

BOY

(A NOVELLA)

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**DECLARATION**

This project is my original work and has not been presented for examination or award of a degree in another university.

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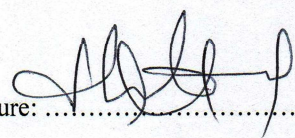
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This project has been submitted for examination with our approval as university supervisors.

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*To Kanyiri, for believing; and to the Kazees for everything*

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When I started working on this project, I had no idea it would become the journey that it was. Days of solitude and hard work, lost in worlds creating characters who would eventually become as close as family always threatening the fine line between reality and imagination.

This novella came out of a need to tell a story that has long wanted to come alive, and finally it did. But I could not have done this without the immense support of wonderful people who were strange enough to believe.

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## SYNOPSIS

Ayub, a year older and with an overactive imagination, cannot cope with the ever changing world. He grows up in a loving family which comprises his father, an editor for a national newspaper and his mother, a hotel owner. But the complexities of the changing world push him into his imagination where he creates imaginary companions – his secret friends – who guide him along his journey of discovery and often offer an alternative to the ‘real’ world.

Ayub looks up to his parents and they become the anchor that holds him to reality. His relationship with his father is particularly strong and he seems to learn a lot from him. But the changes in the world prove too harsh for him and he is pushed further and further into his imagination and further away from reality and the relationships around him.

When the Head of State is almost overthrown, the country goes through a significant change that leads to his father losing his job and later his identity. Ayub has to deal with a father who is angry at the world, who becomes Abusive, and who becomes a shadow of what he used to be. Ayub has to travel through worlds to find his father and ultimately himself.

After losing his job, his father becomes an alcoholic and gets into trouble with the Party of The Cock which eventually arrests him causing his family – and Ayub – to fall further into turmoil. Ayub has to reconcile with the changing world around him and beyond, and find his place.

## INTRODUCTION

African writers are moving on from certain themes and stereotypes that seem to certify texts as true African literature. Themes such as colonialism, neocolonialism, the tribulations of urbanization, poverty, sickness, famine; still affect Africans but writers are now coming up with a different voice, a voice that speaks in a softer tone, a tone that presents its disappointment and disapproval of leadership differently, a tone that veers off from the path of political preaching, a tone that re-presents the African story.

One way in which writers are retelling the African story is through the coming of age novel, an apt embodiment of the celebration and expression of the African experience. The coming of age novel or the bildungsroman is explained by Jerome Buckley in *Seasons of Youth* as a novel that conveys the idea of a character's development or creation. In other words the coming of age novel reveals the development of the child, or the creation of an adult from a child. The coming of age novel thus, at the risk of stating the obvious, revolves around childhood.

But is childhood really important in telling the African story? Maxwell Okolie argues that "childhood, like the past with which it is associated, occupies a prominent psychological part of African literature." The child is able to bring to light their experiences, in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa that make up their reality and existence. It is for this reason - the importance of the child in narrating the African story – that I argue that the child is an important entity in not only telling the African narrative, but also in revealing the growth of the African people (or nation) and the complexities that surround Africa(ns).

I am reminded of what Veit Wild says:

Since the 1980s, new outlooks have emerged in the discourse about Africa. The dichotomies of the anti-colonial era have been replaced by a more complex and multi-layered perception. This perception takes into account the diversities and complexities of African reality in the post-independence era, moving from the nation-based and anti-colonialism towards a multi-cultural post-colonialism.

Gikandi further adds to this argument by stating:

...a new African literature is emerging in which the notions of betrayal and the failure of nationalism are seen as inadequate strategies for representing and explaining a post-colonial situation which is proving to be much more confusing than earlier theories of neo-colonialism entail. (37)

It is in this light that I posit that children are essential in the narration of the African experience, capturing the nuances of the developing world, as well as the complexities and dynamism that dictate their existence.

There is however a common misrepresentation of the child in literature. The child is seen, as Gatungo states, as having a certain “vulnerability and helplessness...inherent in all the children of the world.” Early literary texts confirm this misconception and hint at setting a standard by which the world viewed children in literature. In John Earle’s *Microcosmographie* the first sketch titled *The Child* states:

[The child] is the best copy of *Adam* before he tasted of Eve or the apple [...]. He is nature’s fresh picture newly drawn in oil, which time, and much handling, dims and defaces. His soul is yet a white paper unscribbled with the observations of the world,



wherewith, at length, becomes a blurred notebook. He is purely happy, because he knows no evil, nor hath made means by sin to be acquainted with misery.

This depiction of the child is built on the following assumptions: First, the child, like Adam before, is untainted or unexposed to the harsh realities (and development) of the world and is therefore a primitive man. Secondly, growing up becomes a degenerative task – a steady progress from good to bad. Thirdly, experience is seen as a defacement of the child’s original purity instead of development of the child’s potential. These assumptions present the child as both pure and simple, and also as a victim of the (adult) world around him. But of course these assumptions are false because they detach children from the formation of chaos and assume that a child would never be an antagonist.

However, children have been seen to play a “unique and constructive role in the making of worlds, particularly the worlds of human nature and human culture” as Castaneda posits. Gatungo and Earle’s thinking denies children a political voice by assuming that they lack agency.

To ensure that their agency is recognized, writers need to shift the location of children in literature from the periphery of purity and victimhood to what Castaneda terms as the “centre of social political, and cultural concerns.” John Hood-Williams insists that one inaccuracy of literature is that writers “continue to render the child as the incompetent other” and that we need to break from the - as Ann Oakley calls it - “adultist” way of seeing children, as vulnerable, innocent beings in need of protection.

Childhood is however a great contradiction as Ben Okri states in his collection of essays *A Time for New Dreams*, “an enigma, a labyrinth, an existential question, a conundrum.” It is in

this witnessing and questioning that a process of moulding takes place – the construction of an adult. Robert Muponde states that “the child is viewed as a symbol of the age’s spirit.” The growth of a child, from say childhood to adolescence, is linked to the development of the postcolonial/post-independence nation. The child narrator is important in not only telling their story, but that of the nation.

But the child narrator is not always a being becoming an adult. In some cases, as in the case of Camara Laye’s *The African Child* the child narrator is an adult looking back through memory. Here the child’s voice is informed by what the adult recalls. The writer, as Lindsay argues, utilizes “autobiographical reminiscence [that] can be described as mental time travel, with the rememberer transported into the past to re-experience, albeit only partially, a moment of his or her personal history.” Thus the writer remembers parts of his memory and builds sketches for the world he is creating, and then uses his imagination to add onto the memory. Autobiographical memory is therefore an important aspect of identity formation and creation for any writer seeking to use the child narrator’s voice. A mix of memory and imagination is necessary in writing the child.

It is with this understanding that my interest in telling the African story grew. I believe that children have agency and that through the child we are able to see the world in an almost magical clear way that highlights the process of the child’s becoming, through which the changes and transformations in society are brought to light. My project explores the aforementioned shift in the expression of the African story through the voice of a child growing up, by means of a novella. Creative writing always reveals to us nuances that speak of the human condition, and in this case, the African condition. I developed characters that embody the societal transformation and themes relevant to today’s society by use of both memory and imagination. In this endeavour

my aim is to recast the literature presented by writers before us, to claim that even Africans can overcome years of oppression, poverty, disease; claim that Africans can break the stereotypes that define African literature (and the role of the child in literature); and claim that Africans can use their pasts to re-tell their present, and future.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Several writers recognize the importance of the child narrative voice in literature. These writers present children as essential entities in the story, and more so the narration of the story. They also avoid the condescending portrayal of children as the other vulnerable and innocent being in need of protection and representation. And while these works make up a significant part of African literature, there is still need to write and add onto the vistas that present the societal transformations through the eyes of the child in Africa today. Rapid development and globalization means rapid change in issues, and a rapid change in themes that need to be addressed.

Some works, more so from Kenya, have presented this transformation through the eyes and voice of a child. There is therefore a need to not only tell the new African story, but also recapture the place of the child as an important narrator of truth and the happenings in the world around them. There is also a need to write works that will stand firm as great new works of African literature. One way of doing this is through autobiographical memory, a way of going back in time – to our childhoods - to interrogate the factors that affected our identity formation and since memory may be an inaccurate tool, the use of creative imagination is essential to

stretch whatever is left of the memory to create worlds that present these factors (and memories) in new exciting ways.

Several writers have however placed the child at the periphery, presenting the (child) narrator as a mere observer and victim. My project seeks to recast the image of the child as a powerful voice in storytelling and shaping the history and the narrative of a people. The child is no longer a passive subject, but an active agent in the creation and development of history.

## **OBJECTIVES**

This project seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To demonstrate the importance of the child narrator in African literature in describing the societal transformations.
- ii. To demonstrate the impact of societal transformation in the identity formation of child narrators.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

The project assumes the following hypothesis:

- i. The child in African literature is an integral voice in presenting African experiences and narrating them.
- ii. The societal transformations that take place ultimately influence the identity formation of the child, and how they view themselves and the world.

## **JUSTIFICATION**

While several texts have been written all over Africa capturing issues that affect society through the child narrator, most texts usually present the child in a condescending way as an innocent and vulnerable being assuming that children have no agency. But children are important voices in narrating the African story. There is therefore need to break the stereotypes on children portrayed by writers and write more texts that will give the necessary agency to the child narrator. Kenyan writers today still lag behind their contemporaries in other parts of Africa and thus there is a need to write more share our stories.

It is therefore imperative that more bildungsroman works be created to capture not only the identity formation of the child, but also of the people and a nation as a whole – the coming of age story of a people. My project therefore brings to birth a creative work that will be useful in the study of literature and also to reveal the world as the child sees it, as a developing being sees it, as a developing world sees it.

This research seeks to reveal, or in the very least suggest, the complexities of growing up in a rapidly changing world and the different levels that constitute these complexities. These complexities are shown to be a result of the aforementioned shift in focus and expression in African writing.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For this project, I was guided by texts that give agency to the child, utilize the child narrator, and the coming of age style. I also focused on texts that present magical realism theory,

as well as texts that expound on the novel as a literary genre; its aspects, and the process of writing them.

Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road* is a coming of age story that retraces the life of Azaro from childhood to maturity. As much as being a representation of childhood experiences, the text poses the crucial problem of the African child's growth in the contemporary African society, as well as the process of identity formation, and the existential angst therein.

The novel highlights the encroachment of western civilization on African life and its impact on the growth of the main character. Through this story we realize the various dynamics in the process of identity formation in post-colonial Africa. Some of the factors that we may consider essential in this formation of identity include education, role of family, tradition, socioeconomic status, urbanization, and so on.

Camara Laye's novel *The African Child* also captures a child's experiences growing up against the brushes of western civilization. Through Laye's eyes we see a journey from the innocence of traditional life surrounded by custom and family, to experience, surrounded by disorientation and nostalgia. The novel, which is autobiographical, recaptures the vivid childhood impressions of life describing the world as if from within the child, and at the same time revealing the child's development. He is both part of the child, and at the same time a voice outside the child – an adult looking back in time.

There is a certain feeling of sadness and loss brought about by Laye's narration of his childhood. Despite the child's happiness as he exists in a loving accommodating environment, the adult, Laye, is writing in exile, away from family and the comfort of familiarity. This exemplifies the angst associated with growth; what Okri, in *A Time For New Dreams* argues is

the betrayal of childhood – that who we are when we are children is not who we become, and it is not a guarantee that what we are exposed to or what we choose to incorporate into our identity while growing up will lead us to a specific chosen ideal being. The process of identity formation, and even existence, is unpredictable and at flux:

Our childhoods pass obscure judgments on us. Looking at a picture of oneself as a child, who does not hear a faint whisper say: ‘This is what you were; and look at who you have become’? We always let down the unstated promise inherent in our childhood. But we are not sure in what way. The failure eludes us somehow. (109)

What Okri and Laye achieve with their narratives is the placement of the child at a point of agency giving the narrator a voice in which we can see the world differently, through their eyes. The children are not mere victims of a changing world, but active participants in the various events as they mark their place in history becoming adults themselves.

While the setting of various narratives will change, the child narrator is seen to transcend time and space and remain an important element of stories (and storytelling). Novels based in colonial settings: Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Matigari* and Ferdinand Oyono’s *Houseboy* also espouse on childhood, growth, and self-discovery. Muriuki and Toundi, respective characters in the novels, are essential in highlighting the state of affairs during colonial times through the eyes of a child.

Muriuki presents to us a portrait of a new generation of children ready and willing to continue the tradition of colonial resistance. At the end of the novel, the young boy Muriuki picks up the gun from where the revolutionary Matigari left it:

Under the mugumo tree, Muriuki dug up all the things that Matigari had hidden. He took out the pistol and the cartridge belt. He counted the bullets. Then he took the AK47 and gazed at it. He dug up the sword and laid it to the side. He passed the strap of the sword over his right shoulder and across his chest so that the sword lay on his left side. (175)

Ngugi presents to us the reality that children are actively involved in the resistance struggle, and in the direct shaping of the world around them. By Muriuki taking the pistol and cartridge belt that Matigari had hidden, Ngugi hints at the possibility of children becoming active participants in the revolutionary struggle, and societal transformation. Muriuki, through his interactions with Matigari undergoes a process of identity formation that transforms him from mere child to revolutionary fighter. Like Azaro and Laye, Muriuki places himself as an active participant in the goings on of society.

Toundi, in Oyono's *Houseboy*, espouses on the relations between colonialists and the colonized with both innocence and agency. In one part he is a child observing, and on the other part he is a being with dreams and ambition, and at times a sense of dignity that irks the colonizers who clearly believe the child (and African) should be subservient and docile. The Commandant's wife Madam shows this expectation on Africans when she questions Toundi:

'You look as if you find it a drudgery. Oh of course we are very satisfied with you.... You have no faults, you are always punctual, you are a conscientious worker...but you haven't got that joy one finds in African workers.... You give the impression that you are doing a houseboy's job while waiting for something else to come along.' (55)



Toundi also presents the idea of the African as a child. What I argue when I state that the coming of age story presents the growth and development and identity formation of not only the child, but also the nation. In other words, Africa is a child telling its own story of development amid great challenges.

The schoolmaster spoke with authority. He tried to explain African behaviour. Everybody told him his own African story to refute him and demonstrate that the African is a child or a fool.... (52)

The need to place the child at a place of agency is affirmed by this thought: how we place the child in our stories is how we place ourselves in our stories. Oyono, Ngugi, Okri, Laye and many other writers know this. The hopes of the African people, very much like the hopes of a child existing in an oppressive world, must remain alive; and like Toundi refuse to treat the impermanence of life as permanent and refuse to have stories told to us through other people's eyes.

We cannot refute the role colonialism has played on children. Ngugi, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, expresses his concerns on the influences of the West on the children of post-colonial African states. He states:

Children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world defined and reflected in the European experience of history. This entire way of looking at the world, even the immediate environment was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of the axis. The images children encountered in literature were reinforced by the study of history and geography and science and technology and where

Europe was once again, the centre. This in turn fitted well with the cultural imperatives of British imperialism.

Ngugi argues that for British imperialism to be successful, influence had to be passed onto children. This was done by the altering of truth in their environments and this in turn formed a base for their reality. To them, anything Eurocentric became the right thing. The child, especially in post-colonial Africa, faces the challenge of retelling these truths, in a society that is trying to reclaim its space in the world, but still finds itself in the clutch of neo-colonialism and imperialism. Even our literature reflects this skewed perception. Children are expected to speak when spoken to, to not speak against adults (or the adult world), to not have a grasp on reality (often termed as childish or immature). Looking at it as child-adult, colonized-colonizer; we see the need to shift the power from one extreme. The child is therefore important in narrating what the African goes through in these post-colonial times as he exists in a space where he is both witness and judge, with a much needed agency.

Elizabeth Gatungo, in response to Gabrielle Roy's *Children of My Heart*, presents the images of children painted throughout literature. Children portray a vulnerability that is apparent in all children: "a vulnerability to adults' expectations, dictates and reasoning, against which the children have no protection." Gatungo insists on the vulnerability and fragility of children as being representative of all the children of the world. This however seems to deny children of their agency and independence. In some cases, as in William Goldin's *Lord of the Flies* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, children have been seen to stand on their own, independent of adult authority and power. In fact, children have been seen to be representative of the 'adult' world, bringing out the human condition without much vulnerability or fragility. *Lord of the Flies* actually brings to us the realization that there is no innocence in childhood. The

novel ends with Ralph calling for “the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart.” *Allah Is Not Obligated* similarly shows that innocence is not necessarily synonymous with childhood. The conundrum seems to lie in the definition of innocence (or lack thereof) through an “adultist” approach. Birahima in *Allah is not Obligated* is the victim of civil war a disaster created by adults which ultimately places the children in situations where they are required to put aside their childhood. But I may argue that the children do not necessarily put aside their childhood and act as adults, rather they assert their childhood (voice) to adapt to the situation at hand; what is misinterpreted in Goldin’s *Lord of the Flies* as the children acting like adults.

My project reveals that children do have a voice with which they use to bring out their reality, and highlight elements that make up their identity, placing them as curators of the world around them and not just victims and observers. My main character stands outside of his circumstances and challenges and give voice to silences made by adults. Through him we see national development or the lack of it, and its effect on the people and the nation.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

My research employs the use of Magical Realism theory. Magic realism, as *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines, “is a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the ‘reliable’ tone of objective realistic report”. Magical Realism allows the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and borrow from the elements of fable, folk tale, and myth while still remaining relevant to today’s societal issues. The bizarre attributes given to characters in such novels – such as the narrator in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* Azaro’s ability to see into the

spiritual realm - are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often inexplicable political realities today. Magical realism therefore incorporates the imaginary with the everyday.

Magical Realism came up in the 1960s in Latin America as a reaction by Latin scholars to Western Realism, which was perpetrated by colonizers. Western Realism whose main concern, according to *The Columbia Encyclopaedia*, was “the commonplaces of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character is a product of social factors and environment is the integral element in the dramatic complications” was bent on presenting life without idealization or any form of romanticizing. When speaking about the natives of Latin America, Zamora and Faris state that the Spaniards, who were the colonizers, said that natives were “as the eternal infant, immature, lazy and worse than the European child totally incapable of mental and psychological development”. They also:

...established a binary opposition between European civilization with its consciousness of historical heritage and ability to engage in self-reflexivity, arguing that European scholars were indispensable for the understanding of the social and political organization of primitive societies. (135)

Magical Realism was therefore a reaction to the European rationale that demeaned the dignity of colonized peoples.

In the face of such indignity, it was necessary to come up with a literature that opposed the ‘reality’ that was defined by Europeans and to question the European rational canon. Zamora and Faris state:

... it is against this complex background of the colonized subject's rebellion against imposed models, the resistance of the newly independent Latin American countries to neo-colonial domination and the European philosophical delegitimation of metaphysical and epistemological paradigms that we must situate certain twentieth-century literary practices. (135 - 136)

But in as much as Magical Realism lends its background in Latin America, the setting is similar to other colonized societies, including Africa. The oppression and dehumanization that took place in Latin America is parallel to that which happened in Africa, and thus there was a need to go against the European way of doing things. Writers and artists, often in rebellion against societal norms, interrogated new ways of telling their stories. And as Zamora and Faris state, "artists have frequently been considered subversive figures, challenging official dogma in spite of the various mechanism of control."

African writers like Ben Okri and Amos Tutuola are such writers who use Magical Realism to tell the African story in a new way. In their novels *The Famished Road*, and *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Okri and Tutuola capture and present issues affecting the African people. The use of magical realism has not only been useful in coming up with an African way of telling stories, but has been useful in telling the African story and all its peculiarities.

In re-telling the African story, Magical Realism has been found to be an effective tool in presenting the dynamic and ever-changing themes. Okri utilizes it well in *The Famished Road* by presenting a character who is also an *abiku* (spirit child) who constantly exists in sort of an in-between space where he interacts with his family and other people in the real world, as well as his spirit companions in the spiritual world. Okri presents important issues through bizarre

episodes that at first seem disconnected to the African experience. For example, the fact that the *abiku* are children who cannot seem to decide where they want to exist, in the real world or the spirit world and thus keep dying and being reborn, is a way of showing the high infant mortality rate in post-colonial Africa due to poverty, sickness, malnutrition, war, etcetera. Magical Realism tries to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable occurrences in Africa today.

There are several characteristics that differentiate Magical Realism from other theories, and these characteristics assisted me in my project. The first one, as I already mentioned is the use of fantastical elements. Magical Realist texts present the bizarre as normal, and borrow greatly from myth, folklore, and fables, while remaining to be relevant in today's social context. Another characteristic is authorial reticence. The author does not seek to explain the strange occurrences in the story and tells the story as if it is the ordinary that is taking place. Chanady argues that:

The narrator does not provide explanations about the accuracy or credibility of events described or views expressed by characters in the text. Further, the narrator is indifferent, a characteristic enhanced by this absence of explanation of fantastic events; the story proceeds with "logical precision" as if nothing extraordinary took place. In this, explaining the supernatural world would immediately reduce its legitimacy relative to the natural world. The reader would consequently disregard the supernatural as false testimony. (16)

The third characteristic I was interested in is political critique. Magical Realism seeks to break rules and go against the norm. In essence, it is came up as a political act of dissidence against an oppressive force. Melekne states that "magical realists are equally obsessed with

iconoclasm or breaking the image of ideals cherished by their contemporaries or ancestors. It is also inherently political for it challenges assumptions of order unlike Realism which presents its version of the world as uniquely true or objective.” The Magical Realist will always seek to critique society, and specifically the political force of the time.

