



**James Berry** (b. 1924) was raised in a tiny seaside village in Jamaica. At seventeen, he left home for the United States. Unhappy there, he returned to Jamaica four years later. Although Berry moved to England in 1948, much of his writing focuses on his early Caribbean home. He chooses to use the local language of his childhood in his writing because he wants to express the experience of living in his home village. Berry has won many literary awards for his poetry and stories.

# THE BANANA TREE

Short Story by James Berry



**SETTING A PURPOSE** As you read, pay attention to the clues that help you understand the relationship between the boy and his father. Write down any questions you have while reading.

**I**n the hours the hurricane stayed, its presence made everybody older. It made Mr. Bass see that not only people and animals and certain valuables were of most importance to be saved.

From its very buildup the hurricane meant to show it was merciless, unstoppable, and, with its might, changed landscapes.

All day the Jamaican sun didn't come out. Then, ten minutes before, there was a swift shower of rain that raced by and was gone like some urgent messenger-rush of wind. And again everything went back to that quiet, that unnatural quiet. It was as if trees crouched quietly in fear. As if, too, birds knew they should shut up. A thick and low black cloud had covered the sky and shadowed everywhere, and made it seem like

night was coming on. And the cloud deepened. Its deepening spread more and more over the full stretch of the sea.

The doom-laden afternoon had the atmosphere of Judgment Day<sup>1</sup> for everybody in all the districts about. Everybody knew the hour of disaster was near. Warnings  
20 printed in bold lettering had been put up at post offices, police stations, and school-yard entrances and in clear view on shop walls in village squares.

Carrying children and belongings, people hurried in files and in scattered groups, headed for the big, strong, and safe community buildings. In Canerise Village, we headed for the schoolroom. Loaded with bags and cases, with bundles and lidded baskets, individuals carrying or leading an animal, parents shrieking for children to stay at their heels, we arrived there. And looking around, anyone would think the whole of  
30 Canerise was here in this vast superbarn of a noisy chattering schoolroom.

With violent gusts and squalls the storm broke. Great rushes, huge bulky rushes, of wind struck the building in heavy, repeated thuds, shaking it over and over and carrying on.

Families were huddled together on the floor. People sang, sitting on benches, desks, anywhere there was room. Some people knelt in loud prayer. Among the refugees' noises a goat bleated, a hen fluttered or cackled, a dog whined.

40 Mr. Jetro Bass was sitting on a soap box. His broad back leaned on the blackboard against the wall. Mrs. Imogene Bass, largely pregnant, looked a midget beside him. Their children were sitting on the floor. The eldest boy, Gustus, sat farthest from his father. Altogether, the children's heads made seven different levels of height around the parents. Mr. Bass forced a reassuring smile. His toothbrush mustache<sup>2</sup> moved about a little as he said, "The storm's bad, chil'run. Really bad. But it'll blow off. It'll spen' itself out. It'll kill itself."

50 Except for Gustus's, all the faces of the children turned up with subdued fear and looked at their father as he spoke.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Judgment Day:** a religious term for the end of the world.

<sup>2</sup> **toothbrush mustache** (müs'täsh'): a small, rectangular unshaven area of hair on a man's upper lip.

“Das true wha’ Pappy say,” Mrs. Bass said. “The good Lord won’ gi’ we more than we can bear.”

Mr. Bass looked at Gustus. He stretched fully through the sitting children and put a lumpy, blistery hand—though a huge hand—on the boy’s head, almost covering it. The boy’s clear brown eyes looked straight and unblinkingly into his father’s face. “Wha’s the matter, bwoy?” his dad asked.

He shook his head. “Nothin’, Pappy.”

60 “Wha’ mek you say nothin’? I sure somet’ing bodder you, Gustus. You not a bwoy who frighten easy. Is not the hurricane wha’ bodder you? Tell Pappy.”

“Is nothin’.”

“You’re a big bwoy now. Gustus—you nearly thirteen. You strong. You very useful fo’ you age. You good as mi right han’. I depen’ on you. But this afternoon—earlier—in the rush, when we so well push to move befo’ storm broke, you couldn’ rememba a t’ing! Not one t’ing! Why so? Wha’ on you mind? You harborin’ t’ings from me, Gustus?”

