said.

“You don't believe me?”

He stared at the mud for a moment, then faced me. “You know how long you were gone?”

“A few minutes. Not long.”

“A few seconds. There were no more than ten or fifteen seconds between the time you went and the time you called my name.”

“Oh, no ...” I shook my head slowly. “All that couldn't have happened in just seconds.”

He said nothing.

“But it was real! I was there!” I caught myself, took a deep breath, and slowed down. “All right. If you told me a story like this, I probably wouldn't believe it either, but like you said, this mud came from somewhere.”

“Yes.”

“Look, what did you see? What do you think happened?”

He frowned a little, shook his head. “You vanished.” He seemed to have to force the words out. “You were here until my hand was just a couple of inches from you. Then, suddenly, you were gone. I couldn’t believe it. I just stood there. Then you were back again and on the other side of the room.”

“Do you believe it yet?”

He shrugged. “It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts.”

“I reappeared wet, muddy, and scared to death.”

“Yes.”

“And I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They’re no crazier than yours.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“I’m not sure it matters what we think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well ... it happened once. What if it happens again?”

“No. No, I don’t think ...”

“You don’t know!” I was starting to shake again. “Whatever it was, I’ve had enough of it! It almost killed me!”

“Take it easy,” he said. “Whatever happens, it’s not going to do you any good to panic yourself again.”

I moved uncomfortably, looked around. “I feel like it could happen again—like it could happen anytime. I don’t feel secure here.”

“You’re just scaring yourself.”

“No!” I turned to glare at him, and he looked so worried I turned away again. I wondered bitterly whether he was worried about my vanishing again or worried about my sanity. I still didn’t think he believed my story. “Maybe you’re right,” I said. “I hope you are. Maybe I’m just like a victim of robbery or rape or something—a victim who survives, but who doesn’t feel safe any more.” I shrugged. “I don’t have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don’t feel safe any more.”

He made his voice very gentle. “If it happens again, and if it’s real, the boy’s father will know he owes you thanks. He won’t hurt you.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know what could happen.” I stood up unsteadily. “Hell, I don’t blame you for humoring me.” I paused to give him a chance to deny it, but he didn’t. “I’m beginning to feel as though I’m humoring myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it’s beginning to recede from me somehow. It’s becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand.”

“Or like a ... a dream?”

I looked down at him. “You mean a hallucination.”

“All right.”

“No! I know what I’m doing. I can see. I’m pulling away from it because it scares me so. But it was real.”

“Let yourself pull away from it.” He got up and took the muddy towel from me. “That sounds like the best thing you can do, whether it was real or not. Let go of it.”

The Fire

1

I tried.

I showered, washed away the mud and the brackish water, put on clean clothes, combed my hair ...

“That’s a lot better,” said Kevin when he saw me.

But it wasn’t.

Rufus and his parents had still not quite settled back and become the “dream” Kevin wanted them to be. They stayed with me, shadowy and threatening. They made their own limbo and held me in it. I had been afraid that the dizziness might come back while I was in the shower, afraid that I would fall and crack my skull against the tile or that I would go back to that river, wherever it was, and find myself standing naked among strangers. Or would I appear somewhere else naked and totally vulnerable?

I washed very quickly.

Then I went back to the books in the living room, but Kevin had almost finished shelving them.

“Forget about any more unpacking today,” he told me. “Let’s go get something to eat.”

“Go?”

“Yes, where would you like to eat? Somewhere nice for your birthday.”

“Here.”

“But ...”

“Here, really. I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“Why not?”

I took a deep breath. “Tomorrow,” I said. “Let’s go tomorrow.” Somehow, tomorrow would be better. I would have a night’s sleep between me and whatever had happened. And if nothing else happened, I would be able to relax a little.

“It would be good for you to get out of here for a while,” he said.

“No.”

“Listen ...”

“No!” Nothing was going to get me out of the house that night if I could help it.

Kevin looked at me for a moment—I probably looked as scared as I was—then he went to the phone and called out for chicken and shrimp.