Prevalence of folklore is another feature of Magical Realism, more so in African literature. Writers borrow form myths, proverbs, folk tales to present ideas in their modern narratives. Melanek posits that:

Unlike their European counterparts, African novelists, justifiably incorporate folkloristic details like proverbs and mythological stories in their modern narratives. One cannot study African literatures without studying the particular cultures and cultures upon which African writes draw for their ideological and formal elements.

These characteristics work together to produce a work of Magical Realism. I used these elements to come up with a novella that will hopefully re-present African society and re-tell the African story.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This project was carried out by close reading of the primary and secondary texts to have a deep understanding of narration via the child's voice. I needed to expose myself to the elements of magical realism; as well as the tenets of creative writing.

My research findings enabled me to come up with a story told through the child narrative voice, a story that sought to an African story in a new way. The novella will hopefully add to the collection of African literature as a book that will stand the test of time, and still speak to its time and beyond.



# BOY

A Novella

## CHAPTER 1

It was the day of new beginnings.

I sat still. Outside the wind carried the ancient songs of distant spaces. Inside, the house smelled of the world: the forest, the market, the neighbourhood, expectancy, preparation, jubilation. Strange apparitions floating in the wind, looking for companionship, drifted into the living room. I watched as they hovered around, leaving trails of enchantment, offering me passage into new mysterious worlds. Their eyes held in them immense longing and their aura was sustained by a sense of belonging. They offered me difference, an alternative. Their promise was that of a retreat from the trappings of everyday life: a world without Baba's colossal presence or Mama's infinite tenderness, a world where normalcy was met with the upheaval of it and I was free to roam in its eternal space. There I could be anything I wanted. I could be a dream floating in the air looking for dreamers, or the wind singing the history of many universes, or a bird flying higher than my limitations.

One of the apparitions hovered around Mama who was busy preparing for the party. It floated above and around her as she moved around the kitchen dutifully and then moved out towards Baba who at that moment was telling some neighbours, who had come, a story that required him to throw his arms about while running on the spot. His laughter filled the compound. The apparition stared at Baba with immense curiosity moving closer to the cigarette Baba was holding. Baba moved his hand, the apparition retreated, startled. I laughed. Mama looked at me knowingly.

The house was getting crowded. Word had spread that Baba was throwing a party. He had invited a few neighbours but the whole world came. Neighbours together with their children and their children's friends swarmed in droves. Baba, in unusually high spirits, welcomed them all. The second wave of guests comprised our relatives. Uncles and aunts and cousins who bore a distant familiarity were introduced to me. I smiled, and shook clammy hands, and hugged strangers who left me with the lingering scents of their perfumes, scents that carried secrets and incomprehensible mysteries. Everybody that Baba had invited had come, but the guests kept coming. Soon the house was full and Mama had to bring some chairs outside.

A sense of festivity hovered around the compound. The guests stood in small groups talking. Some talked loudly while others in hushed tones throwing furtive glances here and there as if to see if anyone was listening in on them. The loud ones talked about common things, like the neighbour who had been caught in the arms of the butcher's wife and how he almost lost his manhood to the angry butcher's knife, or the carpenter who drank so much beer that he claimed an angel appeared to him on his way home and instructed him to build a church for all the women in the world. Their tales were laced with reckless laughter, a laughter that soon became hollow and turned into palpable expectancy. They started to jeer at Baba, asking how such a big party could lack in drink. Baba, not one to be disgraced, sent some cousins for beer. Moments later crates were met at the gate with such jubilation that more people were drawn to the party and soon the compound too was full.

I left the house and shuffled through the crowd observing. The apparitions mingled with the people merging with their spirits and scents. I watched them as they flew about in abundant radiance leaving behind a trail of boundless color. They soared into the sky disappearing into the unending blue. Around me humanity moved about noisily screaming names and laughing

ferociously. Children cried and adults talked and all were connected by an unseen force that made them one in the chaos of that moment. Above me the world was stilled by an immense peace, everything drowned by the vast unending sky. The sky was an ocean and I was lost in it. All around me was an unending sea of blue stillness. Far away in the distance a cloud floated my way in the form of a whale, monstrous and mutable. In the almost invisible horizon stood a desolate mountain from where the wind blew. The apparitions floated towards the mountain beseeching me to follow them. Beneath me, under the ocean, was the world with Baba, Mama, and the countless guests.

Their promise seemed better than the chaos of earth. I wanted the freedom of peace and beauty; limitless imagination; a world where I could be anything. They lured me on with my deepest desires. The mountain seemed to call to me in a language so familiar. I imagined the beauty surrounding it and the enthralling magic of the meadows that ran around it and into the horizons. I listened to the immensely enchanting songs that would anchor me to that world. I wanted to be there embracing the beauty forever. I drifted on towards the mountain slowly accepting the offer of this new world. And then the stillness was broken by a great tempest that carried, in it, Baba's laughter. The blue stillness became a dark ravenous storm with enormous waves that carried memories of love and home. A heavy fog blew across the sky hiding the mountain and all the beauty that lay around it. I remembered Baba and Mama. I could not leave them. The apparitions began to mourn; my refusal to be with them cut deeply into their placid hearts. Suddenly, I wanted to be with Baba, to be surrounded by his presence; but the new world would not offer me that. The blue surrounding me shattered into countless crystal shards and I watched the earth rush up towards me as I fell from the sky.

I stood in the midst of the crowd observing. I found Baba watching me curiously. He looked drunk. He moved about in a stagger pushing people and pouring their drinks causing them, in their drunken stupor, to hurl insults at him forgetting that he was their host. His face was full and bright with pride and joy. He pushed his way through the crowd and made his way to where I was standing.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yes.”

“What were you doing?”

“Nothing.”

I saw the apparitions prancing about the party. They too had found their way back from the magical worlds beyond the sky.

Mama walked past me handing guests paper plates filled with rice and beef stew. Her face was a flurry of worry and uncertainty. The apparitions surrounded her moving with her seamlessly as she milled about the crowd. Baba had walked back to his friends who had formed a circle under the young bottlebrush tree, round a rusty grill on which meat had been randomly placed. He talked animatedly, getting lost in the smoke coming from the burning meat, his legs wobbly from all the beer he had drank. I thought he would fall on the grill and into the fire. Next to him the apparitions danced and played getting lost in countless acts of mischief. One entered his beer glass while others vanished into the crowd taking up different forms, colours, and qualities. The apparitions floated about wherever I looked; they were real - formless but real. Then the realization came to me: they were everywhere and nowhere, here and there. They

followed my sight and imagination. They were in me. Only I could see them. Right there as the guests talked and laughed and shouted, and as the world embraced its omnipresent chaos, I realized that I had the ability to create the apparitions and the worlds they came from. They were mine; my secret friends.

Evening had fallen on us gradually. A flock of white birds flew across the darkening sky and settled in the topmost branches of the trees in the forest. The sky became a mix of indiscernible colours. The noise from the party deafened the usual evening sounds. Instead of crickets' chirps and bird calls, the air was full of laughter and singing. The men, now drunk from countless beers, sang old war songs praising dead heroes and their guiding spirits; and the women, who had moved into the house to cook and talk, countered with their own songs praising ancient priestesses and their descendants. A group of boys ran into the house and came out with three boxes of wine. A few moments later one of my aunts, one whose bovine form was unfamiliar to me ran, into the night, after them and caught one at the edge of the compound. A thousand droplets of sweat shone on her plump pimply face. She boxed and pulled at his ears and then sent him to retrieve the boxes. When he came back he received a second wave of thrashing for only one box had its contents.

Night finally came and covered everything in its thick blackness. The men lit a bonfire and the compound became a forest of shadows and incandescent manifestations. Shadows formed on the walls, the gate, the men's faces, everywhere. A harsh cold wind blew through the party and into the fire lifting luminous orange flames into the dark sky and fuelling their jubilation. In that moment Baba's presence was magnified a thousand times over and he became

an ancient king who fed on his subjects' adoration. The men in their drunken state showered him with all manner of praises. An old man wearing dark round-rimmed glasses stood up from his stool and walked over to Baba. I could see the flames reflected in his glasses. Shadows cut deep in his face revealing hidden folds and wrinkles. He held, in his left hand, a walking stick ornamented with intricate designs etched on the wood. The designs looked foreign and ancient. Formless lines turned into animals and then into the letters of an unknown language. His fingers wrapped tightly around the handle. It was as if the walking stick was the source of his power, his life-force.

When he got to Baba he embraced him and then spat on his old wizened right hand and placed it on Baba's chest. He said something that got lost in the wind and flickering flames and screaming children and singing women. One of the men broke into a deafening melodious shriek as the old man turned and reached out for an odd bottle under his stool. He sipped its contents and turned to the flames. In one swift move he spat into the fire causing it to come alive. The whole compound was bathed in its incandescent glow and then a swarm of sparks flew up into the night sky like a thousand bees let loose on the blackness above. When he was done he sat on his stool, silently staring into the fire. Two apparitions – my secret friends – went and sat with him. He regarded the fire as if their presence. A few moments later the fire died down and I saw, in it, the old man walking a narrow dark path; he was shrouded in an overwhelming solitude. His glasses illuminated the ground in front of him like headlights from a car. The trees bowed gently as he passed them and the wind blew beside him, an old companion, carrying his walking stick for him. He walked until the road brought him to a black monstrous forest. He stood still his lips moving silently, firmly. He lifted the walking stick from the sinuous currents of wind and pointed it at the forest. A great commotion came out of the dark trees and a giant black bird with

white stripes on his side appeared, flew around him seven times and then perched on the walking stick. They communicated through the absolute silence of the universe and the space beyond earth. When they were done the bird lifted off the stick and flew back into the forest, then the old man turned towards the road. His eyes met mine. A warm and familiar light came from his eyes.

“Why are you following me?”

“I wasn’t.”

“So how come you are here?”

“I don’t know.”

He pressed the walking stick firmly on the ground, resting all his weight on it. Then he stretched out his other hand and placed it on my forehead and a cold dark enormous shadow came from the forest behind him and lowered on me. The world turned black, and in the distance I saw blurry orbs of light and a faint noise. I willed myself towards them and the blackness lifted, and we were back at the party.

The old man stood before me calling my name. I stood there dazed and frightened. I wanted to run but my spirit was apprehended by the immense security of Baba’s voice:

“Why aren’t you greeting your great uncle?”

I looked at the old man and then at Baba. The fire illuminated their backs. Behind them the men surrounding it began to sing loudly. The light in the old man’s glasses had disappeared. In them I saw only the light coming from the house. There was no path, no forest, no giant bird, no light. I felt safe.



“Forgive him he is a bit shy.” Baba said.

“Shy? I don’t think so.” The old man said, a mysterious smile cracking at the corner of his mouth. He looked at me tellingly, then I saw a small glow in his glasses and then they became dark again. He placed his hand on my head. “You are a special boy. You should come visit me some time.”

“I’ll make sure he does.” Baba said, breaking the strange silence that had developed.

The old man walked away into the crowd.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Go get me my coat from the house; the brown one.” I turned to leave. “Ayub. All this is for you.” His face contorted in emotion. His eyes became watery and then he looked away quickly. I went into the house and he went back to where the men were, to drink and sing.

Baba in his drunken state had acquired new energies. He left the men singing at the fire and disappeared into the house. Moments later he appeared holding a hurricane lamp on one hand and an empty beer bottle on the other. The light from the lamp cast deep contours on his face that resembled old ritual markings. He looked like an ancient priest. Moths and beetles

danced around the lamp in a random formation. His being seemed to command their flight. I watched him in awe; my father, king of our kingdom.

“Attention! Attention you drunken fools!” Baba bawled. His face was both serious and bemused. The men stopped singing and turned to him. The moths and beetles scuttled off for a few moments and then flew back to the light and the eternal subservience of their king. The wind blew at the lamp causing the contours on Baba’s face to move about. His face took a mysterious emotion that commanded the whole compound’s attention. “I need all of you to move to the house. We need to celebrate the guest of honour.” The guests ignored him and some insulted him amidst laughter and jeering, until Baba threw the beer bottle into the fire and threatened to hit someone to the moon and back, and then they started to move slowly into the house.

The house felt much smaller. The walls threatened to bulge outwards to accommodate the large number of people that had come. The living room was filled to capacity; even my secret friends had no room to hover about. They stood on the ceiling, upside down, and carried on with the songs of their mysterious merriment. Mama, and the rest of the women, was huddled in one corner. Just as Baba had been a king among the men, Mama bore a surreal majesty around the women. They were like maidens in service of their queen. When Baba stood up, they all stared at him with a secret longing. It took some time for Baba to silence the murmuring guests who were now drunk on the apparent lack of air in the crowded room. Baba had to threaten them again.

“Today is a great day. Most of you know why we are gathered here. *Most of you.*” he said. A light din went around the room. Guilty eyes escaped his and in a fit of embarrassment looked at everyone and everything else. He continued, “Today we celebrate a young man who has brought so much joy into our lives.” A huge smile cut across Baba’s face. He was happy. My

secret friends danced around him singing muted songs of jubilation. He stared at me and then at Mama, and then continued with his speech. He generated myths around my birth, giving meaning to every moment of my coming to this world. He spoke with great pride. His eyes lit up as he talked. He spoke of the great pride he got from my existence, he spoke of the immense hope he had in my future, and he spoke of the transformative ability of my being. He prophesied the turning of the world order. He said kings would bow before me and wise tongues be stilled at my counsel. He declared that I would move mountains and that my voice would be carried by the wind to the ends of the universe, and that the thirsty would be quenched and the hungry sated. The naked would be clothed and the voiceless would be spoken for, because I had dared to be. He said I would imagine new solutions to the problems of this world, and I would offer respite to the weary and broken. He proclaimed success on my head and declared prosperity on my life. He added that I would battle tyranny and darkness until finally light would come to liberate the world from its eternal suffering. Then with emboldened hope and immense despair in his face, he said that through me he would live forever.

The room was covered in an overwhelming silence. Everyone floated in the wave of Baba's strange words. He cleared his throat and then wiped his eyes. He seemed to have sobered up. He looked at the guests who were recuperating from the effects of his speech and just as he was about to say something a voice rose from one of the corners. Everybody craned their neck to find who it was. Like a rising tide, slowly and with the certainty of time and age, the old man rose from where he was seated.

"Let's have the boy's mother speak first before anyone else does." Baba said, but the old man ignored Baba's suggestion. He stood up and leaned on his walking stick. Baba wanted to

say something but he changed his mind. A sheath of light flickered over the old man's glasses and then he spoke:

“All you have said is all true Baba Ayub. But let us remember that the world is full of riddles, and straight paths are often met by turns and twists. What you have said is true, but to arrive at the paradise you have envisioned for him, he shall encounter many struggles and in a bid to overcome he shall discover new worlds and travel them. In his travails he shall wander through worlds riddled with puzzles and unfathomable circumstances. He shall travel through realms only travelled by the few who are truly in search of the answers hidden from the rest of humanity. He shall see beyond our vision and walk where no one has walked before, and he shall speak in tongues not even he can decipher, and get lost in worlds created for and by him. Life shall throw at him all sorts of hurdles, some in the form of familiar beasts. And when he comes out victorious he shall walk with the air of one who has been called for many who were not fortunate to be cleansed through the fire of tribulation, to come out pure in spirit and form.”

The room remained in profound silence. At one corner a lizard attacked a mosquito and then retreated back into the shadows. Then a strong wind blew through the house heavy with the promise of rain, and the guests started to leave in small groups. Some walked over to Baba and thanked him. The women thanked Mama and promised to return and help her with the cleaning. The old man remained on his chair taken by a deep sleep. Nobody else noticed him. He rested on the backrest his neck crooked and limp. I thought his spirit had left him. I didn't move, until he started snoring loudly. Some of the guests came to me with clenched fists and handed me crumpled up notes. I thanked them and held the money tightly in my fist. I moved towards the old man and sat next to him. Mama and Baba greeted the guests and thanked them for coming, then as the last one left, the rain fell hard on our house and the deafening sound of rain on iron

sheets filled the space around us. The old man's snoring was drowned by the clamour. Baba locked the door and then walked slowly across the living room to where Mama was standing. He embraced her. There was a sacred ritual. They held on to each other for a few moments getting lost in the peculiar serenity that wrapped around them. Their love became a river that had broken its banks. It flooded the house, then the compound, and flowed beyond the gate down the street and filled the whole world. They overwhelmed me. Watching them carried me off to strange distant places further and further from them until they were blurry characters in the distant horizon, and everything around me became dark.

Faraway in the distant mountain surrounded by a meadow of infinite beauty I could hear the voices of my secret friends. They called out to me and I felt a sense of desire fill my being. Brilliant colours shone from behind the mountain and beautiful smells wafted around me. In the distance I could see the manifestation of Baba's words, and behind me in the deep darkness I saw the old man sleeping on a bed of his own words. I started to wander into the realms of endless magnificence. The voices of my secret friends became louder and their songs of enchantment bore a hypnotizing effect on my spirit. I was drawn towards the mountain, towards the enchanted meadow, towards the rainbow made of emeralds, towards the crystal waterfall, toward the amethyst lake. Then out of the deep darkness behind me came strong hands that picked me up and pulled me towards the sleeping old man, towards the familiar blackness, and from the deeper realms of the dark world to which I was being carried off into I heard a voice, still, firm, and familiar:

“Happy birthday Ayub.”

## CHAPTER 2

Morning came with memories of yesterday's revelry. A strange power hung over all things. Everything was where it was not supposed to be - the furniture in the living room was all pushed up against the wall, the kitchen was a muddle of unclean utensils, and the compound was littered with crumpled paper plates, rice, bones, bottles, plastic chairs and garbage. It was as if a great force had come and caused a grand disruption in the order of things.

I stood at my window and stared at the world. The sun cast a golden cover on everything it touched. Splendid rays cut through the trees like long fingers holding down a world fighting for its transformation. A stray dog wandered into our compound through a gap in the fence. It walked around the compound sniffing everything, drawing invisible lines over the dewy grass. It ate the dried lumps of rice, and swallowed small chunks of vegetables and meat. It had a vicious appetite. It moved around the yard blinded by its own hunger, knocking over chairs and turning over paper plates and bottles. When it reached the ash heap where Baba and his friends had lit the bonfire, it pulled out a bone that had been half-buried in the ash and ran off to the furthest corner of the compound. It went at the bone with a beastly ferocity. I could hear the bone cracking under the pressure of the dog's teeth. I stood by the window staring. The dog's eyes darted around as if in expectation of opponents willing to contest its find. The dog went on with its feast and then, at once, stopped. It was as if an invisible being had summoned it. Its ears rose, sentient to the inaudible sounds that filled the air around it. It turned and faced my window. Our eyes met. Its eyes were a clear brown – almost human. It stared at me like it had known me all my life. I felt a bizarre connection between us and my spirit was drawn to it. I did not move. A

cold wind blew and rattled the window pane. The dog stood facing me, unmoving. I noticed the spots on its back, strange, like shells randomly thrown over brown cloth. They bore the oddest arrangement. They resembled words written in an ancient alien language. I stared at the spots letting their unsettling power draw me further into the unknown. A giant bird flew above the dog and cast its dark shadow on it. In an instant the world became darker and then I heard Mama's voice behind me.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm watching the dog.”

“What dog?”

Mama moved closer to the window. There was no dog only plastic chairs and garbage strangely strewn about in an arrangement similar to the dog's spots.

“There was a dog, I promise!”

“I'm sure there was.” Mama said walking away. “Come help me with breakfast.” She left my bedroom and left me standing by the window, looking at the empty compound in wonderment; aware of a new difference in the way I saw the world, a difference that I did not quite understand.

The kitchen was a mess with dirty pots and cooking sticks, spoons and forks, knives and chopping boards, cups and flasks. I emptied all the leftovers into a polythene bag: chewed chicken bones, carrots, peas, French beans, black-eyed peas, half-eaten potatoes, bones with the meat cleaned off, dried marrow, lumps of rice, chunks of chewed meat, onion peels, kale and spinach stems. I took the polythene bag out and watched as fruit flies appeared from nothing and

hovered around it like a revered relic. We piled all the dirty utensils in one corner and then Mama put a clean pot on the cooker for the tea.

I left Mama in the kitchen and went to the living room. Everything was in disarray. The furniture had been moved, wall hangings altered, even the mantelpieces were not where they were supposed to be. A peculiar silence filled the room. Images of the party fell from the ceiling like snowflakes settling on everything. I saw the men, stinking of smoke and meat, watching Baba make his speech, I saw the women staring at me with longing and trepidation, and I saw the old man painting visions of my future and destiny.