70 Gustus opened his mouth to speak but closed it again. He knew his father was proud of how well he had grown. To strengthen him, he had always given him “last milk”<sup>3</sup> straight from the cow in the mornings. He was thankful. But to him his strength was only proven in the number of innings he could pitch for his cricket team. The boy’s lips trembled. What’s the good of tellin’ when Pappy don’ like cricket. He only get vex<sup>4</sup> an’ say it’s an evil game for idle hands! He twisted his head and looked away. “I’m harborin’ nothin’, Pappy.”

“Gustus . . .”

80 At that moment a man called, “Mr. Bass!” He came up quickly. “Got a hymnbook, Mr. Bass? We want you to lead us singing.”

The people were sitting with bowed heads, humming a song. As the **repressed** singing grew louder and louder, it sounded mournful in the room. Mr. Bass shuffled, looking around as if he wished to back out of the suggestion. But his rich voice and singing leadership were too famous. Mrs. Bass

**repress**

(rĭ-prĕs´) *v.* If you *repress* something, you hold it back or try to stop it from happening.

<sup>3</sup> **last milk:** the last milk taken from milking a cow; this milk is usually the richest in nutrients and taste.

<sup>4</sup> **vex:** dialect for *vexed*, meaning “annoyed.”



90 already had the hymnbook in her hand, and she pushed it at her husband. He took it and began turning the leaves as he moved toward the center of the room.

Immediately Mr. Bass was surrounded. He started with a resounding chant over the heads of everybody. “Abide wid me; fast fall the eventide . . .” He joined the singing but broke off to recite the next line. “The darkness deepen; Lord, wid me, abide . . .” Again, before the last long-drawn note faded from the deeply stirred voices, Mr. Bass intoned musically, “When odder helpers fail, and comfo’ts flee . . .”

100 In this manner he fired inspiration into the singing of hymn after hymn. The congregation swelled their throats, and their mixed voices filled the room, pleading to heaven from the depths of their hearts. But the wind outside **mocked** viciously. It screamed. It whistled. It smashed everywhere up.

Mrs. Bass had tightly closed her eyes, singing and swaying in the center of the children who nestled around her. But Gustus was by himself. He had his elbows on his knees and his hands blocking his ears. He had his own worries.

**mock**

(mŏk) v. To *mock* someone is to treat them with scorn or contempt.

What's the good of Pappy asking all those questions when he treat him so bad? He's the only one in the family without a pair of shoes! Because he's a big boy, he don't need anyt'ing an'  
110 must do all the work. He can't stay at school in the evenings an' play cricket<sup>5</sup> because there's work to do at home. He can't have no outings with the other children because he has no shoes. An' now when he was to sell his bunch of bananas an' buy shoes so he can go out with his cricket team, the hurricane is going to blow it down.

It was true: the root of the banana was his "navel string."<sup>6</sup> After his birth the umbilical cord<sup>7</sup> was dressed with castor oil and sprinkled with nutmeg and buried, with the banana tree planted over it for him. When he was nine days old, the nana  
120 midwife<sup>8</sup> had taken him out into the open for the first time. She had held the infant proudly and walked the twenty-five yards that separated the house from the kitchen, and at the back showed him his tree. "Memba when you grow up," her toothless mouth had said, "it's you nable strings feedin' you tree, the same way it feed you from you mudder."

Refuse from the kitchen made the plant flourish out of all proportion. But the rich soil around it was loose. Each time the tree gave a shoot, the bunch would be too heavy for the soil to support; so it crashed to the ground, crushing the  
130 tender fruit. This time, determined that his banana must reach the market, Gustus had supported his tree with eight props. And as he watched it night and morning, it had become very close to him. Often he had seriously thought of moving his bed to its root.

Muffled cries, and the sound of blowing noses, now mixed with the singing. Delayed impact of the disaster was happening. Sobbing was everywhere. Quickly the atmosphere became sodden with the wave of weeping outbursts.

<sup>5</sup> **cricket** (krik ʔt): an English sport similar to baseball.

<sup>6</sup> **navel string**: a term for the umbilical cord.

<sup>7</sup> **umbilical cord** (üm-bil ʔ-kəl kôrd): the cord through which an unborn baby (fetus) receives nourishment from its mother; a person's navel is the place where the cord was attached.

<sup>8</sup> **nana midwife**: a woman who helps other women give birth and cares for newborn children.

Mrs. Bass's pregnant belly heaved. Her younger children  
140 were upset and cried, "Mammy, Mammy, Mammy . . ."