“Mama, what happened to the old man?”

“He went home.”

“But it was raining?”

“He said he had somewhere important to be.”

I stared at the chair I last saw him on. Its emptiness merged with that of the room and memories of the party came to fill the void. Shapeless faces filled the living room singing sweet songs that lifted my spirits and carried me to beautiful realms beyond. The faces became a monstrous river that flooded the living room and the spaces within me and then flowed into the compound and eventually broke into the street. Then the faces melted into one shapeless form and transformed into the face of the old man.

When the tea was ready, Mama came to the living room and asked me to help her arrange the chairs. Two lizards scuttled from under the chair we were moving. I squealed. Mama chuckled.



“They are harmless Ayub. And even if they weren’t, they are too small to swallow you whole.”

I imagined being swallowed by a lizard. I saw its mouth expanding over me. I felt its dark warmth and the excruciating pain of its digestive juices.

We placed everything in its original place and then Mama asked me to go wake Baba up.

Baba was like a sleeping giant. I watched his chest rise like a mountain in its formation. He was unmovable, still and silent in slumber. Above him a lizard on the wall nodded, watching us. Baba's presence filled the room. He breathed slowly, surely. There was a strange calmness about him like his spirit had left its body and wandered off on a long journey. I stood there watching him until I saw movement behind his eyelids, and I knew his spirit had returned.

"Baba." I placed my hand on his firm chest and pushed gently. And then like a mountain that had become ripe in its anticipation, Baba rose. The lizard ceased its nodding and scuttled off into the shadows. Baba looked at me with raw eyes. His face was the face of a stranger, a person in unfamiliar territory. He took a few moments and then lifted his hand, thick like a log, on my head.

"Good morning Ayub."

"Breakfast is ready."

"I'll be there soon."

I walked out of the bedroom and towards the living room. Baba's presence rolled behind me like a heavy potent wind blowing towards a helpless world. I sat and waited. Mama sipped her tea slowly. Her mind was somewhere else. I watched the steam coming from the tea Mama had poured for me. I was fascinated by the formlessness, the weightlessness, its ability to rise and disappear into the spaces around it. I felt drawn to it. Then I felt the earth let go of my being and the weightlessness of different worlds lifted me. I saw my secret friends in the spaces above me. They were excited at my appearance, and they broke into beautiful formless songs that lifted me further towards them. The beauty filled the space around me like waves in a vast sea, and I floated peacefully towards my friends, towards the mountain, towards infinite beauty and peace. Suddenly a strong wind blew creating a great storm. My weightlessness dissipated into a thousand butterflies that flew off my legs, and my weight was restored. I began to sink deeper and deeper towards the world and into a thunderous din: Baba's voice.

"Good morning my dear!" Baba lifted Mama and swung her around happily. He looked into her eyes and whispered something to her ear and they giggled and held each other like they had just fallen in love for the first time. He whispered something else causing Mama to blush and feign protest. They laughed and giggled, lost in each other. I stared at them. Maybe I wanted what they had, but I was not sure I knew what it was.

"Ayub! My man!" He let go of Mama and walked towards me. Baba's words had a strange effect on me. I became the steam, formless and weightless. I lifted and merged with the air and then came back to my normal being. *My man*. I was his man, I was important, he was proud of me, I mattered. Baba's voice echoed in the small space around us. Mama poured him some tea and put slices of bread on a plate then she put cup and plate on a stool and put it next to Baba's chair. The chair creaked under Baba's weight. He told us many stories interrupted by

moments of chewing and swallowing. He told us of a white man who he once worked for who was so eager to please his African employees that he had come up with nicknames for all of them in an attempt to appear friendly. He told us, in a fit of violent laughter how some of the nicknames had offended their bearers who were so afraid of losing their jobs that they let him call them whatever he wanted.

"What was your nickname?" I interrupted. Mama made a curious throaty sound.

"My nickname?" Baba seemed off his guard. "Well..." he paused and sipped his tea. "I was the Black Mamba." He said it slowly as if to invoke the weight and danger of being called a snake.

"But that's a snake. He called you a snake."

Mama made the sound again.

"Yes, but not just any snake a Black Mamba. Ferocious, fearless, and dangerous; just like me."

"But it *is* a snake. He still called you a snake."

"A dangerous snake!" Baba insisted, chewing loudly to hide his annoyance.

"And I'm sure Black Mamba was much better than what the other employees were called." Mama intervened.

"Black Mamba... Those were the days."

Baba changed the topic. He told us about work, about things that were beyond my understanding, about worlds he existed in, worlds beyond my imagination. He used strange

words: parastatal, tender, revenue; abbreviations that made him sound like a stranger: LPO, COO, GM. He was no longer the Black Mamba. He was 'editor in chief of *The Independent* newspaper working for the development of his family and country'. He swore to better systems, shift paradigms, restore order, and straighten crooked paths. He spoke with authority and confidence that he was part of the change the world needed. He talked long after we had finished breakfast. He talked until Mama interrupted and said she had to clean up the dishes. She went to the kitchen and left me with Baba, and a strange silence about us.

Mama was in the kitchen when Baba came back from his room dressed in a blue buggy track suit, white trainers and a cap. He looked refreshed. His spirits were elated; his laugh was hollow and full, rolling out like thunder, deep and sure of itself.

"Ayub come, I need you to take me somewhere."

Baba often went for long walks, but he never took me along. Something had changed: a sudden transformation in our relationship. I was not who I was before my birthday.

"Where are we going?"

"Put on your shoes, you'll see."

I followed Baba out of the compound and down the street onto a path that led through a thicket and towards the forest. I followed him in an awkwardly trying, as always, to keep up with him. We passed through a cluster of bushes that caught on to our clothes, and into a clearing littered with polythene bags and old newspapers. Baba was silent. I could hear his breathing, like giant waves crushing against docile rocks. We passed a tree whose lower branches were covered

in black polythene bags. In the distance a white goat of uncanny whiteness, gleaming in its immaculate whiteness, walked across our path and into a thicket. I could hear its bleat as we passed the thicket - a sullen call to unseen companions.

The path led us into the forest, dark, mysterious and powerful. We stood for a moment and felt the immense power and majesty of the dense forest. Then Baba said:

"Such is life Ayub; it is all light and certainty, and then all of a sudden darkness and fear. The secret is to remember who you are always, and keep walking until you see the light again."

He touched my head affectionately. I heard the goat somewhere in the distance, then a strong wind blew and the forest was filled with strange noises. A giant orange bird flew from one tree to another. A great fear ran through me, but Baba's hand offered great comfort.

"Stay here, I'll be right back."

"No!"

"You'll be fine, trust me."

"No, don't leave me."

"Listen Ayub," he kneeled and placed his hands on my shoulders, "I need you to be brave for me, okay? Like a man, my man."

"Yes Baba."

"I'll be right back."

Something moved in the undergrowth next to us. I looked and saw the goat stuck in the bushes. Its eyes glistened in the dim forest light. I turned to where Baba was and found he was gone. A brown wind blew around me and formed a light whirlwind that carried leaves and dirt in it. It moved around me and then transformed into a woman. Her voice was familiar, her countenance firm. She was dressed in a white robe speckled with brown leaves. Her face was pale and beautiful – like a dead princess. I should have been scared. She lifted her hand and the wind died down. She walked around me. Her eyes were warm, large, and round. She smiled. A row of white teeth showed. At her feet a mound of earth lifted her. A ring of earth formed around me. She stretched out her hand and touched the bush freeing the goat. It walked up to me and then ran off into the darkness; its eyes left an iridescent trail. The noises in the forest came to a stop. There was silence all around us. Then a strange sound came from deep in the forest. It sounded like a harmonica. The sounds strangled the air. The woman smiled knowingly, and as the music became louder so did her laughter. She laughed and laughed and the music grew louder until the forest was filled with the sound of music and laughter. Then the woman turned and faced the source of the music. She started walking. The mound of earth followed her. The music became softer as she walked away. The orange bird flew from the tree and landed on the mound of earth. It became a stream that flowed towards the woman and towards me. The stream formed a pool around my feet and I felt the wetness fill my shoes. The woman kept walking towards the music. The goat appeared in front of her, and then stood on both legs and embraced her. In an instant they turned to a brown wind and blew into the trees. The orange bird lifted and flew towards me and then disappeared just before flying into my face. The music stopped and the water around me sipped into the ground, and the sounds in the forest came back, and out of a bush Baba came smiling.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Were you afraid?"

"No."

"That's my man."

"Where were you?"

"Just around. I needed you be alone for a few moments. Every man needs to be alone to face his demons."

"Was the woman a demon?"

"What woman?"

"The one I saw. And the goat?"

"What goat?"

"There was a woman and a goat."

"Did she say anything?"

"No."

"Did you say anything?"

"No."

"Good. The forest, like the world, has many mysteries. Come, let me show you something."

I staggered beside him having not recovered from my visions. Baba walked in long strides choosing paths confidently. I tried to catch up, at times breaking into intermittent jogs. We followed a path that was lined on both sides by a row of trees. The wind blew through the upper part of the trees. The forest sounded like a distant crowd cheering. The path looked familiar. I remembered the old man. One tree had, on its trunk, similar markings to the old man's walking stick. We walked for a long time hearing the changing sounds of the forest and feeling its transformative air until we got to a vast clearing. There were tree stumps jutting from the ground. The clearing was desolate and dreary. A sad spirit brooded over the ground. Even the light seemed to be dimmed by an inconsolable sadness. Baba's demeanor melted. His face was compounded with great emotion.

"One day this is what will become of all the forests of the earth. Man in his infinite hunger will devour nature until all we have left is regret and memory."

His voice broke under the weight of his words. A black polythene bag floated in the light wind. I remained silent. He walked further into the clearing and I followed. His wide shoulders cast a great shadow behind him. He walked to a stump which had shoots and buds growing on it. He sighed and said:

"This is what you must be like Ayub. Strive even when the world tries to dash your hopes, dream even when the world makes it impossible, fly even when the world tries to anchor you in traditions, patterns, and systems. Never give up, always keep growing, becoming."



As we stood there I heard the wretched sound of the harmonica choking the air. A gentle white wind blew around the stump and the shoots became longer and the buds became beautiful flowers and the tree grew slowly until it was a giant tree in front of us. The giant orange bird came and perched upon one of the branches and called out to all the birds in the world. The air was filled with the flapping of wings. They all perched on the branches - hornbills, weavers, bluebirds, hummingbirds, swallows, woodpeckers, orioles, flufftails, greenbills, robins, flycatchers, sunbirds, starlings, nightjars, honey guides, eagle owls, kites, large herons, red and yellow barbets, crows, hawks – and the tree glowed with the radiance of life. The orange bird made another great call that silenced all the birds and then the tree degenerated into a great cloud of orange mist, and it transformed back into a stump with tiny, sure, shoots and buds.

"We must go." Baba said. He was looking around the clearing. A sense of confidence had left him and now he looked vulnerable and worried. I followed him back to the path, out of the clearing and onto the paths that led us home.

When we got home Mama was preparing lunch. Baba looked weary. He fell on his chair and let out a great sigh. I sat across the room watching him. He was staring at the ceiling. A fly landed on the ceiling. I watched its wings buzz as it cleaned its unusually large eyes. Then a lizard appeared and the fly lifted in a panic. The lizard nodded in defeat and then scuttled back into the shadows. We sat in silence lost in our thoughts. I thought of the woman and the great mystery about her. Baba's words floated about in the infinite spaces of my mind. I thought of the forest and the world and the mysterious transformation taking place. The more I wondered the deeper I wandered into strange spaces. I saw my secret friends calling out. I saw them walking

on paths made of golden bricks that led to worlds where there were no questions only answers, no mysteries only apparent bliss. I joined them on the golden road. They caressed my being with golden songs and precious verses. On either sides of the road were silver waterfalls that ran into deep dark crystal chasms. Seven rainbows painted the sky above and a halo of a multihued cloud sat above the mountain. It was inexplicable beauty. My secret friends led me happily, and I followed. Suddenly out of the chasm came a familiar voice. It reached out and clasped at my being, and flung me from the golden path and into the crystal darkness. Beauty was replaced with horror and angst. I fell into the dark towards the voice and the world became dark and silent.

"Ayub! Ayub!" Mama called. I opened my eyes and saw her puzzled face. "You fell asleep. It's time to eat."

Baba had already taken a bath and changed his clothes. He looked fresh, his spirit reborn. Mama placed a plate of *ugali* and fried greens before him and he immediately went at it, eating ferociously like in him was the hunger of all men. The worry and uncertainty I had seen in him had disappeared and had been replaced with his usual confidence. He ate steadily keeping his eyes on his food and then said:

"A man has to eat, Ayub."

### CHAPTER 3

Mama was always the last one to leave. She woke up earlier than all of us and made sure we were ready; Baba for work and I for school. She hovered around the house like an ancient priestess conducting her rituals - with foreboding and reverence. She made sure that our baths were ready, and then our breakfast. Time stopped for her. After Baba had left for work a portion of her glow dissipated and she bore the troubled facade of a queen whose king had gone to war. She completed her morning rituals with vague disdain and peppered our time together with old stories often birthed from the boundless realms of her imagination. Her words formed ships that floated about the spaces around us and carried me off to worlds inhabited by her creations - diverse and infinite. Space and time were formless, I was here, there, now, later; in them I *was*. Her words were eternal carrying the wisdom of a thousand ages, sailing through continents and generations; and when the ships returned to the shores of reality and I sunk my feet on the sands of time - stoic, immutable time. She walked me to the gate and I went off to school, feeling her spirit sink within her; a queen deprived of her king and prince.

I passed Mama's hotel on my way to school every morning. MAMA AYUB HOTEL. The sign, shakily printed in creamish-whitish paint, always brought the realization of Mama's unassuming power. The woman whose legend roamed the streets and paths, whose legend sated the unending hunger of men and women, whose legend transcended this and other worlds, whose legend spoke to the possible eventuality of all the women in the world; was my mother, my rock, my anchor, mine.

The whole world visited Mama's hotel. Every day after school I passed by and sat at a corner and watched. I saw men with outlandish eyes which failed to see beyond despair, I saw women with vile intent emanating from their once-innocent wounded hearts, I saw children in search of their parents' eyes, I saw politicians chasing dreams planted by white ghosts, I saw preachers who carried tattered holy books and pulled the weight of their hopes on battered broken backs, I saw farmers with chainsaws running away from voices that called out to them, I saw midgets who walked with their hands raised trying to reach out to unseeing beings, I saw strangers who bore the familiarity of celebrities and familiar faces that turned invisible soon after they sat down. And I saw the acquiescent spirits of the girls who worked for Mama, the girls who helped Mama to serve everyone who came with the honour accorded travelers and secret messengers of distant unknown kings, the girls she had picked from the market, girls who still had the remnants of roaming demons in them.

Hannah was one of those girls. She worked with great diligence. I watched Mama regard her with silent approval. She was always in a black shirt and a faded denim skirt – standing out in her own uncommon elegance. Her eyes had the glimmer of eyes that had seen too much in the world. She served everyone with a fixed smile that was both firm and pleasant. She talked to everyone and never seemed to stop talking even when she was alone.

One day a man in tattered jeans and a shirt with the legend 'UNDER PRESSURE' printed on it walked in blowing out the last of his cigarette. He smelled of tobacco and decrepitude. He had strange ugly sunglasses on and a beard that hid a scar that ran across his mouth. He walked with the air of one desperate to be feared and acknowledged. The hotel came to a silent buzz when he walked in, all eyes following him until he got to an empty table. All the other girls were busy in the kitchen and Mama was on the counter working her books. Hannah

had not seen the man when he walked in, and then she did. The man barked his order. She recognized him. Her face took up a strange colour. She kept her eyes fixed on him and I noticed a change in them – they lost their glimmer and took a fiery quality that frightened me. She stood there looking at him even after Mama asked her to serve him his food – she refused. Mama took the food from her angry hands and served the man whose eyes were dark with an insatiable hunger and whose tongue had been split by a life of lies and treachery. Mama came back and pulled Hannah to the back of the hotel. A few minutes later they emerged their spirits at peace. Later, after the man had left, she claimed he had stolen something that belonged to her, something of incalculable value, something irreplaceable, something whose memory birthed a great sadness in her.

The girls loved Mama. They saw, in her, a field of hope in a world that had robbed them of everything they owned. She spoke truth to their ears and gave them something to live for. To them she was their second chance, hope against all odds, their salvation. To me she was everything.

To the world, the hotel was a place to imagine, to speak, to exchange, to meet; to Mama it was her passion, her second child. She obsessed about it. But when evening came, just as the sun was setting and the world was falling under the sweet words of darkness, Mama locked up the hotel and we went home. At home a different spirit manifested. At the hotel all her thoughts were on the world, at home she was in her secret place, her place of rejuvenation. She prepared my bath and then made dinner; all the while carrying me off into other times and places with her unending, and at times implausible, tales. When Baba came home her countenance would return and she would be the queen whose king returned safely from battle and a strange glory would reveal when they shared the day's goings on. And even when they asked how my day was, and

tried to include me in their conversations, I knew I was merely an extension of who they were together. And as they got lost in each other, my secret friends appeared and the loneliness that had begun to fill up in me retreated into unseen places.

But on this day I woke up and found them in the living room listening intently to the radio. I tried to say something but Mama lifted her hand, her eyes still fixed to the radio. The gruff voice of a man filled the house. Outside the house the world hung in silence. The usual sounds of children playing, trucks passing, men hollering at each other, women calling out to children, drunks filling the air with song, were noticeably absent. The voice wafted in the empty space between us and floated into the silent world.

The man's voice was cut off and the air was filled with music. Baba sat up and swallowed heavily. The man I the radio sung in a strange foreign language but sounded like he was saying 'in the morning, in the morning.' I thought of the day, how everything looked heavy and shrouded in a strange mystery. The voice broke into an odd staccato: 'In the mor-ning, in the mor-ning ee-eeh'. I thought of mornings, of dawns, of beginnings; and then Baba spoke:

"They did it. They finally did it."

Mama looked at him curiously and asked, "so what does this mean?"

"I don't know. We will have to wait, but this is not good."

"Will you be okay?"

"Let's wait and see."

I remembered the look on Baba's face, the loss in confidence, the subtle worry on his eyes, the face he had when we were in the forest.

Soon after he had regained his composure, Baba saw it fit to recount all that the voice had said:

“This is a new era; the era where we demolish the unreasonable and illogical boundaries set up by the colonial powers in their mad scramble for our land, and the patterns followed by their corrupt selfish disciples. We had been asking ourselves what sort of societies or governments we hope to set up when our freedom is won.... And when we got that freedom what followed was disillusionment and all kinds of suffering. But we suffer because we have decided to copy ways that are not ours; and have decided to reject some of our values that were called primitive and unchristian. But now is the time. They have done something brave and we should reward their efforts by recreating what is ours, conditioned and related to conditions and circumstances of our people. It shall be enriched by our ability to borrow or take what is good from other systems, creating a synthesis of this with the best of our own systems and cultures.”

Baba shifted in his chair and then continued:

“We are a people swelling with impatient nationalist movements striving to win freedom and independence from those who falsely promised us freedom and independence and gave us nothing but corruption and insecurity, disease, poverty, and ignorance. Unless we rid ourselves of these evil men, our freedom shall remain hollow and meaningless. The motive behind this revolution has always been for the security of all our people, higher standards of living, and social advancement.

He was a new man. He spoke passionately and with fervour. Mama and I watched him as he went on, mesmerized by his zeal, moved by his words. The music stopped and the voice filled the room once more:

“My dear countrymen, it is with the greatest pleasure that I announce to you today the overthrowal of the corrupt regime of the Head of State by the patriotic forces of our country. The country is now fully and firmly under the control of the Armed Forces. Every care has been taken to make the revolution as bloodless as possible. My fellow countrymen, over the years this country has shifted between an open and closed dictatorial and inhuman society. The fundamental freedoms that our people sacrificed their lives for during the struggle of independence have been compromised by few greedy and corrupt bandits. In the recent past we have witnessed with great disgust the imposition of a de jure one-party system, arbitrary arrests, suppression of the press, intimidation of individuals and general violation of human rights. This oppression and repression is reminiscent of gone days that we thought were buried once we gained independence. Rampant tribalism, corruption, and nepotism have made life impossible in this country. The cost of living in our country is one of the highest in the world, we can no longer afford to live here. Beyond that we are among the most taxed of all communities. Our armed forces have therefore heeded the people’s call and decided to restore order, liberty, dignity and social justice to the people. In doing this we have proved to the rest of the world that no individual or group of people can take away the freedom which our fathers fought to bring to this country. Like the colonial imperialist, the same fate will fall on anyone who threatens our liberty. My countrymen, it is not our intention to stay in power indefinitely. As soon as the situation allows, elections will be held and we will give the people their power to choose their leaders. We will continue with the policies we set when we achieved independence, policies that have since



been eroded. Have nothing to fear. As for now the constitution has been suspended and a national liberation council has been set up to preside over the matters of government and state. All detainees and political prisoners have been released with immediate effect. Long live our nation; long live the People's Redemption Council."

The voice died and the room was filled with static, and then another voice spoke:

"You are hereby informed that the government has now been taken over by the military until further notice. Everybody is requested to stay at home. There should be no movement from one area to another. All police should now assume their roles as civilians until further notice. Your cooperation is requested."

Music came once more from the radio. Baba sat back in silence staring at the wall. Mama kept her eyes fixed on him. The music played for a while and then the voice came back, calling for calm and for everyone to stay in their homes. We had become the rocks upon which the waves of upheaval beat against. Even the air felt strangely thin, removed of its fullness.

Later in the evening their voices seeped through the walls and filled the darkness around me with a spectral radiance. Their words danced around forming patterns, then abstract symbols and characters. They spoke for a long time. They spoke of strange things and omens, of the old man who had come to my party and how he had woken up on that night claiming that a giant lizard had called him for a meeting and that he had to attend before dawn. They spoke of signs in the movements of the wind and the constellations. They spoke of a star that had fallen into the Atlantic and caused terrible flood that wiped out entire generations. Another star had fallen into the forest near our house. Golden birds had been seen taking flight over the forest at night. Dark

songs were replacing sweet songs that had always been sung by women in the market, songs wandering down the road outside the compound and into the paths that fed the world. They spoke of dreams, they had, of immaculate white statues that walked and talked and brought them gifts. They spoke of the land suffocating with plenitude while the masses starved, and of the remnant who would emerge from nowhere and nothing to rule and transform the future suffering of the land. They even talked of widespread rumours that floated around the country tied to the necks of a hundred white crested crows. A brilliant aura lifted Mama and Baba's words that night. I lay in bed listening until I felt exhausted and restless. I wanted to see the world again, with new eyes. They stopped talking and the walls rattled and shook and I heard unnatural sounds floating into my room. Their words faded into blackness.

“Am I dreaming?”

“Are you?”

“Am I?”

“You should be.”

“I don't understand...”

“You should be... dreaming... your world needs dreams.”

“Why?”

“Because only dreams will wake you up from...”

“From what...”

“It’s cold.”

“I can’t feel it.”

“Come with us.”

“Where?”

“Come.”

I followed my secret friends leaving the blackness of my room, past meadows with butterflies on every grass stalk, past streams of pure silver, past flowers – bougainvillea, hibiscus, leonotis, orchids, cycads - made of stained glass, to a vast lake whose waters were still, frozen in time. Its surface looked like a massive expanse of crystal that ran into the horizon and merged with the sky to form an endless display of blue.

“What do you see?”

“Nothing.”

“Look again...”

“A sea. A great vast sea.”

“What is in it?”

“Ships. Bottles. Ships in bottles. And a lighthouse. Ships in bottles guided by a lighthouse.”

“What else?”

“Rocks. The ships are hitting the rocks. The bottles are breaking... the ships are sinking.”

“And...”

“Giant flowers. The sunken ships turn into giant pink flowers. The pink flowers are growing everywhere... around the rocks... they are protecting the other ships... they are growing bigger... now they are bleeding, then they are dying. What does this mean?”

“What does *what* mean?”

“All this?”

“Your dream?”

“Is it a dream?”

“Is it? What else do you see?”

“I see an endless eternal forest with ancient all-knowing trees amongst which men and monsters, centaurs and monkeys, unspeakable beasts and giant birds, writhe, grin, grimace, grasp, and stab at each other. Above the forest a dragon with huge eyes, menacing teeth, and a sinuous tail keeps watch on men, women, and children, staring at the forest with sightless eyes. They are waiting, waiting for the dragon to fall asleep; but their wait is almost over....”

“Good. Wake up.”

## CHAPTER 4

The next day I woke up to find Baba listening to the radio. Mama was in the kitchen. Baba was seated in a sacred silence. “It is over Ayub, we are done for.” He said when he saw me. There was sadness in his eyes. “They have all been arrested. The People’s Redemption Council is no more.”

“What happened?” I asked. Outside the world was still silent.

“The General of the People’s Redemption Council was only head of state for a few hours. Mutiny. He was surrounded by traitors, greedy useless traitors. They gave him away at the last minute. He probably knew he was done for but went on with the plan anyway. Better to try and fail....” His voice trailed off. I thought he would cry. “We are done for.” He held his head with both hands. “All we want is a new nation, a well crafted nation, a nation that runs; but all we have is leaders who rob us blind.”

Mama walked into the living room and placed a cup of tea on the stool next to Baba. She remained silent. A strange spirit had taken over Baba and was breaking him over and over, filling him with infinite misery.

“Look at our education. They have robbed us of our language, our poetry, our songs, our stories; and replaced them with lies. We have nothing to call our own not our architecture, not our art, not our sciences, not our history, not our civic law, not even our philosophy. We have lost our way of life, our way of loving, our humanity.”

Baba stood up and left the room. The cup was still on the stool, its steam rising to fill the air above it, fading into invisibility like Baba's hopes.

When he came back the voice from the radio announced that the Head of State would give a briefing soon. Baba cursed everything he thought of. He cursed colonialists, he cursed our leaders, he cursed corruption, he cursed poor planning, he cursed the suffering in the world. He reached for his tea and took a huge sip and swallowed loudly.

"There is some tea for you in the kitchen." Mama finally spoke. Her voice came like a welcome breeze in a hot room. Baba was still in a trance. I walked to the kitchen and poured a cup of tea from the flask. Baba was still mumbling when I came back. We sat in silence, waiting. I thought of my secret friends and the worlds they offered; and I thought of how much of a difference freedom made to a world.

The voice that had spoken before ushered us into the Head of State's address.

"My countrymen, I greet you in the name of God. You are all aware of the great events that have taken place over the last few hours. A group of dissidents calling themselves the People's Redemption Council tried to break the stability of our beautiful nation. Their attempts were however thwarted by loyal forces working tirelessly for your security and wellbeing. These characters – enemies of our state – have, for a long time, perpetuated foreign ideology, and spread lies that have threatened the sovereignty of our great nation. My people I tell you today, that we have to rid ourselves of this poison, to deal ruthlessly with these Marxist dissidents: writers who spread lies, musicians who cause us to dance with the devil, civil servants whose service is to the enemy of the people, radical lecturers whose readiness to confront authority has become a fashionable thing for students to observe and emulate. My fellow countrymen we must

get tough with this people for the good of our nation, our people, our children. It is for this reason, that our country shall remain under one party, the Party of the Cock, the only party that has proven to have the nation's best interests. I also take this opportunity to warn whoever thinks that they can do whatever they want to destabilize the order of things in our country. I commend all who have proven their loyalty to this government and the Party of the Cock. May we forever follow in the footsteps of those who have been before us, those who have brought us this far to a place where we can stand proud to be a regional oasis of development and accountability. May we stand united in one accord, and may we break the will of anybody who stands against the common good.”

Another voice took over highlighting what the Head of State had said. The voice was timid and shaky. Baba switched off the radio and walked out. I moved to the window and watched him walk out of the compound and into the street, and down the road towards that forest.

Baba came with news of the transformation that had taken place; of men, women, and children being killed in the streets; of people being arrested and detained, most without trial; of men hanged and buried in unmarked graves; of innocent people suspected to be against the government disappearing; of secret policemen hiding in the trees in the forest; of ears riding the wind waiting to hear anything subversive. He spoke with his earlier passion and then veered off into mysterious things telling us about other parts of the world where bombs were being dropped on innocent children, bombs so destructive that they wiped out their entire histories. He said that there were wars unlike any other, wars that really had no fighting, just contestations between powers that sought to rule the world. He talked of how they competed in building the greatest weapons, and then competed to create the greatest shields to protect themselves from the

weapons they built. He talked of the massive armies they built and paraded all over the earth. He spoke of how the powers searched throughout humanity for the most brilliant minds and built the most amazing contraptions, and systems, and policies, and dreams. Then when they were satisfied with their dominion of the world, they competed to see who would conquer the universe first; and they built ships to take them to the dark voids of space where time stands still watching, waiting, dying.

He said that a dark cloud would fall on our world. He said he had heard voices in the forest and whispers in the wind. He said because of what had happened life would be almost impossible; things would change. He told Mama that conditions would be bad for business. He said poverty would steal all the girls and suffering would kill all the men. Death would rule. Nobody would speak their mind and those who did would disappear - men and women vanishing from the face of the earth. He said secret policemen with invisible faces and eyes that could see everything and ears that could hear all voices roaming streets and hiding under paths and on trees and buildings would rule. And as he spoke a strange anxiety filled the spaces around us. Mama lamented how an increase in food prices would mean an increase in prices at the hotel, and Baba lamented over the changes at work. Then Mama, as if in a trance, spoke of what she knew would happen: soon she would serve fewer people and some of her girls would stop coming to work. And as she spoke I saw students all over carrying yellow maize meal for lunch and eating it silently with great hunger and shame as other students jeered at them while around them fear, hunger, poverty, and death ruled.

“Are we safe?” Mama asked. Her eyes trembled with concern. I stared at her in that moment and saw a new Mama, a Mama who was not in control of what was going on around her.



“Nobody knows.”

“What does that mean?”

“That nobody knows what exactly is going to happen.”

I watched them dance to the music of their anxiety. Their souls were in turmoil, their eyes betrayed their dread, and their words revealed their doubt.

“So what do we do?”

“Keep doing what we do... and hope for the best.”

That evening I sat silently watching them as they talked. Their voices trailed off into the shadows and corners. The light bulb flickered. Baba said something about electricity. Mama took the plates to the kitchen and then came back. They continued talking, but it was not just talking, their spirits converged in the common anxiety that choked the air. The light flickered and Baba’s voice bounced off the walls and forced its way into my head. And then came darkness. “We should get used to the blackouts now.” Baba said. And in the darkness, as my eyes struggled to make out unseen objects, I saw the old man behind a gentle flickering flame. He appeared from the depths holding a candle cupping his palm to protect the flame from the wind. His glasses shimmered and reflected back the light until his eyes became flames. He walked to me and said:

“Nothing in this world is new; everything goes back to its beginning. And because every generation begins with nothing, they know early not to take things for granted. They may not know that they know, but they do. They know what to do, the early plans, the original intentions, the earliest dreams. With time they tend to become a little wiser, but don’t go very far.

Eventually their realization becomes slower, and they begin to make mistakes. They become their own enemies, a destructive force to their own selves. Eventually, each generation has to go back to its origins and make out a place and a name for itself. And that is how they become a people: formed to always have infinite hope and eternal struggles always seeking to connect with their origins, their source, their beginning.”

The uncertainty in that season grew until it choked out all hope and joy. Mama and Baba’s conversations were all about the Head of State and the restructuring of the world order, the appointment of new faces, and the promotion of loyalists. Suddenly everyone everywhere needed to know someone. The Head of State appointed a new cabinet of men and – few women - whose noses grew with every piece of legislature passed, and their bellies expanded unnaturally with every promise they made. Baba became increasingly worried. Mama told him of stories told at the hotel, the general feeling of disillusionment felt by the people, and the introduction of secret police everywhere: they erected stalls in the market, wandered endlessly along the paths, hid in trees and bushes in the forest, and planted magical ears in every crevice of the world, listening to any influences that might have intended to distort the well-meant intentions of the Head of State.

And then everything fell apart. The government was restructured in its entirety, and the uncertainty that choked the air became palpable disillusionment. Baba came home earlier than usual and announced it: for his long term service to the nation he had been granted early retirement to be with his family and enjoy the fruits of his labour. He sat on his chair and stared at the wall.

## CHAPTER 5

When Baba lost his job, the world around us crumbled with unprecedented ferociousness. In the first month of his new unemployment a different spirit came into him. I would wake up early and find him gone. He would put on his suit and leave the house, and come back drunk and angry. Instead of words he made animal noises, and he stopped calling me *young man*. He was a different man. He sat on his chair with a tamed desolation and ate silently and then went to sleep. In the second month he gave up leaving the house all together. He would wake up and spend hours under the avocado tree drinking. Mama would leave work at lunch time to cook for him and he would only go out to buy beer. In the third month he started going out more, drinking more and talking more. He would curse everything. He cursed the chair, the food, the shadows, the lizards that scuttled on the walls, the mosquitoes that whispered ugly songs in our ears, unseen enemies, people in the television, he even cursed names he found hard to pronounce. When he ran out of things to curse he started cursing Mama and then me. And the more the curses and insults, the more time I spent in my world. In this season there was no longer peace in the vast sky of my imagination. Baba's voice rolled in dark clouds and a dark rain fell on me and my secret friends. We hid in memories. And when his voice became too loud my secret friends took me further past the vast sky, beyond hills and plains, beyond meadows and orchards, beyond mountains and valleys, deeper than I had ever been before, until we found a space where Baba's voice was only an ancient song in the wind, distant like the sound of an accordion being played in a distant room. The more time I spent with my secret friends, the lesser I said, and the lesser I ate, and the more Mama was filled with grief.

"Why won't you eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"But you have to eat."

"No."

"What?"

"No I don't have to. My friends say that I don't have to."

"What friends?"

"My secret friends."

"Secret friends?"

"Yes."

"Do they tell you why you don't have to eat?"

"Because in our world we don't need to. We don't need to do what people do in this world."

"Where is this world?"

"Far away. Far away beyond Baba's words."

Baba continued in his ways. Nothing Mama did could calm his spirit. One day he came home with a great cloud of anger about him. He sat on his chair and cursed the world. His anger

was so much that our hearts were filled with a dark cold fear. Mama brought Baba's food slowly and with great caution. The plates clattered against each other as she walked. Baba had been mumbling things we could not understand. Mama placed the plate on the table and then sat on her chair. The steam rose from the food and wafted into the tense air. He did not touch the food instead, he lit a cigarette and smoked viciously. He attacked the air with the smoke. He stopped mumbling and started to tell us things. He told us random things, things we did not understand. A cricket chirped somewhere in the house. The shadows watched us. I ignored my secret friends and listened to Baba. He talked in riddles and parables none of us understood. He talked about strange things and then familiar things, and then slowly he began to make sense.

He told us how he had suffered the blistering sun in search for a job. He told us how he got swallowed by a whirlwind which took him to places he had never been before. He told us how when he could not find any job, when the dust on his feet felt like shackles he started looking for answers. He told us how the world had turned against him, how it conspired to keep the all good things from him. He stood up and walked around the living room. He lit another cigarette. Mama and I watched him in silence. He asked us questions we did not know answers to and when we gave him nothing but silence, he cursed us, and then his spirit became violent. He punched the air. He punched the shadows. He punched unseen people, people who, he said, had taken his job, had conspired to make sure poverty had devoured him. He punched at the unseen until he broke into a glistening sweat. And then he sat down.

The food was cold when he started eating it. He found a new reason to be angry. He shouted at Mama and flung the food at her. He missed. She disappeared into the kitchen and came with a new plate of food. Her face was firm like someone dealing with a child. I looked at her then at him and felt suffocated. The room was getting smaller. The air was replaced by the

unsaid. The cricket went silent. Baba started a new series of ranting. His voice filled the room. In the far corner of the living room my secret friends had gathered. My secret friends called to me in beautiful whispers. Baba's voice faded and sounded like desperate echoes over desolate mountains.

I moved to the corner.

"Come with us."

"I can't. Baba will be cross."

"He cannot touch you where we are going."

"Where are we going?"

"Far away."

"Will I come back?"

"Only if you want to."

One of my secret friends, tall with red skin and an eye at the centre of his forehead stretched out his hand. It was cold. I walked into the shadows, away from Baba's voice until I could hear him no more. We appeared in the middle of a great plain. Our bodies walked through the tall grass that ran from horizon to horizon. In the distance the sun hung awkwardly in the almost blue sky. It looked like a rusty golden orb. Below it was an old tree; the only thing other than grass that grew in the plain. We walked towards it. One of my friends, short with blue fur covering his body said something I did not hear. The others started laughing. The laughter wafted about me like a soothing breeze and I started laughing. I had not laughed in months. It felt

strange. When we got to the tree we sat in its shade and got lost in a deep overwhelming silence. The grass bowed to the wind. The wind blew past us carrying the sounds of other worlds. In it I heard the warmth of Mama's voice, and then the world became smaller beneath me and I felt her hands carrying me. When I woke up I was in my bed.

Baba and Mama were arguing about something. Baba's voice was raised as usual. Mama's got lost in Baba's roar. I left my room and followed the noise to the kitchen. They stopped when I walked in. It was as if my presence had pushed the tension into the shadows. Mama walked towards me and gave me something to eat. Baba stared at me angrily, but his eyes had a distant quality, like that of a man trying hard to remember. I went to the living room to eat and then as if on cue, they took up their arguing from where they had left off.

“Who were they?” Baba asked.

“They didn’t say.”

“What did they want?”

“They said they wanted to talk to you.”

“And what did you tell them?”

“I told them I didn’t know where you were.”

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday?" Baba shouted.

"Was it possible?" Mama said, trying to raise her voice above his. "You came here acting like the whole world was against you. Then you insult me, your wife, and your son. And you expect me to have a conversation with you?" Mama was livid.

There was silence for a few moments and then Baba spoke.

"What did they say?"

"They said you should go to the building with the image of the red cock or else they would come to the hotel."

Baba's anger filled the house like an ugly dark cloud. "What does that mean?" He punched the kitchen sink and then cursed the men. "Foolish sons of frogs. They will die if they touch my wife!" He lowered his voice, "I will kill them myself."

"Now stop that foolishness." Mama interrupted. "You will go see what they want. And whatever it is that you have been doing or saying stop it or you will put us all in danger."

"Danger? Watch how you talk to me, you hear? Danger... I am the danger!" The words came rolling out of him like thunder, deep and heavy with the promise of harm. He walked to the bedroom and left Mama in welcome silence.

"Ayub, go bath or you'll be late for school." Mama called out from the kitchen. She was angry. I did as she said.

The walk to school was different than usual. The road looked longer and dustier. The whirlwinds were more. I avoided them. They had a sinister quality to them. I walked slowly.



Baba's voice echoed in my being. I felt his anger pressing onto my spirit. As I walked I noticed things I had never before. I noticed how the sun was more golden than yellow in the morning clouds. I noticed the yellowness of the weaver birds and the wisdom of their beaks. I noticed the greenness of the trees, how pale the leaves were because of the dust. I noticed the faces of passers-by who until then were faceless. I noticed the industriousness of the wind and the clarity of the sky. I noticed how the road let us walk on it and how frustrated the feet that walked on it were. And then I noticed the paths that fed off the road, each with one of my secret friends standing on it. For the first time I noticed my being in this cruel world, and my ability to shift between worlds.

## CHAPTER 6

School no longer made sense. I found the trip to school more interesting than school itself. On the road I saw the world, I asked questions and it answered back. The sun revealed the secrets of time and the wind whispered tales of adventure and travel. The weariness in the world spoke of the possibility of new worlds, better worlds; and the paths that veered off the road reminded me of dreams and the infinite possibility in them. But the school became a performance. The teacher performed a sombre soliloquy, always looking out for invisible ears, cautious of the extent in which truth was revealed to us. The Head of State became the progenitor of our history. Suddenly roads, stadiums, schools, airports were named after him. Lessons were changed to accommodate his infinite goodness; and we, the students, gave listened, and when asked gave the right response. There was no learning, no real transformation, just acting and accolades to the best actors. It was in class that I explored the different worlds moving in and out of them as I pleased, playing with my secret friends in places far beyond the teachers' rumbling. I was only interested in assembly. The headmaster would call us all together every Friday afternoon and give us milk: a gift to the generation of tomorrow from the Head of State. It was for this generous act that the Head of State still maintained a mysterious quality which drew us to him. I felt indebted, loved, special; the Head of State cared for me. After school I would walk home and continue with the questions and the universe would reveal its secrets, secrets that my teachers, parents, and the Head of State's generosity had failed to reveal.

In the evening the road looked harsher, angrier, more tired. People walked on it with heavier, angrier steps and in return it gave more dust and conspired with the wind to create more

whirlwinds. My secret friends still stood on the many paths that veered off it. I ignored them and walked home. I walked past Mama's hotel and saw her speaking to some men. They looked angry. Mama's voice was raised. I stood by the road contemplating my next move. I decided to walk over to Mama.

"You need to tell him to come see us or you will pay!" One of the men said, his finger wagging fiercely in front of Mama's face. He made me angry.

"I have already told you *I* don't know where he is." Mama said, moving closer to the man.

I walked slowly, cautiously until I got to where they were. Mama was startled when she saw me.

"Ayub, what are you doing here?"

"I'm from school."

One of the men stared at me angrily and then spoke. "Go home boy, can't you see grown-ups are talking?"

His contemptuousness angered me. I wished for harm upon his head. I stood my ground in defiance and cast insults at him.

"How dare you speak to me like that?" The man moved towards me.

"Don't you dare touch my son." Mama warned. "Ayub, get inside." She pointed at the hotel entrance.

"Listen to your mother you irreverent brat!" The man said.