Realizing that his family, too, was overwhelmed by  
the surrounding calamity, Mr. Bass bustled over to them.  
Because their respect for him bordered on fear, his presence  
quietened all immediately. He looked around. "Where's  
Gustus! Imogene . . . where's Gustus!"

"He was 'ere, Pappy," she replied, drying her eyes. "I dohn  
know when he get up."

Briskly Mr. Bass began combing the schoolroom to find  
his boy. He asked; no one had seen Gustus. He called. There  
150 was no answer. He tottered, lifting his heavy boots over heads,  
fighting his way to the jalousie.<sup>9</sup> He opened it, and his eyes  
gleamed up and down the road but saw nothing of the boy. In  
despair Mr. Bass gave one last thunderous shout: "Gustus!"  
Only the wind sneered.

By this time Gustus was halfway on the mile journey to  
their house. The lone figure in the raging wind and shin-deep  
road flood was tugging, snapping, and pitching branches out  
of his path. His shirt was fluttering from his back like a boat  
sail. And a leaf was fastened to his cheek. But the belligerent  
160 wind was merciless. It bellowed into his ears and drummed a  
deafening commotion. As he **grimaced** and covered his ears,  
he was forcefully slapped against a coconut tree trunk that lay  
across the road.

When his eyes opened, his round face was turned up to a  
festered<sup>10</sup> sky. Above the tormented trees a zinc sheet writhed,  
twisted, and somersaulted in the tempestuous flurry. Leaves  
of all shapes and sizes were whirling and diving like attackers  
around the zinc sheet. As Gustus turned to get up, a bullet  
drop of rain struck his temple. He shook his head, held grimly  
170 to the tree trunk, and struggled to his feet.

Where the road was clear, he edged along the bank. Once,  
when the wind staggered him, he recovered with his legs wide  
apart. Angrily he stretched out his hands with clenched fists  
and shouted, "I almos' hol' you that time. . . . Come solid like  
that again, an' we fight like man an' man!"

**grimace**

(grīm'īs) v. If you  
*grimace*, you twist  
your face in an  
unattractive way  
because you are  
unhappy, disgusted,  
or in pain.

<sup>9</sup> **jalousie** (jāl'ə-sē): a window blind or shutter with adjustable thin slats.

<sup>10</sup> **festered** (fēs'tərd): infected and irritated; diseased.

When Gustus approached the river he had to cross, it was flooded and blocked beyond recognition. Pressing his chest against the gritty road bank, the boy closed his weary eyes on the brink of the spating river. The wrecked footbridge had become the harboring fort for all the debris, branches, and monstrous tree trunks which the river swept along its course. The river was still swelling. More accumulation arrived each moment, ramming and pressing the bridge. Under pressure it was cracking and shifting minutely toward a turbulent forty-foot fall.

Gustus had seen it! A feeling of dismay paralyzed him, reminding him of his foolish **venture**. He scraped his cheek on the bank looking back. But how can he go back? He has no strength to go back. His house is nearer than the school. An' Pappy will only strap him for nothin' . . . for nothin' . . . no shoes, nothin', when the hurricane is gone.

With trembling fingers he tied up the remnants of his shirt. He made a bold step, and the wind half lifted him, ducking him in the muddy flood. He sank to his neck. Floating leaves, sticks, coconut husks, dead ratbats, and all manner of feathered creatures and refuse surrounded him. Forest vines under the water entangled him. But he struggled desperately until he clung to the laden bridge and climbed up among leafless branches.

His legs were bruised and **bore** deep scratches, but steadily he moved up on the slimy pile. He felt like a man at sea, in the heart of a storm, going up the mast of a ship. He rested his feet on a smooth log that stuck to the water-splashed heap like a black torso. As he strained up for another grip, the torso came to life and leaped from under his feet. Swiftly sliding down, he grimly clutched some brambles.

The urgency of getting across became more frightening, and he gritted his teeth and dug his toes into the debris, climbing with maddened determination. But a hard gust of wind slammed the wreck, pinning him like a motionless lizard. For a minute the boy was stuck there, panting, swelling his naked ribs.

He stirred again and reached the top. He was sliding over a breadfruit limb when a flutter startled him. As he looked and saw the clean-head crow and glassy-eyed owl close together,

**venture**

(vēn'chər) *n.*

A *venture* is a dangerous, daring, or poorly planned task or activity.