“Your mother is the irreverent brat!” The words came crashing out of my mouth.

He made as if to slap me, but I ran and hid behind Mama.

“Look, I will tell my husband that you are looking for him, now leave us alone.” Mama held me behind her and walked towards the hotel.

“First your husband disrespects us and then your son? You will pay, I swear, you will pay.” He licked his finger and pointed it to the sky and walked away. The rest of the men followed him.

Mama did not speak to me until we got home. The house was alive with Baba’s absence. The lizards danced on the walls and the mosquitoes flew in formations of mock celebration. I did not know what to say. Her silence was worse than any form of punishment that would come my way. I longed for her voice, her admonishing. The sun gave way to darkness and the crickets and frogs broke into their evening songs outside. She started making supper and then stopped and turned to face me. She was slightly surprised that I had been standing behind her the whole time.

“You never talk to adults like that, you hear me?”

“But...”

“No! Nothing you can say can justify that disrespect. It was wrong.” Her face was stern and then it melted into a contorted mass of emotion. Her voice became softer. “Never insult somebody’s mother. Remember I am also a mother, you disrespect any mother you disrespect me.”

“Yes Mama.” I felt the tears on my face but I was not ashamed. I hugged Mama and wept. I was sorry.

When Baba came home I was in my room. I had been thinking about Mama. I thought about her beauty and her strength. I thought of how she could hold off four men with only her voice. I thought of how she dealt with Baba, with inexplicable grace. I thought of her laughter, how it echoed within worlds and beyond, how it welcomed hope and comforted those around her, how it carried me off to places where life made sense and love was a tangible thing, and how I had not heard it in a very long time. I thought of her face, how it had lost its glow, how as she held me close I saw a grave worry in it, how her beauty, though it seemed battered, held on with an undying grace.

“Where is he? Where is that good for nothing boy?” Baba’s voice assaulted the house. The walls rattled. I heard his footsteps walking towards my bedroom, and Mama’s shuffling quickly behind them.

My door swung open and a ghastly figure walked in. It could not have been Baba. The man who stood in my bedroom was a mass of beastly ferociousness. He looked like a wounded animal. His face was swollen, contorted into a mass of pain and anger. There was blood coming from his nose and a cut above his left eye.

“What did you do?” He roared. The world around me darkened and I was enveloped in evil. I felt hated and threatened. My bones quivered within me. My heart felt like a ball in my throat. I felt a tingling sensation all over my body. My secret friends hid in the shadows and the

wind outside stopped blowing. The mosquitoes were silent and the lizards ran off. The universe and everything in it agreed - I was in danger.

Baba's face was swollen beyond recognition. Everything else, except his face, betrayed his identity. Mama stood behind him hoping for the best.

"What did you do?" He asked again. There was form at the corners of his mouth. He was an animal, a wounded vicious animal.

"Nothing." I mumbled. Fear gripped my insides so tightly that I felt my being grow weak.

"You see what your son did? He sent a brood of thugs to attack me." He looked at Mama and then, viciously, at me.

"He did not do anything," Mama tried.

Baba moved closer. One second he was looking at me, the other I was blinded by a white bright light. I saw the world tumble in unseen angles. Then I felt a searing pain on my face, and then the hardness of the floor. Instantly a shadow fell on me. Baba rained on me with a barrage of punches kicks and slaps. I could hear Mama's voice somewhere, desperate and clumsy like someone falling down a flight of stairs. There was noise and pain everywhere, then tears, then blood and mucus, then darkness.

"Where am I?"

"Somewhere safe."

"Why is it so dark?"

“It is only as dark as you see.”

“Who are you?”

“I am your friend.”

“Who is my friend?”

“Someone who protects you.”

“Is Baba my friend?”

“Does he protect you?”

“No.”

“Come with me.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t see.”

“I will guide you in the darkness. You trust me don’t you?”

“I also trust that the light will come soon.”

“So you will not follow me?”

“Where?”

“Into the darkness.”

“I will wait for the light.”

It was morning when I came to. Mama looked like she was catching a strange illness. She cried so deeply that the worlds inside me acknowledged her grief. She had not slept. Her face looked battered all the more by worry and sadness. She spoke to unseen beings, praying for my safety and protection. She made sacrificial promises and bargained for my safe return. I watched her and waited. When she saw that I was conscious, she thanked her prayers and held me. I winced and she eased her grip. Everywhere my body was in pain.

She prepared my favourite foods and fed me with infinite care. I ate slowly and drifted in and out of sleep. She told me stories and sang me songs. And she read me books that built my dreams. I did not speak. I let her words cover me and I felt protected. She was my friend. I felt her love renew my spirit and my bruises were soothed by her voice. I was at peace, away from danger, away from the cruelty of the world, away from Baba.

“Where am I?”

“Where you were.”

“But there is light.”

“There is always light.”

“And the darkness that was?”

“There is only darkness where we choose to see darkness.”



“Am I dreaming?”

“Maybe. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see.”

“What do you see?”

“Light.”

“Open your eyes.”

Slowly I began to see. I saw a vast lake in front of me. Beyond the lake were endless mountains that ran into the horizon. The sky was blue with no sun. The voice was a being whose presence I felt but could not see.

“Where am I?”

“You know where you are.” The voice echoed over the lake and beyond.

“Where is the sun?”

“Look closer.”

The lake was still, like a giant mirror. It reflected the sky’s blue and refracted a thousand colours into the horizon. I walked towards it and looked into it. Underneath its surface was a giant fantastic orb that shone on a world beneath.

“Where is that?”

“Home.”

“My home? But it’s so big.”

“Your world is as big as you see it.”

“Is that the market?”

“The market and everywhere else.”

“I can see the forest from here, and our house.”

“From here you can see anywhere you want.”

“And where is here?”

“A place of endless possibility.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. The world is full of endless adventure.”

“How will I know where to go?”

“It does not matter, all that matters is that you do not stay stuck in one world.”

“And Mama?”

“What about her?”

“I don’t want to leave her.”

“We carry with us all we need for our journeys.”

“And Baba?”

“We carry with us only what we need for our journeys.”

I felt lighter. The ground beneath my feet moved further and I realized I was floating. The voice carried me over the lake until we got to the centre. Under the silver surface I saw the world. I saw people milling about in search of their treasures. I saw Mama in the house crying over me, and I saw Baba in the market walking casting furtive glances at the passers-by. I saw our compound and its smallness and the market in its entirety and the forest with its insatiable spirit. I saw the world as I had never seen it before. I saw the endless possibility. I saw freedom.

## CHAPTER 7

My recovery brought with it a new sense of adventure. I no longer went to school. I would leave the house as usual and walk down the road and into the paths I had always ignored. The paths were different from the road. The one I chose was narrow and crooked, like a vein bringing nourishment to the world. I took in the newness with great enthusiasm and walked further and further from the road until I was lost. When I felt discouraged the secret friend assigned this particular path would call to me and I would forget my worries. I walked in silence in the company of mysterious sounds. The birds sang invisible melodies in the trees, and the wind whistled peculiar symphonies. I could hear everything and nothing. The strangeness made me forget everything. For as long as I walked this path, I was alone in the world; nothing else mattered. I walked until the silence was replaced by a distant commotion. The chaos became louder as I walked and my peace was turned into confusion. I was no longer alone.

The smell of sun baked garbage hang heavy above that of roasted maize, wet chicken, damp cereals, mud, sweat, raw meat, stinking fish, and cheap perfume. Stalls filled with fruit, and vegetables, and fish, and cereals, and plastic shoes, and tattered books stood separated by narrow paths and clogged trenches. Women balanced wares on their heads making way for men carrying bails of flour and rice on broken bruised backs. Children hang onto their mothers' threadbare wrappers, and drunks staggered through the maze of stalls, people, and animals. Above the beautiful mess the sun shone. There was a collective spirit that kept the market going that connected every living being to another. I walked through the labyrinth of stalls with new eyes, taking in everything as if for the first time: people's faces, the smells, the blaring sounds

coming from worn out speakers, the colours, the textures, everything that made the market's heartbeat.

My newly found sense of adventure filled me with extraordinary courage. Things that normally filled me with fear had no effect on me. I did not fear the drunk who staggered by me cursing his enemies, or the prostitutes who cast insults at each other. I found the mad man lying on a garbage heap particularly interesting. He sang a bizarre familiar song which I had once heard in my dreams. He sang to an unseen audience and I found myself clapping when he finished his song. Even the street children did not scare me. I envied their freedom. I could see their spirits, burdened with the cruelty of the world, but gifted with wings and the ability to go wherever they wanted.

There was loud music coming from one side of the market. I decided to follow it. I walked down the part of the market where fabric was sold. The path, on both sides, was decked with all sorts of colour. It was magical. The reds and blues and yellows merged with the purples and oranges and greens to bring forth new hues that made the spirits dance. I walked slowly, taking in everything. Even the air had an ethereal quality. But the traders' faces clashed with the beauty of what they sold. Their faces were dark, shadowy, and grim. I avoided their eyes. Their beauty, it seemed, was pegged on what they could get from selling their wares. I was dumbfounded. How could people miss out on such beauty for something as meaningless as money?

The music came from what seemed as the biggest bar in the market. There was a man lying in some muddy water, comfortably, like he was in the most comfortable bed in the world. Next to him were three other men were arguing animatedly, their hands and faces saying more

than their voices. A few moments later they calmed down and seemed to agree on something, and then they walked off merrily, as if nothing had happened. Two boys walked over to the sleeping man and started rummaging his pockets. They were a strange pair. They did exactly what the other did. Their movements were eerily matched. I walked towards them.

“What are you doing?”

“Minding our business.” One of them said. They kept their eyes on the man.

“What are *you* doing?” Asked the other.

“Nothing.”

“Then leave us. Can’t you see we are busy?” They both said, on cue. Then they ran off and disappeared into the crowd.

The music still blared from the bar. I stood to contemplate my next move and then I heard a familiar voice. It was shouting, threatening, vicious. It was Baba. He came out of the bar staggering and tripped on the man on the ground. He fell violently and then picked himself up. Two men followed him out of the bar and circled about him menacingly.

“Did you think you could run forever?” One of the men said. He was tall and lanky, but firm and intimidating. His partner was almost as tall and well built. They dressed in almost the same manner: black trousers and red shirts.

“Go to hell!” Baba replied in an almost incoherent slur. He was drunk.

The tall man lit up in anger. Everybody stopped in anticipation of his next move. The people next to me declared Baba a dead man. Nobody saw it coming. The tall man’s fist met

with Baba's face. Baba flailed his arms around trying desperately to regain his balance. He fell on his rear side and the market exploded in a fit of laughter. Baba was embarrassed. He stood up and looked around plotting his comeback. The man sent two other quick blows at Baba. I hid behind a woman carrying a tray of groundnuts. She looked at me suspiciously for a second and then ignored me. Baba got up and wiped the bloody nose.

“You are finished!” The man shouted.

“Rubbish! Useless cowards! You threaten my wife and my son and then you expect me suck up to you?” A strange silence enveloped the moment. It was as if the music coming from the speaker was the only sound in the whole universe. Baba looked the man straight in the face and then moved closer to him. His spirit had been recharged.

Next to him, Baba looked significantly shorter. But he also looked lean and tough. The tall man looked around and saw the circle of humans that had formed around them. I saw the resolve in his eyes. “You will pay.”

Baba laughed contemptuously. “I am not afraid of you. You can silence the world if you want but I will be the last remaining voice speaking about your nonsense policy and your illogical systems. Look at you all, dressed in your fancy shirts and trousers, you look like a joke. You took away everything I ever worked for. I have nothing to lose. I am not afraid of you.” He went on laughing.

The tall man threw another punch which Baba missed with surprising ease, and then Baba sent a lighting jab that stunned the man and the whole market. His head rocked and he let out a sickening shriek. The silence grew heavier, and the wind blew harder around us. Baba sent a barrage of punches on the man all the while shouting insults. He impressed us with quick

hooks, and quicker jabs. When he was done, he sent a mighty upper cut that sent the man falling clumsily on the ground. The crowd cheered. Baba turned to the other man who looked at his friend and then at the crowd. Everyone waited for his next move. Baba put up a threatening stance, and the man decided to tend to his friend. He picked him up and walked into the jeering crowd. Baba was the new hero. He wore his status around him and walked back into the bar, and I watched the market go back to its usual self.

Evening came with the realization that I was lost. I walked down several paths that led me deeper into the market, and then I gave up. I found a bench outside an empty stall and sat. In the still golden air of the evening I heard a voice. It was one of my secret friends.

“What is the matter?”

“I am lost.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t find my way home.”

“Where is home?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you ever been to the moon?”

“No.”

“The moon is my home.”

“How do you get there?”



“On the back of a bird.”

“Can a bird take me home?”

“I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“You are lost.”

“Take me to that place.”

“What place?”

“The place called far away.”

“Why?”

“Because I am tired.”

“Of what?”

“Of this cruel world.”

“Why are you tired?”

“Because there is too much hurt going on. The market feeds on hurt, the whole world feeds on hurt.”

“Are you hurt?”

“I want to go home.”

In the midst of asking my secret friend to take me away to another world, I heard a voice, a real voice. It smelt like smoke and earth, and wrapped around me.

“I know you.”

I remained silent. For some strange reason I remembered one time Mama had told me not to talk to strangers.

The old man’s glasses glistened in the darkness. “Come with me...”

“No I want to go home. Can you take me home?”

“Yes. I will take you home. As we walked home I thought of the twins, and Baba fighting his opponents, and many other trivialities of life, which at that moment carried the weight of all of earth’s riddles.

Mama looked thinner. There was a void in her. Her demeanour spoke on her behalf of the world’s cruelty and injustice. She spoke secrets to an unseen being. She wished for our safety, for my safety, for Baba’s safety. She wished for Baba to get a job. Then she called out to the kindness of the wind to carry blessings our way. All the while her eyes were shut and her hands rubbed against each other fervently. Mama looked strange. She reminded me of a giant bird.

After supper was ready, we sat in the living room in silence. She sat in her chair folding clothes and I sat in mine staring at the wall. There was a noise, faint and continuous, coming from the wall. It sounded like a metronome, marking time to life’s heartbeat, slowly, like it would soon stop. Between us a feeling of impermanent peace filled the air. I watched a lizard stalking a mosquito. The mosquito stood on the wall, vertically, with its head facing the floor. It

stared at me darkly. I stared back. There was something hypnotizing about its gaze. The lizard moved stealthily and then with the speed of a whip lashing at the air, its tongue grabbed the mosquito and pulled it back into its mouth.

“How was your day?” She asked.

“It was okay.”

“And school?”

I kept my eyes on the wall. “School was good. We played some new games.” I lied.

“Well I hope you also learnt something new.” I felt her smile.

The room was now filled with strange energies. We were glad to be in the room together. We were united by some unseen bond, the same bond that unites people who have gone through the same suffering.

“How are you?” She asked, and then stopped what she was doing.

“I am fine.” I knew what she meant, but I had no answer to her question.

Sadness filled me up and spilled into the space between us. I saw the sorrow on her face and her resolve to be strong for me. Her eyes were black with grief, and dry so that even tears could not run free.

“Why can’t we run away?” I asked. The lizard ran towards another mosquito.

Mama laughed a cold mechanical laugh, like someone who had forgotten what happiness felt like. “And go where?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“That is not possible Ayub, and who will take care of your father?”

“He can take care of himself,” I mumbled.

I looked within the worlds in me, deep past the great lake and beyond the mountains. I asked my secret friends and the strange birds that flew in the vast plains of my imagination. I asked the mermaids and whales that swam in the blue sky and I asked the weaver birds that lived in the great ancient tree. I roamed the many paths and asked the great road. I asked the lizard and the mosquitoes trapped inside him. I searched beyond worlds for an answer to that riddle: why Mama still loved Baba.

“I saw Baba today.”

“Where?”

“In the market.”

“What were you doing in the market?”

“He was fighting.”

“Strange men in matching clothes, the same ones who came looking for him.”

“They had matching clothes?” This seemingly insignificant fact seemed to fill Mama’s being with worry.

“Yes. But Baba beat them.”

“How many?”

“Two, but he only fought one.”

Mama started her incantations again. This time she spoke in strange tongues that I could not decipher.

Baba walked in with muddy boots and a cigarette in his mouth. An evil smell came from his body. He sat on his chair and kicked off his boots, and the evil smell filled the room. I had to put the boots outside. Mama brought him his food and then sat next to him.

“Where were you today?”

Baba had already started eating. He chewed slowly looking at Mama fiendishly, and then he swallowed. “What do you mean where was I? Am I being interrogated in my own house? Oh I’m sorry officer, let me see, where was I today?” He mocked.

Mama sat still, patiently. I felt the urge to vomit. She waited for him to finish and then asked him the question.

“I was out looking for a job woman! You think I leave this house to go and watch the sun move about in the sky? I have to feed you and this boy.”

I knew that Mama had been using money from the hotel. I also knew that Baba drunk all his money. But I stayed silent. I knew better. I ate my food slowly listening to their conversation, knowing at any time it would turn into an argument. I thought of the market and the many paths I was yet to walk on. I thought of the smells and the sounds. I tried to remember the faces I had seen. I thought of the strange twins, and the man lying in the mud. I thought of the woman who had brought me home, and wondered if there were other kind spirits in the market. I merged the

paths with the paths of my imagination, and I wandered off into strange new places, places where even my secret friends had not been to. I walked on parallel paths that brought me to the great lake. I walked to its shore and looked into its depths. I saw the world beneath it, our world, the real world, and then I saw a boy that looked like me roaming the streets and paths like a blind person. I walked aimlessly hitting stalls and hawkers. Tipping boxes filled with biscuits and sweets, and turning over trays filled with cereals and dried fish. A man stopped me and asked me where I was going, and I told him I was looking for Baba. He told me that he did not exist in this or any other world. I disappeared into a great whirlwind and appeared outside our house. Mama was inside cooking. She looked sickly. Her skin pressed against her bones. I walked into the house and felt the dump smell of death. Mama's grief was wrapped in the absence of Baba. He was gone, forever.

The vision lasted only a moment, and I was filled with anguish. I burst out crying and startled my parents were who already at each other's throats. I couldn't tell them why I was crying. I lacked the words to explain my vision. Mama wrapped me in her arms and Baba ate his food. He looked at me helplessly, wanting to help but not knowing how to.

For a while I wandered up and down familiar paths not sure where to go. The market smells were still present in the air. I decided to walk down the path taken by Baba's opponents. I walked slowly, observing the goings-on in the market. I noticed something I had not seen before – the suffering that was present in every human being. The men who carried bags on their backs cursed the spirits of their loved ones as they walked by. Women carrying trays walked around in grief and almost despair. I felt sorry for them. I looked at their trays: dried fish, biscuits,

groundnuts, chicken legs, sweets, vegetables, fruits. They all sold the same things it was a wonder if anyone sold anything. They carried thoughts of their children deep in their hearts. Even those inside stalls suffered. You could see the desperation, the need to sell their wares, the need to survive. Everybody haggled for more than just the right price, they haggled for their lives. The path led me to a strange stone building with white walls and the image of a giant red cock.

There was something mysterious about the building. Its shape reminded me of a hungry monstrosity. Its walls were flaky and had scorched to a dull shade of white that made it look like it was made from ancient egg shells. Strange energies roamed around the building. Men in identical attires milled about. They wore black trousers and red shirts, and very dark sunglasses that made them look blind. Their red shirts filled the air with a spirit of power, and it brought out – from the people – seven different spirits of fear. The red on the ground only edified the image of the giant red cock. The market’s aura changed the closer it came to the building and the giant red cock’s presence filled the entire world. I looked at its big black eye as it looked back at the world. It seemed to see beyond time and space. It watched over history and all the world’s goings-on. It watched, knowingly, at humanity, and for that humanity acted accordingly.

But I was soon distracted. One of the men blew hard into a silver whistle and immediately a strong wind blew from the east causing a great commotion all around the market. Even the men, resolute in their black trousers and red shirts, seemed shaken. Papers were blown everywhere and dust covered everything. Women covered their children and men covered their eyes. A powerful song ascendancies was carried in the wind and echoed louder as it blew through the building with the red cock. A giant whirlwind came and shook the entire market violently and the world stopped. From the east a giant cock flew, the wind carrying it under its

wings. It cast an ugly shadow on the market. Everything the shadow touched withered and died. Those that died rose up. They became an army of the dead with pale skin and red glowing eyes. They followed the cock up the paths towards the building. Everything they touched withered, died, and rose. The cock flew and rested on the roof of the building. The bird opened its wings and let out a loud cry, and then let out – in the most beautiful voice – a song. It was the song of the patriots. Time froze as the whole market sang. Those who did not sing were arrested by the men in black trousers and red shirts and led into the building. When the song ended, the cock flew into its image painted on the wall and the army of the dead disappeared, and the world went back to normal.

A man on a horse emerged from behind the building. A group of children was following him, shouting and singing excitedly. I decided not to follow him, but instead studied him as he rode slowly on his horse. He was a dark man, almost purple, with a bushy beard and beady eyes. His skin was smooth and his face full and round. He looked like an adult child. He cast furtive glances at me and I watched him from a distance. The children rode invisible horses and imitated his posture. He reached a narrow path between stalls with magical things. Healers, diviners, medicine men, and herbalists from all over the world sat together selling decoctions and amulets. Here anything could be cured: illnesses, loss of property, anger, lost love, jealous neighbours, poverty, unemployment, and madness. Small animal skulls, bones, feathers, snake skin, balls of tobacco, shells, beads, calabashes, dead chicken, and old wicked faces decked the stalls along the path. The horseman stopped and turned to look at me. He waved his hand and the children ran away scared, screaming. Then he turned and disappeared into the path.

I decided to follow him. His horse was white, like it had been dipped in milk. It looked old and emaciated, but strong and docile. It listened to his silent commands and walked in a regal



manner. He was careful not to touch the stalls. The diviners, healers, medicine men, and herbalists looked away as he passed their stalls. His demeanour trounced theirs. His medicine was definitely stronger than anything they sold. Some seemed to bow out of the way. He kept his eyes ahead, but I knew he was aware of my presence. I followed him deeper into the paths, where the air was filled with strange smells: dead birds, boiling decoctions, steaming herbs, and enchantment spells. Smoke came from several stalls, wilfully, like it was alive. It gave a violent choking smell that filled my lungs until I could not breathe. I willed my body to keep moving until I reached a great clearing. This must have been the centre of the market. It was a huge shapeless field with a thousand paths forming from its ends like a massive spider.

“Why are you following me?”

“You asked me to.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you know?”

A loud noise cut through the air rattling through stalls. A woman dropped her tray of wares that had been balanced on her head. She whispered obscenities as she collected biscuits, sweets, bottled water, groundnuts, chewing gum, long-life milk, and some strange brown liquid in a plastic bottle which had a black polythene bag wrapped around its top. She arranged the

goods in the tray and then put it back on her head and walked away from the platform on which the giant speakers had been placed on.

“TESTING, TESTING ONE, TWO... TESTING ONE, TWO, THREE...” A mysterious voice came out of the speakers and occupied the air above us. The horse moved about nervously. I had not noticed how white it was in contrast to its rider. His leg looked like the horse had a dark stripe painted on its side.

The horseman stared at the man on the platform. The man held a metal rod into which he spoke. Whatever he said to the rod came out of the speakers a hundred times louder. I marvelled at the sight. The horseman remained unmoved. A crowd had started to gather at the clearing in front of the platform. As the man went on speaking into the rod, others moved about behind him carrying musical instruments: a drum set that seemed to be missing a few parts and had to be supported by a stone, a keyboard that was missing several keys, an old box guitar, and another guitar that seemed to be missing a few strings but looked rather new. When everything was in place, the band of instrumentalists in neon green shirts walked onto the platform and stood behind their respective instruments. Only the drummer sat on a wobbly three legged stool. Their shirts matched the drapery and the huge plastic flowers that had been used to decorate the platform. Without notice they started playing outlandish music that only they understood. The sound came out of the speakers with the voracity of a caged animal. The drummer played without any regard for the keyboardist who seemed not to acknowledge the existence of the two guitarists. Even the guitarists played different melodies. It was the sound of chaos and violence and desperation and experimentation. The man who had been holding the metal rod spoke into it a few more times and then placed it down and walked off the platform. The music stopped and a man who bore the exuberance of dragonflies and other winged insects walked up the platform.

He picked up the metal rod and spoke into it. “CHECK!”

His face creased up in protest. He lowered the metal rod and a new voice came out of the speakers, a clearer voice, a more determined voice.

“Praise the Lord!”

The crowd that had been swelling responded like a well-rehearsed choir “AMEN!”

“Praise the Lord again.”

“AMEN!”

I stared in wonderment as the call and response took place. The man on the platform created an invisible connection with the crowd. He spoke of things I did not understand. He welcomed us to a session of miracles and signs which I greatly anticipated. He spoke of great things and promised the people riches and fortune, and the people said AMEN like the man’s promises depended on the word for their fulfilment.

“And when you do these, all your desires will come to be.”

“AMEN!”

He read from an enormous tattered book with pink edges. He spoke for a long time referring to two men: one called God, the other called Jesus. He said that God owned everything in the world and that he had the power to grant us all we asked for. He then swore by the name of the second man urging us to do everything in his name.

“God loves you, and wants you to be rich. He says to obey him and you will be prosperous. Call on him in the name of Jesus!”

“AMEN!”

“Many people are searching for answers. They have been disappointed by herbalists, by medicine men, by healers. Some have even resorted to witchcraft, but today I say to you brothers and sisters, Jesus is the answer... JESUS!”

“AMEN!”

“He is the answer to all your troubles, the answer to all the earth’s mysteries, the answer to all the wealth and riches, he is the answer you are looking for.”

“AMEN!”

The man talked with great fervour almost flying off the platform. His voice became louder and more impassioned as he spoke until a sharp searing sound cut through the air from the speakers and he stopped talking. His face was covered in a thick coat of sweat. Steam came from the top of his head and his eyes darted about. The crowd was one with him. It was as if everyone understood him. To them he spoke the truth, and this truth seemed to set the people free of some unseen oppressor. For as long as the man was on the platform they were liberated. I pondered his words, and let them dance around in my head. I wondered what he meant by Jesus being the answer. Everybody had agreed with him, but I still had one question, if Jesus was the answer, what was the question? I stood there cuddled by that question. I thought of asking around but everybody else was in a trance-like state. I decided to ask the horseman. I turned to where he was standing and found a heavy set woman with several folds on her neck. She had her right hand in the air and her lips moved silently. Her eyes were fixed on the platform. I stared at her for a few minutes and then she looked at me, her hand still in the air. Her face fell off like a mask, and she became a monster, ugly and terrifying. I let out a loud scream and caused quite a commotion as I

scuttled between the people. I had not noticed how big the crowd had become. I squeezed through elbows until I was free. I made sure that the woman had not followed me. On one end of the clearing I saw the horseman riding off slowly. A flock of black crows flew over his head. I decided not to follow him. I turned back towards the crowd and found the man on the platform leading them in a prayer. He prayed to God and to Jesus. He cast out the evil one to the ends of hell and covered everyone with the blood of Jesus. I walked slowly in the direction of the path that brought me to the clearing, and as the man committed everyone in Jesus' hands, I found my way home.

The next day I set out to find the horseman. I searched for him behind the building with the painting of the red cock, and in the paths around it. I roamed about until I noticed the men in black trousers and red shirts had evil in their eyes when they looked at me and I decided to walk towards the clearing. This time the healers, medicine men, diviners and herbalists had a new power. They called out spirits and illnesses with confidence. They held their heads high with the assurance of kings, and some of them called out frightening incantations that filled the air with strange energies.

“I know you.” Said an old man who sat on a small chair covered in beads and shells.

“No you don't.”

“Yes I do, you are the friend of the horseman. You are a powerful spirit.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

I decided to run away, but I could not move. He stood up and walked towards me and then when he got to where I was he started to stroke my head.

“You are an interesting boy. Come, I have much to teach you.”

I tried to move but I could not. My body had been bound by powerful magic.

“My my” he said almost in a whisper, “I can feel your power. Why do you resist me?”

I struggled to break free, willing my liberation until I saw weakness in the silver chords of his medicine. I broke free and ran away towards the clearing. Even at the clearing I could still hear his laugh echoing deep in the market.

When I got to the clearing I found the band already on the platform playing a barely audible song. They played and the crowd sang along and danced. There was a spirit of jubilation in the air. People clapped their hands and jumped rhythmically as the speakers filled the air with sound. Then the music stopped. The people clapped and then the keyboard produced a sound that cut through the people’s being until their jubilation turned to solemnity. The other instruments joined in and the people sang slow songs of surrender and subservience. Women lifted their hands and men removed their hats. Trays were placed on the ground and children were tied tightly on sombre backs. I wanted to cry. The song they played was the saddest I had ever heard. The people sang at the top of their voices and then the man from yesterday walked onto the platform and started talking in strange tongues. His voice was broken and peculiar. His cry went out into the spiritual realms and I had it echo multiple worlds. Giant wings grew from his back and he levitated above the crowd, showering prayers on the people as his wings lifted him higher and higher. His form blotted out the sun and the people were covered in a great shadow.

“Cover us in your shade o Lord, cover us in your shade.”

After he was done he descended back onto the platform and the shadow disappeared. The wings evaporated into a purple vapour, and then he wore his usual exuberance and greeted the people in the name of Jesus.

“How many people are glad to be here today?” He asked. He had a sinister grin cutting across his face.

The crowd went into a frenzy. I was not sure if I was glad to be there.

“Praise Jesus!”

“AMEN!”

“Today is a special day. This is the day that the Lord has made. Welcome to the second day of our crusade, and we trust that we will see the power of Jesus here in our midst. Amen?”

“AMEN!”

“Today Jesus is calling you to let go of worldly thing and give your life to him. Today, Jesus is calling us to the cross to die to our worldly nature. Today, Jesus is calling you into a life of prosperity.”

“AMEN!”

He ran about the platform as the crowd threw up a ruckus and then he paused. “The Lord is here today brothers and sisters. God is here today.” He walked over to the pulpit and picked the big tattered book and flipped through the pages ferociously. His eyes lit up when he read a portion in the book and then spoke slowly into the metal rod that had been fastened to a stand.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” He took the metal rod from the stand and held the book tightly to his chest. “God loved us so much, so much that he gave the ultimate sacrifice. See humanity was lost in sin; lost without a hope for redemption. But in love, God did the hardest thing a parent would do. He offered his son to the wickedness of the world to die so that we may be free. He gave us his most valuable possession. What have you given God? What are you holding onto that has hindered his blessings from coming your way? What is it that means so much to you that you need to show God that you love him by offering it to him? Let us search our hearts my brothers and sisters. Let us search our hearts.”

A heavy silence covered the clearing. Then like a giant gong hitting against the universe, a strange noise fell on us and everyone started speaking in strange languages. Everyone spoke a different mysterious language. Some had their eyes rolled up into white teary balls. Others lifted their hands and danced strange jigs that raised dust around their feet. I stared in wonderment. The man on the platform too started to speak in an unknown language. His voice was shaky and broken. Then out of nowhere the keyboardist played a strange hypnotizing tune, and I saw silver chords coming from the speaker and wrapping themselves around us. I felt lifted. The music lifted life's burdens off the world's weary backs and lifted humanity to spaces we had never been to. The crowd turned into an acquiescent army, its will contorted into that of an unknown being. Then like a massive wave it moved towards the platform flowing like a giant river to where the strange man was standing, and then one by one the people reached into their pockets, wrappers, and undergarments and placed money onto the platform. There was no restraint. Their eyes stared believably at an invisible place. I feared that they could see beyond this world and into another world – my world. The man on the platform continued speaking in his cryptic tongues as the



keyboard played wretched enchanting tune. Coins and crumpled notes littered the platform and for a second I caught a sly smile on the man's face, as he spoke in tongues walking and stomping on the money under his feet.

I let the music wring my spirit until I too could not hold back. But I had nothing to give. I let the river of humanity push me forward until the heat from all the bodies overwhelmed me. The world turned to a giant collage of colour, then to blackness.

"Why am I here?"

"You came."

"Are you God?"

"Am I?"

"Follow me."

"Where?"

"Into the dark endless possibility of space."

"Space?"

"And time."

"I don't understand."

"You will."

The music stopped and a blinding whiteness filled the world, and I was back in the market.

I got home a short while before Mama did. She looked tired. She asked why I was home so early and I told her that our teacher was not feeling well. She looked at me blankly and then unlocked the house. Every time I looked at Mama she looked more and more unlike her. It was as if a stranger resided in her. I saw her spirit through her eyes, distant like she was trapped in a light house and I was a ship sailing past her on the tumultuous waves of life.

The house was cold and dark. The sun was almost gone, and outside the sky was alive with colour. Mama switched on the lights but there was only the darkness and her distant sigh. She rummaged for candles as I stared into the dark corners where my secret friends sat, watching. Mama lit three candles and put them in three corners of the kitchen and I watched as the darkness retreated to the last corner and settled, creating the shadows that filled the room. And then she started preparing supper. I watched her as she cut vegetables and lit the cooker. I watched her as she moved around with the weight of the world on her shoulders. I watched her as she stared into her cooking humming an ancient song, a song carried through generations and worlds in the currents of the wind. She reminded me of someone I had seen in a dream. In that dream I was hanging off a cliff between life and the grey abyss of eternal sleep. As I was calling out for help, a faceless being came and held my hand and just as they were pulling me up, I slipped and fell into the empty void where my helpless cries were my torment forever. Mama reminded me of that faceless being, of that being who wanted so much to save me, but could not.

I helped her move the candles to the living room and then we sat to eat. The shadows moved in tandem with the flames, and everything had three shadows. My shadows sat behind

me, silently, watching over me as I sat in anticipation, waiting eagerly for Mama to say something, anything. And when the silence was too much for me to bear, I spoke.

“Mama, who is God?”

“God? Why do you ask?” She sat up and stared at me through the faint light that bathed the room.

“Today after school I passed through the market and listened to a man talking about God.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that God loved us and he gave His son to evil men to die, because he loved us.” I shifted uncomfortably thinking the implausibility of those words.

“Well, I don’t know much about God.”

“But if He indeed loves us, why did he show such cruelty to His son?”

“The world is full of riddles.” She stared at one of the candles, shadows forming on her face, and then she turned to me. “My father once told me a story. When the white men came, he was just a boy. There was great anxiety at their coming. Some said that the white men were spirits sent by God to cure the many plagues that had hit the land. They said that his medicine was stronger than that of the diviners and medicine men and herbalists put together. But his father was apprehensive. He sensed great deception in their blue eyes. As the people embraced the white man’s way, my father’s father kept his distance. Soon the people adopted the white man’s religion, then his education and then, blinded by the white man’s gifts, the people failed to notice when their land was taken from them. My father, still a boy, saw the subservience of the

masses and the deception of the white man. His father's caution could not save him, his land was taken and they were relocated to settlements where our people were made to work for the white men. When he grew up, my father kept his hate for the white man locked in his heart. He said that through religion our people were blinded and so God was nothing more than a lie, a diversion.

Mama paused and took a deep breath. Silence filled the house. The early night's noises seeped in through the shadows and replaced the silence.

"Where did you see this man?"

"In the market."

"Where exactly?"

"At the clearing in the centre of the market, where all the paths lead."

"What were you doing so far away?"

"I was thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

I knew she was going to find me out for lying to her about school. I paused to think of something to say and then Baba walked in. Even the candle flames acknowledged his presence. It was as if the wind had carried him home and into the house. He greeted us and sat on his chair, and then he lit a cigarette. The smoke formed clouds above us that seemed to suck the light from the room. Mama served him food and he ate with his usual ferocious appetite.

"How is school?"

He was looking at me. I did not want to answer him but Mama looked at me with threatening eyes. “It was fine.” Baba’s demeanour changed, and we could see annoyance setting in.

“How was your day?” Mama asked him, quickly and with feigned calmness.

“Today was better than yesterday. I got an offer to work as an accountant for a small business, but it’s yet to be confirmed. Things will be better soon.” He said swallowing a mouthful. Then he looked at me and repeated, “soon.”

The room was filled with different energies. It was as if we were living a memory. Mama and Baba spoke like they used to. Mama laughed at Baba’s jokes, and Baba laughed when Mama laughed. I watched them as they talked about the neighbours, about the government, about Baba’s certain employment, and about Mama’s hotel. But they did not speak about me. I listened and stared at one of the candles until their voices were distant and faint, like waves beating against rocks. I stared at the flickering flame in silence until the orange light that filled the room burnt black.

I got to the clearing earlier than usual. The crowd had already gathered. The people waited impatiently for the mysterious man. The crowd looked bigger than usual. There were more people: women with trays of wares on their heads, men with their dreams, hopes and frustrations written on the brows, children clinging on to their distracted mothers, sickly people who held on desperately to their chests when they coughed, and crippled people whose dead limbs pointed discontentedly at the heavens. Rumours of healing and miracles snaked their way through the crowd. More people streamed in through the paths most of them with sick or

crippled relatives their faces firm with deranged hope. I walked through the crowd in search for a vantage point. Most people grumbled as I squeezed through. I pushed through sweaty smelly bodies until I found my way at the front. There I stood and joined the crowd in waiting.

“Praise the Lord!”

“AMEN!”

“Praise the Lord again!”

“AMEN!”

The keyboardist greeted the crowd that was waiting for the mysterious man. The keyboardist went on shakily, aware that he was not who the people had come to see.

“What a wonderful day the Lord has given us. Let us celebrate and be glad in Him.”

Immediately the band broke into furious music that kept the crowd sated until the mysterious man walked onto the platform.

He wore a silver suit that made him look like a stream of light on the platform. It was as if heaven had opened and illuminated him there. He greeted the people with great enthusiasm, and then announced that this would be the last day of the crusade and that people should expect miracles. He said this and then the crowd cheered wildly

The sun burnt fiercely above our heads. Some people had decided to take advantage of the situation and decided to sell iced water to the crowd. I watched as they pushed between the people, and as the people ignored them. I got lost in the goings-on. The wind carried me further

away from the moment and I saw the market bathed in radiance. Everyone was united in longing, in hope.

“Repent! For the day of the Lord is coming. Some of us are languishing in illness and poverty, curses and bondage because of sin. But the Lord is calling us to repentance! We have been in the wilderness for too long! Repent!”

A murmur ran through the crowd and I followed it until I saw Mama between a fat woman with a dirty wrapper tied around her head, and a man in a red shirt and black trousers. I moved back into the crowd so that she could not see me. She looked lost in the moment. Her eyes stayed fixed on the man on the platform and she said “amen” when the crowd did. I saw a renewal in her being, a rebirth. There was an infilling taking place, a restoration. She was an empty vessel being replenished. I watched her and the sounds of the crusade were carried off in the wind; further away from my consciousness. Mama listened to the man and then when he called for people to give their lives to Jesus Christ, I saw Mama push through the crowd towards the platform. The fat woman looked at her contemptuously and then she looked at the man in the red shirt and black trousers. Mama kept walking. The fat woman and the man disappeared into the crowd, and then Mama got lost in the wave of humanity making its way to the platform.

A great wind blew through the clearing causing the people to wail and chant in strange tongues. The man on the platform broke into a strange delirium and started shouting:

**“THE SPIRIT IS HERE! THE SPIRIT IS HERE!”**

The crowd broke into a frenzy. I watched them as they shared a common experience. Women, men, children cried, threw themselves to the ground, flailed their arms in the air, sang mysterious songs, prayed to the heavens, cursed the evil roaming the world, threw money to the

platform, wiggled like worms, ran about like headless chicken. And I longed to belong, to be part of that shared experience. I wanted to search for Mama, find her and hold her hand. But whatever was in them was not in me, so I watched, silently with great longing and angst, fearing that even in this world, like in mine, I was alone.

The loneliness grew a great sadness within me and I decided to leave the clearing. The sounds of the crowd and the man on the platform shook the earth and filled the air with the sound of earth pulling heaven down. I walked away from something I wanted to be part of and found my way on the path where I had seen the horseman disappear. The path filled me with wonder and I found myself wandering, a new sense of purpose slowly replacing the loneliness.



## CHAPTER 8

The path led me farther from the clearing until the market sounds were just a distant buzz. I walked on with my mind lost in the world's riddles until I was deep in the woods past the shops and stalls and hawkers, and crying children and filthy world. The wind whistled a wretched tune through the trees. It carried images of past worlds and future possibilities. I saw the path twist and turn and morph into a road and then back into a path. At different points it branched off into different tracks but I kept walking straight on ignoring images of better worlds. I walked until there was only vegetation around me and then I stopped. The wind became stronger and images clearer. I saw visions of the world as it would be. I saw houses where the trees stood firm, and where bushes grew freely I saw great quarries that swallowed men. Vast tracts of land where chrysanthemums and hibiscus and roses and daisies and dandelions grew were tarmacked and the forest withered like the rotting jacaranda flowers upon which I stood. I looked at the forest, fading away under man's encroachment. I thought of Mama and Baba, I thought of the man on the platform, I thought of the horseman, I thought of the crowd. The world was changing. Deeper into the forest I could see strange lights and shadows, and beyond them I heard the sounds of work songs and diesel powered machines. The paths became snakes that swallowed the forest and grew fat and turned into roads on which the whole world walked on.

A rustling in the bushes behind me startled me and the wind died and the visions disappeared and I was once again in the forest.

“What is he doing?”

“I don't know.”

“Ask him.”

“You ask him.”

“Fine, let’s both ask him.”

“What are you doing?” Two voices asked at once coming from a bush. I stood my ground not knowing where to run to or why I should run. But I recognized them: it was the twins from the market.

“I’m walking.”

“But you were just standing there.” Said one.

“Not doing any walking I might add.” Said the other.

“Well I was, but then I stopped to think.”