**bore**

(bôr) *v.* (past tense

of *bear*) If you say a person *bore* something, you mean they carried it or had it on them; it is visible in some way.



there was a powerful jolt. Gustus flung himself into the air and fell in the expanding water on the other side. When he surfaced, the river had dumped the entire wreckage into the gurgling gully. For once the wind helped. It blew him to land.

220 Gustus was in a daze when he reached his house. Mud and rotten leaves covered his head and face, and blood caked around a gash on his chin. He bent down, shielding himself behind a tree stump whose white heart was a needly splinter, murdered by the wind.

He could hardly recognize his yard. The terrorized trees that stood were writhing in turmoil. Their thatched house had collapsed like an open umbrella that was given a heavy blow. He looked the other way and whispered, “Is still there! That’s a miracle. . . . That’s a miracle.”

230 Dodging the wind, he staggered from tree to tree until he got to his own tormented banana tree. Gustus hugged the tree. “My nable string!” he cried. “My nable string! I know you would stan’ up to it, I know you would.”

The bones of the tree's stalky leaves were broken, and the wind lifted them and harassed them. And over Gustus's head the heavy fruit swayed and swayed. The props held the tree, but they were squeaking and slipping. And around the plant the roots stretched and trembled, gradually surfacing under loose earth.

240 With the rags of his wet shirt flying off his back, Gustus was down busily on his knees, bracing, pushing, tightening the props. One by one he was adjusting them until a heavy rush of wind knocked him to the ground. A prop fell on him, but he scrambled to his feet and looked up at the thirteen-hand bunch of bananas. "My good tree," he bawled, "hol' you fruit. . . . Keep it to you heart like a mudder savin' her baby! Don't let the wicked wind t'row you to the groun' . . . even if it t'row me to the groun'. I will not leave you."

250 But several attempts to replace the prop were futile. The force of the wind against his weight was too much for him. He thought of a rope to lash the tree to anything, but it was difficult to make his way into the kitchen, which, separate from the house, was still standing. The invisible hand of the wind tugged, pushed, and forcefully restrained him. He got down and crawled on his belly into the earth-floor kitchen. As he showed himself with the rope, the wind tossed him, like washing on the line, against his tree.

The boy was hurt! He looked crucified against the tree. The spike of the wind was slightly withdrawn. He fell, folded  
260 on the ground. He lay there unconscious. And the wind had no mercy for him. It shoved him, poked him, and molested his clothes like muddy newspaper against the tree.

As darkness began to move in rapidly, the wind grew more vicious and surged a mighty gust that struck the resisting kitchen. It was heaved to the ground in a rubble pile. The brave wooden hut had been shielding the banana tree but in its death fall missed it by inches. The wind charged again, and the soft tree gurgled—the fruit was torn from it and plunged to the ground.

270 The wind was less fierce when Mr. Bass and a searching party arrived with lanterns. Because the bridge was washed away, the hazardous roundabout journey had badly impeded them.

Talks about safety were mockery to the anxious father. Relentlessly he searched. In the darkness his great voice

echoed everywhere, calling for his boy. He was wrenching and ripping through the house wreckage when suddenly he vaguely remembered how the boy had been fussing with the banana tree. Desperate, the man struggled from the ruins,  
280 flagging the lantern he carried.

The flickering light above his head showed Mr. Bass the forlorn and pitiful banana tree. There it stood, shivering and twitching like a propped-up man with lacerated throat and dismembered head. Half of the damaged fruit rested on Gustus. The father hesitated. But when he saw a feeble wink of the boy's eyelids, he flung himself to the ground. His bristly chin rubbed the child's face while his unsteady hand ran all over his body. "Mi bwoy!" he murmured. "Mi hurricane  
290 bwoy! The Good Lord save you. . . . Why you do this? Why you do this?"

"I did want buy mi shoes, Pappy. I . . . I can't go anywhere ' cause I have no shoes. . . . I didn' go to school outing at the factory. I didn' go to Government House. I didn' go to Ol' Fort in town."

Mr. Bass sank into the dirt and stripped himself of his heavy boots. He was about to lace them to the boy's feet when the onlooking men prevented him. He tied the boots together and threw them over his shoulder.

Gustus's broken arm was strapped to his side as they  
300 carried him away. Mr. Bass stroked his head and asked how he felt. Only then grief swelled inside him and he wept.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** Think about what happens at the end of "The Banana Tree." With a partner, discuss how the storm may change the relationship between Gustus and his father. Use text evidence to support your ideas.