“Think about what?” They both asked.

“About the world.”

“What about the world?”

“How much it is changing.”

“You think about strange things.” Said one.

“Things you really shouldn’t think about.” Said the other.

They looked at each other and smiled with great contentment. I stared at their round physiques and eerie similarity. They were identical in appearance and dressing. We stood in silence for a few moments as the twins giggled at shared untold jokes.

“I’m also looking for the horseman.” I finally said.

“What horseman?” They both asked. They sounded like one person who spoke in two voices.

“The one with the white horse.”

“Well, they can’t be many of those.” One of them said causing a great laughter amongst them.

“Did the white horse have four legs?” The other asked, and they laughed louder.

“He rides through the market.” I said in a fit of annoyance. “I saw him standing next to the house with the sign of the cock.”

The laughter died. Their faces melted into a mass of anxiety and fear. “The cock?” They asked. “Is he one of the men in red shirts and black trousers?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Yes good.”

“Why good?”

“Because if he was one of them he would be bad,” said one, “and it would be bad.” The other added.

“So, will you help me find him?”

They turned to face each other and then walked a short distance from me.

“Should we help him?”

“What if he is one of them?”

“Who him? He is too young.”

“No! The horseman.”

“But he just told us he is not one of them.”

“So we trust him?”

“I don’t know, do we?”

“I don’t know.”

They argued for a long time until I interrupted. “You really don’t have to, I’ll just go on my own.”

“Nonsense!” they said, “we will help.”

The twins spoke of things I did not understand. They shared anecdotes and jokes laughing as we walked through the forest.

We walked for a long time on paths that took us deeper into the forest. We got to an enormous tree stump from which different paths were born. The tree had been cut recently and fresh saw dust rested around it. I touched the trunk and found it was warm. I ran my finger softly over the hundreds of rings etched into its fibre.

“It must have been an old tree.”

“I am sad.”

“Why are you sad?” I asked.

“This is what the world has come to.”

“Life means nothing.”

“Money is everything.”

“Is that why you stole from the drunk man in the market?”

“That was different.”

“Totally absolutely different.”

“Besides, we did not steal...”

“We merely took what we knew was going to be wasted.”

The twins talked fast and passionately.

“These people” one of them pointed at the stump “they are greedy. To them money will never be enough. They will go on until the world is dead.”

“Dead. Completely dead. Until they can sell nothing else.”

“That is what is wrong with the world.”

“They will cut down forests to make roads, and destroy crops to make quarries.”

“And the air will be filled with smoke, and the rivers with death.”

“And people will catch strange diseases...”

“And give birth to monstrosities.”

We went past the stump and kept walking. I listened to the twins. Their words drew pictures in the forest air. I saw truth in their words, and I felt a great anxiety at the fate of the world.

“The greedy will rule...”

“And the hopeless will submit to them...”

“And the end will come for all men...”

“And there will be no salvation, for even that they will have sold.”

We walked in silence, listening to the forest, desperately savouring every moment there as if it would one day disappear. We listened keenly. Then the wind blew past us carrying the forest's sounds. In it I heard a distant song, a song that nestled in the foliage and undergrowth. A song whose harmony was held in the dangling leaves. A song whose tune wandered off into the recesses of my mind until it filled the worlds within me. In it I heard the voice of a woman. She

sang the song with a heavy heart, and I felt her sorrow with every falling leaf. I stopped to look around, and with my eyes closed I saw her.

She came from above the trees gently floating towards us. I looked around me and found I was alone. The twins were no more. The trees around leaned forward in reverence bowing awkwardly at the woman whose beauty stopped the wind. She wore a brown wrapper made of tree bark and jewels made of wood and leaves and precious stones. On her neck hang a large round sapphire in which I could see myself and the entire world. Her eyes were green and her lips red like a thousand berries. She stopped singing when she touched the ground. I looked at her face, at her striking beauty. Her face was perfect, without blemish. Her skin was the color of fresh earth, creaseless and flowing like a rich plain. Her hair stood in a neat bun, perfectly trimmed bushes. Her eyes sparkled like polished gems, their light cut through me. She had been crying.

“Who are you?” I asked. I was not afraid.

“I am the forest.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because I am dying.”

“How?”

“You are killing me.”

“Me?”

“Your kind. Man.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because we are killing you.”

“But you can change it? I don’t have to die.”

“How?”

“You can change it. I don’t have to die.”

She disappeared into a green sweet-smelling vapour, and the twins appeared behind me.

“Who were you talking to?”

“The forest.”

“What did it say?”

“We can change.”

The path led us to the most enchanting part of the forest. Streams of light cut through the foliage painting golden streams in the forest air. Insects danced suspended in the light, landing on the patches of hibiscus, honeysuckle, orchids, and bluebell. I marvelled at the immense beauty. Above us the cedars painted the vast blue sky green.

“What did she mean?” I asked.

“Who?”



“The forest.”

“I don’t know.” They said at the same time. “Maybe we should ask the Horseman.”

The forest took a dark sinister shade. The tree cover was so thick that the sun’s rays could not pass through. The further we walked the darker it became until we could not see beyond a few metres.

“This is far enough,” said one of the twins.

“We’ve gone far enough.” Said the other.

“But you can’t leave me here...” I protested.

“This is far enough.”

The twins turned and ran off in the direction we had come. I watched them run off and felt an overwhelming loneliness cover my being. I walked into the darkness. I could barely see the path. I walked on enveloped by the noises of the forest. The noises grew louder until they became wretched fearsome shrills, howls, and hisses. I felt shadows move about me and I could see glowing eyes staring at me through the bushes. The wind blew by slowly like it was heavy with death. But I kept walking. I remembered what the twins had said about the greedy fate of man, and what the forest said about our ability to change. I kept my mind alert with thoughts, questioning these philosophies, trying to understand. The world was indeed full of riddles.

I walked until I got to a small clearing. A large ray of light cut through the thick trees and cast a white round light on the ground. A ring of bluebells and orchids grew around the light forming an odd altar. At the centre of the ring a thin cedar grew into the sky. Around the cedar was a golden rope tied in a neat knot, and the rope ran into a bush. Something in the bush moved.

I moved about nervously ready, but not willing, to run. The golden rope filled the air with an extravagant hue. I stood mesmerized and frightened. I watched the rope, taught and steady, move about in the bush and then it slackened until it touched the ground, tinting the earth around it with a dizzying yellow.

A white horse walked regally from the bush with the golden rope attached to its muzzle. It walked towards the cedar and then when it got inside the ring it lay on the ground. I could see a ring of chrysanthemums around its neck.

“What are you doing here?” I was sure the horse had spoken, but the voice came from behind me.

I turned. The Horseman was standing there, his body was covered in white markings and he had a strange aura about him. Spirits danced around him. His eyes were fiery with veneration.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

He walked over to the horse and untied the golden rope. There was an ethereal connection between him and the horse. They spoke in silences and invisible signs. It was an overarching language understood by all men. I stood there watching, listening, understanding. They pondered what to do with me; I had interrupted something important.

“I’m sorry... I...”

“Silence.” They said. Their voices sounded like thunder echoing over distant mountains.

They continued with their conversation and reached a conclusion.

“Come with us.”

The horse’s whiteness illuminated the dark forest. We walked in silence until we got to a gigantic tree, and the Horseman spoke:

“Are you hungry?”

“No.” I lied. My stomach rumbled in protest, tiny thunders in my worlds.

He picked three fruits and handed me one anyway.

The mysterious fruit had an unfamiliar taste. It was yellow and smooth like a lemon, but its inside was a deep red like pomegranate. I ate slowly, examining it as we walked. We got to a stream in which water flowed in silver streaks. He stopped and walked over to the stream. The horse followed him. He knelt and cupped his hands and scooped some water into his mouth. The water quelled the fire in his eyes. They both drank the water and I watched them in wonderment. After they were done the Horseman walked towards me and left the horse to browse.

“Why were you following me?”

“I don’t remember.”

He smiled and walked back to the stream.

“And how did you find me?”

“The twins helped me.”

“Where are they?”

“They ran away.”

“Why?”

“They were afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of you.”

“And you? Why didn’t you run away?”

“I don’t know.”

“You are a special child. Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you know? Come, I will show you something.” I walked to the stream and stood next to him. I could feel energies surrounding him. “Look into the water, what do you see?”

I stared at the water as it flowed. I watched it go around rocks and obstacles.

“What do you see?”

“Rocks.Sand.Water.”

“Look farther.”

I watched its formlessness and felt it in me.

“Movement.”

“Keep looking.”

The more I stared into the water the more I became it. I became clear and amorphous. Nothing could stop me. I felt my spirit flow with the wind. I saw it lifted in the invisible arms of the wind and moved over the forest and into the sky. I became the blue sky with stars burning in me in inexplicable colours. I heard his voice from a distance asking me what I could see.

“Me.” I said flowing back to the stream. “I see me.”

“Good.” I felt him move closer to me. Our energies merged and we became one. “Learn to be like the stream. Amorphous and inchoate. Formless and becoming. Always going around and beyond obstacles, carrying nourishment to the weary of the world. This world needs you, but you also need it flow, to spread your gift.”

Our spirit left the stream and became a strong whirlwind that blew through and beyond the forest. We blew past the dark innocence of the forest and blew into the light. I saw machines cutting down trees; men walked around with axes and power saws; lorries waited for logs to be tied on their hungry backs; a well-dressed man walked around with a hat that looked like a woven tray walked out of a lorry and addressed the other men who were acquiescent to his instruction. We blew past them to a part of the forest where the forest was littered with ugly gaping holes that swallowed lorries and earth movers. Men strapped explosive sticks to rocks and blew up the world. Then we blew towards the market, past the man on the platform who was

performing miracles and teaching the people about a saviour they would never understand, and we blew through weary desperate traders and past the building with the painting of the red cock. We blew past the men in black pants and red shirts, and through Mama's hotel to the crowded bar where Baba was arguing with three men who looked at him menacingly, and then we blew past the world and saw a struggling suffering humanity that had forgotten its original purpose, to be like a flowing stream. I saw a people stagnated in disease and wars and misrepresentation and injustice. I saw fathers who hated their sons, mothers who detested their daughters, youths who loathed their elders, religions that believed in one God but fought over misinterpreted teachings. I saw a humanity slowly coming to a stop, to death. Then we blew beyond the world and into the world of my secret friends, and I saw the lake, shimmering in eternal splendour. I saw the sun in it, a golden orb of infinite possibility. The sky in the lake was a collage of beautiful colour that painted the world with immense magnificence. Into the horizon mountains grew out of streams, greatness from everyday small things. We blew between several worlds and came back to the forest and into our bodies.

“What did you see?”

“Everything. But I do not understand.”

“What don't you understand?”

“Why the world is like that.”

“It is because humanity forgot.”

“What did it forget?”

“That they are spirits meant to rule the world. When they were created before time, they were kings, gods, but their spirits were blinded by greed and subjugation. Humanity was born with a gift that became their curse. When they were born, everything they were given was in seed form, and so they had to nurture their seeds to the fulfillment of their great purpose. They had to keep moving, growing, learning. But they could not wait, they became impatient and forgetful. And so they deviated from the intended plan, and they sort other ways of bringing forth the contents of their seeds and instead of dominion and harmony, they got subjugation and death. They became stagnant; they stopped moving, growing, learning.” The Horseman walked towards his horse and climbed onto its back. “Never stop flowing. Be like the stream. Follow the path and do not turn from it and you will find what you seek.” He turned away from the stream and rode off into a black wind.

My mind was filled with images. I walked on the path fixing my eyes on it. There were many other paths coming from it, some with beautiful flowers and smells and sounds that offered a great temptation. But I heard the Horseman’s voice and kept to the path. I was so preoccupied that I did not realize that evening had come. I walked as it became dark, and the beauty of the forest turned into a gathering of shadows but I kept walking, with the Horseman’s voice guiding me on until I reached a great chasm that separated me from familiar lights.

Shadows wrapped around me and I moved to the edge of the chasm and gazed upon the unending terrifying blackness. There was nothing to go back to just shadows and memories. In a moment I saw the Horseman rush from the shadows behind me and over the chasm. I decided to follow him and fell into the darkness. As I fell I passed all sorts of spectres. I saw the world’s anguish and the sorrow of a thousand universes. In the dark distance I heard a familiar voice; I

felt safe. I fell deeper and deeper into the blackness, the Horseman's voice haunting me. Above me the night became a slither of dull light and then disappeared and I was covered in blackness.

There were shards of light in the great darkness. They fell around me like broken pieces of glass and in them I could see the old man's figure in the shadow. He sang a warm song and placed his wrinkled hands on my face comforting me and wiping away all my weariness. His face was contorted into a strange mass, like he was worried about my return to the real world. He whispered prayers and incantations, and then lifted me, and as I fell in the blackness I became aware of my weightlessness. He took off my clothes and put me in a warm bed and a warm wind pushed against my body blowing away the shards of glass until all I could see was the overwhelming darkness. I kept falling until his voice became distant, and then I heard Baba's voice, then Mama's voice, like thunder rolling over distant hills. And then there was nothing, only silence and darkness.



## CHAPTER 9

I woke up to the sound of familiar voices. Baba and Mama, standing next my bed, had been quarrelling, throwing insults at each other. They blamed one another for my disappearance and for my truancy. Baba's voice filled the house and bounced off the walls and into my head. It sounded like the voice of a furious beast. Mama's voice was harsh; a strange maternal force covered her being and made it glow. From my bed I could see a dim yellow light taking her shape, protecting her from Baba. They went on until the room was filled with their words and the walls became windows into warring worlds. I saw dark clouds over dead valleys, withered trees, and battered butterflies. I saw the sun dying; its life force drained by the world's oppression, like it had accepted that there was nothing left to shine for. Then in the deep dark purple sky I saw Baba's face raging across the vast firmament. His eyes were a cluster of scorching stars. His mouth let out words like an immense green river washing over everything in its path. A strong wind blew past the parched air carrying vulgarities I had never heard. And then as if an evil spirit had swam against his words and into his being through his mouth, his eyes shorn forth a black light that covered everything and shattered the windows into the other world, and in a flash Baba raised his hand and struck Mama in the face. The noise covered under shelves and cupboards and tables and chairs and hid behind the curtains, and the room was filled with an unyielding silence.

With all the strength in me I pounced on Baba and rained a series of blows slaps and kicks. I wrapped my feeble arms around his neck, but he was too strong. He threw me onto the floor and then, without breaking his body's rhythm, kicked me in my abdomen until all I could

see were black specks of light floating violently in a golden aura. And then as if the evil spirit had completed its malicious work, Baba collapsed under his own sorrow and wept bitterly. I crawled to where Mama lay wrapped in a disquieting silence watching Baba with the most disgusted expression. I let her hold me. There was a scalding pain in my side. Baba cried like a baby. Tears, mucus, and spit flowed freely on his face which was wringed up into a wretched formation. The only thing that moved was the wind that blew through the open window carrying Baba's sobs and snivels. Mama's face was solemn and stolid. She stood up and carried me out of the room. We left Baba there encased in infinite grief basking in the realization that things would never be the same again.

## CHAPTER 10

The Party of the Cock, to me, had always been a powerless entity, a soft breeze marking its amicable intent at gracing the world with its presence. I had seen them at the market in their resplendent red shirts and pitch black trousers milling about the building with the painting of the red cock blending with the rest of humanity. But all that changed the day Baba appeared outside our door drunk, bloody, and almost dead. His spirit seemed to exist in a space outside his body. His eyes were rolled back in their sockets and saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth. He spoke in mysterious tongues, holding a belaboured conversation with an invisible entity. Mama pulled him into the house hurriedly darting her eyes around the compound to make sure that Baba's assailants were long gone. I watched his limp body move on the cold floor, Mama pulling his legs hard and then she removed his shoes and the room was filled with an evil smell. Mama mumbled something that got lost in the night's shadows and then she told me to go to my bedroom. From my room I could hear Baba snoring, his voice lifting from the floor on which he slept.

The next morning the myth of the Party of the Cock floated about in this and eternal realms. Rumours of Baba's incarceration bore endless narratives. Everywhere I went they talked about him. They called him *one of them*. I caught their voices in whispers carried in the air. Baba had been arrested at the bar by the party members – four men dressed in the crisp red shirts and black trousers. They took him to the building with the image of the cock and held him there for

hours. There was no movement in and out of the building. A dark cloud hovered around the market that day.

But he was lucky, the voices said. Others arrested in the same manner were never seen again. All over the country stories such as Baba's floated about: men arrested, tortured, released, and often killed – sacrificed to the image of the giant cock. The more people talked, the more arrests were made until eventually everyone stopped talking, and watching; and the world was blind to all that was happening as long as it happened to somebody else.

Baba's recovery was slow. He spent most of the day unconscious, his chest barely moving. I thought he would die. Mama took care of him every day. Her face was always without emotion. She cleaned and fed him, and sat next to him waiting. Occasionally he would wake up and speak in his strange language and then his eyes would roll back and he would slip back into unconsciousness. But it was Mama's presence that anchored his spirit to this world. She sat patiently fixing her gaze on everything and nothing, lost in worlds where Baba was still the man she married; sometimes I joined her, and I would follow her down crystal paths – paths made of frozen tears – follow her slowly as she walked in search of her laughter.

She tried everything. She called the old man who after asking for a meal and some beer lit some incense and danced around Baba chanting indiscernible verses, calling out to powerless invisible spirits. On the third day of his coming, Baba became worse. He caught a terrible fever and his eyes sunk deeper into his sockets until we feared he would go blind. The room was filled with smoke and spells. A heavy earthy smell made it hard to breathe. The old man asked Mama and I to leave the room as Baba was now battling his demons. Mama left reluctantly. She held

my hand and walked out of the room. I looked at her face, contorted by worry and grief. I offered her my other hand and then she hugged me. Her body shuddered under massive sobs that violently rocked the world.

“He will be okay.”

It had been hours since the old man had asked us to leave the room. Mama was asleep on the chair and I was watching the flies and mosquitoes arguing. My secret friends hovered around the room; but I could not leave Mama like this. So I ignored their cries of invitation and waited with Mama until the old man opened the door and walked into the living room.

“He is done fighting. Let him rest now.”

Mama was up. “Is he awake?”

“He is resting. Let him rest.”

“But for how long?”

“It won’t be long.”

It was the old man’s face that filled us with grief; the weak, defeated look on his face. Mama started to cry. I wanted to say something but air filled my mouth. The old man walked out and went on his way. Mama walked to Baba and sat by his side. She held his hand stroking it gently.

“You have to come back.”

On the third day after the old man's visit, Mama left the house early in the morning. "Do not leave his side even for one moment" she said. There was a strange conviction in her voice. She left me with Baba, and I sat and watched him, his chest moving up and down, his eyes moving about behind tightly shut eyelids, his limbs twitching as if in desperate need to flee. I sat still and remembered: Baba before he lost his job, the joy that filled the house, the certainty that held us together. A great silence filled the room. Dust particles moved, suspended in the air, slowly and slowly until they froze, unmoving. The breeze that was blowing through the window came to a stop, everything stopped. The silence seeped into everything it touched. Then it spread throughout the house, then outside and filled the compound, then it flowed, like a river, outside into the paths and roads until it filled the entire world. And in the deathly silence, when everything froze in anticipation of something great, something unknown, Baba woke up.

He was looked confused and crushed. He looked around then at me, then beyond me.

"Why are we here?"

"We are waiting."

"What for?"

"For your return."

He pushed himself up and rested on the headrest.

"Where is your mother?"

"She went out."

“Is she coming back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did she say anything?”

“She told me not to leave your side.”

“But is she coming back?”

“I don’t know.”

“We have to find her.”

“Where?”

“Come.” Baba made room for me on his bed and then stretched out his hand. I left the chair and joined him on the bed. “We must go now before we lose her forever.”

Then from under the door a stream of water flowed into the room gradually then steadily. The room filled up with water until the bed floated and then the walls broke and crumbled into the water and we were in an ocean with millions of other beds floating about; looking, searching.

“Where are we going?” I shouted against the strong wind.

“To find Mama.” Baba seemed determined. His face had regained a kind of strength. We sailed the ocean past beds with old people, young people, bandaged wounded people, dead people, weary people, lost people, until we got to an island with two great doors at the shore. The door was decorated with carvings of white effigies of men, women, children crying out with

voiceless shrieks, vast gold and silver patterns, eagle winged leopards, fountains, soaring seraphs and grinning cherubs. “We will find her here.”

We left the bed and stepped onto the wet sand. Baba was in his sleeping shorts. We walked until we got to the doors. Then the air was filled with a great din and the doors rattled: “Who are you.”

“I’m just a traveler.”

“What do you want?” The voice shook everything: the sand, the ocean, the world.

“I’m looking for my wife.”

“Why?”

Baba hesitated. “I love her.”

“You lie.”

“No. It’s the truth. I love her. I need her.”

“But your heart is unclean.”

“I have done wrong, I know, but I need her to make things right with her.”

“How do you know you will find her here?”

“Because I drove her here.”

“So you admit you drove her here?”

“Yes.”



“Out of love?”

“No foolishness. I was foolish.”

“So you want her back?”

“Yes.”

“And you say it is because of love?”

“Yes.”

The doors rattled and world shook as the voice changed to laughter.

“Suppose you find her, then what?”

“I will take her place.”

“Then she will be alone...”

“No. No, she will have her boy, our boy.” Baba fell under the weight of his worlds and wept for a long time. Then his tears flowed towards the doors until they formed a pool.

Slowly the doors opened and the world was filled with darkness and demons. “Stay here. You must not follow me.” Baba walked into the darkness and into the circles of hell, but Mama was not there, and so he got lost in the turmoil that was.

“Ayub! Ayub!” Mama stood next to the bed with a confused look on her face. “Did he wake up?”

“No.” I had been lying next to Baba, my face resting on his chest.

“Nothing? He didn’t even open his eyes?”

“No.”

“Okay. There is some food in the kitchen.” Mama pointed the door where a thin man stood his face partly covered in shadow. He looked familiar. I got off the bed and walked towards the door. “This is Pastor Wamae...” her voice trailed off into the ocean that existed in the invisible realms around us.

Pastor Wamae stood still by the door not moving. He grinned as I walked towards him. I was certain I had seen him before – his lanky frame, his thin angular face, his odd eyes, his oversize silver suit, his gruff voice, his knowing smile. I remembered where I had seen him, I remembered his words, his power, the effect he had on people at the market. He was the man on the platform. The whole world had revered his teaching and now he was here in our house standing in anticipation of something, maybe an opportunity to perform a grand miracle.

“Hallo.”

“Hallo young man.” He smiled and shook my stretched hand. “I have seen you before haven’t I?”

His strange knowing smile cut across his face. I shifted nervously stealing a glimpse at Mama. “I must have passed by your crusade after school.”

“Of course.” His smile grew wider.

I left the room and walked into the kitchen. Mama had brought breakfast from the hotel. I poured tea from the small flask and picked a scone from the black polythene bag she had placed on the sink. As I sipped my tea and nibbled the scone, I heard Baba's voice in the weightless formlessness of the steam coming from the tea.

“She will have her boy, our boy.”

The house was filled with groaning and incantations spoken in strange tongues. Pastor Wamae's gruff voice scratched the air and everything it touched. He called upon power from above. He cried and made bizarre sounds that called out to my secret friends. I wanted to be with them, to escape, but I was anxious of Baba's return. Pastor Wamae prayed for a long time casting out unknown demons and breaking invisible chains. He rebuked mysterious enemies and called on the blood of a lamb. He talked of healing by stripes and summoned an unidentified healing hand. Eventually I gave in to my secret friends' invitations.

“Come with us.”

“Where?”

“To meet your father.”

“Where is he?”

“We will show you.”

My secret friends carried me over the ocean with a million floating beds and towards the barren desolate island with the enormous doors.

“Where is he?”

“Behind these doors.”

I walked to the doors and stood before them regarding their embellishment. I saw the effigies and imagined that the men, women, and children were prisoners in the underworld. A loud voice came from the doors and shook the world.

“Who are you?”

“I am Ayub.”

“Who is Ayub?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“I am only a boy.”

“What do you want boy?”

“I am looking for my father.”

“How do you know he is here?”

“I brought him here.”

“How?”

“We came to look for my mother. He said he drove her here.”

“And now you have come to look for him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“My mother needs him.”

“And you?”

“I have my mother... and she is nothing without him.”

There was silence for a few moments and then the doors rattled open.

I walked down a rocky path which had different trees and bushes on either side. The trees and bushes could move and had their own way of speaking. They each had a distinct personality and character. Some of the trees were quite evil and had the bizarre forms of witches and wizards perching on their branches, eyeing me with peculiar concern. As we travelled on I saw the giant orange bird. It circled over us seven times and flew on ahead. The path sloped downwards. The deeper we went the more vivid the state of that world became. The world was made of deathly colours I never knew existed, colours so dreary, so full of malaise and disease, colours that blurred all distinctions between joy and sorrow, that seemed to birth the world's collective nightmares, colours so bizarre that I travelled in a state of perpetual anguish. I walked down the path until I got to a giant red room filled with the infinite cries of lost souls.

As I stood there paralyzed by my astonishment, a spirit fell from the upper parts of the room and wrapped himself around me.

“Who are you?”

“Ayub”

“Why are you here Ayub?”

“I’m looking for my father.”

“Well Ayub, I don’t think you’ll find him here.” He laughed, a cruel condescending laugh and then pointed at the voices floating about the room.

“He is here, I know he is.”

“How do you know Ayub? How do you know that it is not you who is here and he is looking for you somewhere else? Somewhere he will never find you?” He laughed again.

“No! He is here!” The spirit was shocked by my anger.

“Well Ayub...”

“NO! No more of your lies.” I pulled the spirit off my body and called out to Baba as loud as I could. But my voice got lost in the infinite voices that cried out around us. “BABA!” I called out again. My voice shook the walls until dust fell from the upper parts of the room.

“STOP! STOP MAKING THAT INFERNAL RACKET!”

“BABA!”

“I SAID STOP!”

I called out to Baba until my voice filled the room and the lost souls froze, terrified by my conviction. “I will not stop until I find my father. BABA!” The walls rattled once more and I could see the red walls forming cracks like veins under thin skin. I called out a few more times.

Every time I called out the souls would shriek in agony. It was as if my presence there reminded them of their eternal entrapment. I continued to call out. The spirit retreated back to the upper parts of the room. I called out with all my strength sending out my voice to all the secret rooms of the underworld. The cracks on the red walls grew until they formed gaping wounds. The walls weakened with each call until they threatened to collapse. The souls floated about in a panic wanting, with great futility, to save themselves. Everything in the room threatened to crumble. I called out one more time and then everything came crashing down around me. The walls fell and crashed the souls and the room was once again filled with cries and curses.

After dust had settled and the walls had fallen on everything including the noise, I saw Baba standing on the far side of the ruins, dazed and confused as if he had just woken up from a deep sleep. He looked at the rubble around him trying to make sense of everything; anything. He staggered as he made his way on the debris.

“Baba!”

“Ayub. What are you doing here?”

“I came to find you...”

“Where are we?”

“In the Underworld.”

“How did we get here?”

“We came in search of Mama.”

“How is she? Where is she?”

“She is waiting for you.”

“How do we get to her?”

The room was in ruins. I could not find the path that had brought me there. “I don’t know.”

Baba walked towards me. His wounds had healed. His eyes were however bloodshot and he still looked confused. He stretched out his hands to hold me. I moved away.

“Ayub, I’m sorry...”

“Quiet...”

Baba was startled. “You don’t have to be...”

“Quiet... Listen...” The space around us was filled with a disquieting silence. Baba was about to say something and then he changed his mind. “Listen. Can you hear that?”

“I hear nothing...”

“Listen.” In the deep silence of the ruins I heard a distant familiar voice. The voice was reciting indiscernible chants, calling out to reluctant, disobliging powers. “I know the way. Follow me.”

Baba followed me through the ruins and into the darkness.

“Where are we going?”

“Home.”

“Are you sure you know the way?”



“Yes. Follow me.”

Baba tried to keep up to my pace but instead stumbled and fell into the rubble. “Slow down Ayub”. I ignored him.

“We have to hurry before he stops praying.”

“Who?”

“The pastor.”

“What pastor?”

“The one trying to bring you back.”

Baba asked no more questions. He followed me as quickly as he could. We walked in the darkness past the evil trees and bizarre forms that sat on them. The more we walked the louder the voice became until the darkness was filled with Pastor Wamae’s prayers and incantations.

“We are almost there.” We followed the voice until we saw the giant doors. “Those doors will take us home.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

We walked towards the doors and into the light that called out to us. And as we fell into in the blinding radiance of Pastor Wamae’s strange tongues, I heard Baba’s voice coated with pride and reticent joy.

“That’s my man.”

## CHAPTER 11

During the three days that Baba stayed in recuperating, the world had the first wave of its transformation. The Party of the Cock demolished a great part of the market in preparation for a great political rally. Buildings, stalls, electricity poles, public toilets bore a red cross that marked them for demolition. A heavy cloud of dust lifted above the forest.

“They have finished us.” Said a man whose stall had been demolished. His face was twisted by grief. He had a scar across the left cheek. “They want to convince us that they are developing the country, but they cannot keep the truth from us...”

“Be quiet!” said a woman who was carrying her provisions in a basin balancing on her head.

“Let them hear. I don’t care anymore. They have taken everything I own and now they want to destroy everything else.”

The woman stared at him and then looked around worriedly and walked away. Two men dressed in red shirts and black trousers appeared from the crowd and took him away. He let them take him away, silently, and I watched his spirit leave him and mingle with the cloud of dust that floated above us.

I decided to go to Mama’s hotel but she was not there. I was hungry. The place was empty. Flies flew in rested on the table, cleaned their faces and flew out. Hannah stood by the counter reading an old newspaper. She looked beautiful. For the first time I noticed how her denim skirt wrapped around her hips and how her t-shirt brought out her breasts. She stopped

reading and stared at me. She was beautiful. Her face was dark, smooth, and kind. She walked to where I was standing and reached out for my hand.

“Come.”

“Where are we going?”

She pulled my hand and led me towards the back room. She pushed the door and we were bathed in a brilliant white light. She walked into the light and I followed her. The door led us into a meadow, vast and beautiful, with all sorts of flying insects kissing the flowers and painting the air with infinite colour. She pulled me closer to her and I let her hold me; and in that embrace I could feel her body joined to mine, her beauty forming mine.

“Come, let’s dance.” She held both my hands and from the horizon a strong wind blew carrying a familiar song. We danced around the meadow until the song stopped playing, and we fell onto the soft grass and looked at the sky. Her face filled the entire sky and she looked back at me. “Ayub...”

“Yes Hannah?”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Then kiss me...”

I could feel my heart beat echoing from the mountain far away past the horizon and beyond into other worlds. I reached out for the sky, for her...

“Ayub...”

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?” Hannah was standing right in front of me. We were in Mama’s hotel. A fly landed on my nose and then flew away. “Are you okay? You’ve been standing there just staring.”

“Yes I’m okay.” I walked past her and sat on a bench. “I’m looking for Mama.”

“She’s not here.” Hannah was still looking at me strangely.

“Where is she?” I asked, looking away, trying to act as if everything was fine.

“I don’t know. She didn’t show up this morning.” She walked back to where she was standing. “Are you sure you are okay?”

“I’m hungry.”

She smiled, an odd knowing smile, and then went into the back room. The silence was replaced by the sound of crockery and cutlery scraping and banging against each other. The hotel was covered in her absence and her scent. She smelled of perfumed soap. Flies played around the table; on the far corner a lizard appeared from a crack, nodded, and ran back into the crack; and on the counter a praying mantis stood watching, turning its head this way and that way until I thought it was disapproving my presence there. A warm breeze blew in through the door and replaced Hannah’s enchanting scent. I turned and faced the door. Outside leaves shimmered in the sun. The shadows lay heavy on the ground. Insects buzzed around bushes and the sewer trench beside the road. A bicycle zoomed past with its rider laughing hysterically. “It’s time,” he shouted amid laughter, “It’s time!”

Across the road, a man in dirty, tattered clothes and a blackish sack hung over his shoulder shouted insults at the cyclist. Moments later the cyclist appeared pushing his bicycle and went at the man. They lashed at each other with fists and sticks and soon a small crowd had gathered around them, but no one tried to separate them.

The door to the back room shut with a bang. Hannah appeared with a bowl of rice and beans. "Careful, it's hot." I turned to face her and then she placed the food on the table and walked past me towards the door. "This is how it has been the last few months. People have been fighting each other, but soon they will realize that they share a common enemy and unite."

"Who is their enemy?" I asked chewing a mouthful of beans.

Hannah was about to answer me when a tall man with a long mouth and drooping eyes walked into the hotel. "Foolish people, always fighting." He sat next to me and regarded me, smiled, and then said, "Eat up, become strong, soon we will need all the strength we can get." And then he laughed, a deep throaty laugh.

"What will you have?" Hannah asked, her voice bearing slight irritation.

"Whatever the boy is having."

Dad slept like an ogre in this new season. He missed the demolitions in the market. He missed the big trucks carrying dancers and henchmen as they went around, making announcements and declarations on behalf of the Party of the Cock. He missed the fights and the violent confrontations in the market and along the paths. He missed the rumours that filled the air, rumours of an impending war, rumors of false political promises and development, rumours

of an uprising. And as he slept, the world was truly transformed. Posters of a red cock appeared everywhere. Suddenly the whole world seemed to be under the watchful eye of the red cock. Nobody could speak freely. Everybody was engulfed in fear. Anybody who talked ill of the government and the party was arrested. Nobody trusted anybody. A well was dug in the market and the water was sold to the people. Trucks went around announcing new developmental projects: first the well, and then a hospital, and then five new schools, a technical college, an airstrip.... The loud speakers showered praises on the Head of State and the party and warned that these rumours were spread by enemies of the state, enemies of peace, enemies of the Party of the Cock.

But as Baba slept, he was recreating the world. At night after supper, after prayers with Mama, I would join Baba in his dreams and together we would see the world with new eyes. In his dreams I saw the needless suffering of men, I saw our people wallowing in poverty and strange artificial illnesses, drought and famine, war and deceit. I saw children devoured by vultures. I saw trees felled and buildings put up in their place. I saw the creation of slums and the control of wealth so that the slums would always be filled. I saw the stealing of gold, diamond, and other precious minerals by outside powers with pale spirits riding on them. I saw women riding on lies of who they are submitting to powers that sold themselves as solutions to their infinite problems. I saw gods peddled for profit. I saw guns and bombs smuggled in medicine containers. And I saw the creation of a weapon that would annihilate us all slowly and surely. And as I moved deeper into Baba's dreams I saw the convergence of heaven and earth, the recreation of myths that governed the lives of human beings, and deeper I went until I saw his deepest darkest nightmares, and I saw him walking a path, looking for something he would never find. I followed him down the never-ending path through thorns, snares, army ants, spider webs,

further until I saw his worst nightmare: a world where he existed alone surrounded by strangers milling about, with Mama and I nowhere to be found, always existing in memories of how things used to be.

It became clear where Mama had been going to when Baba finally recovered. Every evening she came with Pastor Wamae and every evening he stayed for supper. After Mama and I had cleared the plates he would pray and leave. It was clear that Mama had grown immensely fond of him. She laughed when he made strange jokes and always sat next to him. Baba was always in a mood when he was around. He would often tell us about his dreams and what he saw while he was recovering, and Mama would interrupt with something Pastor Wamae said and then insist he tells the story and Baba would sit silenced, sulking quietly.

“Does he have to come here every day?” Baba finally asked.

“Why? Do you have a problem with him?”

“Well, I don’t want him in my house.”

Mama wanted to say something but changed her mind. She went and sat where Pastor Wamae was sitting and said, “if you have a problem with him then you should do something about it.” Mama stared at Baba with new eyes, frightening eyes, eyes that made the air between them heavy and unbreathable. I shifted in my chair. Baba stared at her in silence. He looked at her desperately. Something in him had changed. He knew he needed her. He kept his gaze on her and then his face softened.

“All I’m saying is you seem to spend a lot of time with him and...”

“And what? And what? I’m your wife? People will talk? I’m not supposed to be seen with another man?” Mama’s words came faster than Baba could respond. He sat there with his mouth open, his lips moving gently. “He is my pastor. Get used to seeing him. Besides, you should thank him, it’s his prayers that made you well.” Mama’s voice was now raised and filled the room. She was uncontrollable; it was as if every rebuking she had ever wanted to give Baba came at that moment. She told him everything that was in her heart as I sat there and watched, shocked. Baba did nothing and said nothing. She talked for a long time. I watched the light and followed it into the shadows beyond its reach and in the darkness I lost myself.

Mama had warned Baba about the guests. Baba was sitting on his chair staring into the wall when the guests arrived. They were a loud group talking, singing laughing. Baba stood up to receive them shaking their hands and smiling blankly. He mumbled as he shook hands until he got to Pastor Wamae. “Pastor! Welcome!” Pastor Wamae laughed and then thanked Baba. Baba turned to sit and found a young woman sitting in his chair. She made to stand up but he insisted and disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a stool.

“Praise the Lord!” Mama said, walking into the living room with a tray of fruits and boiled sweet potatoes.

“Amen!”

“I see someone forgot to inform the deacon that we’d be meeting” she said.



The room was filled with laughter. The woman sitting on Baba's chair raised her voice above the laughter, "well don't blame me, Okwaro was supposed to tell him but he insists he asked me to tell him."

A man in a funny hair cut and dark dry lips hiding deep brown teeth, who I assumed was Okwaro, spoke in defense. "I told Tabitha to tell the deacon."

"No you didn't!" Tabitha shouted in protest.

They all laughed.

"Anyway, it's a good thing Pastor is here, he will defend us." Okwaro said.

"Us? You!" Tabitha replied.

The room was once again filled with laughter.

Baba and I remained silent.

Mama walked in with two flasks of tea and then came back with a tray of mugs. "Let us pray." The laughter retreated into the shadows and everyone bowed their heads and clasped their hands. It was a bizarre ritual. Everyone's eyes were closed and their faces contorted into a deep sorrowful demeanour. In the still silence, as my eyes met Baba's, Mama's voice filled the room. "Abba Father God we come before you this day. Thank you father for this beautiful day, thank you for this community of believers, thank you for gathering every one of use here today. Thank you for all that you have done. Father we commit this gathering into your presence. We command your angels to align to your will for us. We declare that no weapon formed against us shall prosper. We declare we are yours. We know that where two or three are gathered, there you are. We thank you for your presence in our midst. Bless us now as we fellowship, bless our

country and keep us safe within our borders. Bless us even within our borders lord that we may find peace and love in each other. We know that there are many enemies but we declare victory through your blood. Thank you Lord for life, for health, for our leaders, for our pastor, for you. We pray this trusting in your blood. Amen.”

“Amen!”

“Now that was a prayer!” Okwaro stood up to serve himself some tea.

Everyone laughed.

“I don’t think there is something you left out.” Tabitha added.

More laughter.

“Maybe the next time you pray for tea you should *actually* pray for tea.” Baba finally spoke. He laughed. Nobody laughed with him. The room was filled with an awkward silence, and everyone looked at him and smiled politely. He stopped laughing and mumbled something sheepishly and then Pastor Wamae coughed and said something and the room was filled with laughter again.

It was clear that Baba’s presence was powerless there. He was like a child amongst adults. He stood up and served his own tea and then went back to his stool. Mama poured some tea into a cup and then walked back to her chair and handed it to Pastor Wamae. Baba looked at her and then looked away.

“Thank you so much for inviting us into your home.” Pastor Wamae said to Mama, sipping his tea, “it really is a beautiful home.”

“Thank you.” Mama kept her gaze away from Baba’s.

The room was filled with banter and laughter. Baba kept to himself while the guests served tea and talked to Mama about everything, but mostly about what God was doing in their lives.

“As a new believer, you have to be very careful with the people around you. The devil does not appear as an ugly horned beast with a tail, he is often disguised as the people you love the most.” Tabitha said.

Baba chocked on his tea and made a grunting sound trying to hold back a cough. Everyone looked at him. “Excuse me.” He managed. It was unreal, this new manifestation of Baba. The Baba I remember was good around people and people loved him. The Baba I did not want to remember was aggressive and violent around people. But this Baba was timid and reticent. He was a stranger. He just sat and let the world move without him.

“Anyway, shall we begin?” Pastor Wamae spoke above the murmur that filled the room. Everyone was silent. Mama shifted in her chair. “So today we are here to bless our dear sister and to cover her in our prayers.” He stretched out his hand and placed it on Mama’s shoulder. Baba looked at his tea. “She is the newest member of our church and we are blessed to have you. The Lord had great plans for you and made sure that you found yourself in his house. Amen?”

“Amen.”

He continued, with his arm unmoved, “Satan has been in this house. I can feel it. I know when the evil one has been somewhere. The Bible tells us to test the spirits, and I have tested them! Amen?”

“Amen!”

“AMEN?”

“AMEN!”

“Mama Ayub, Satan has been sifting you like wheat. But God is faithful! So today we are thankful for his salvation, and that He came to your rescue and you accepted Him into your heart. We will cover your entire household with His blood, and invite anyone who wants to accept the Lord as savior to do so. Let us not give the Satan a foothold.” Pastor Wamae looked at Baba for a moment and then at Mama. “Praise the Lord!”

“Amen!”

“PRAISE THE LORD!”

“AMEN!”

“Let us pray. Father in heaven we come before you today. Lord we are thankful. Lord we are grateful. Lord we are delighted to be here in your presence. Father in heaven we want to commit our dear sister into your hands that Lord you may protect her from the schemes of the evil one that have been molding her and forming her into something not fit for your work. But God...” at this point I opened my eyes and noticed that the window was opened but no wind came in. Everybody, except Baba, had closed their eyes and had a solemn look. “... had it not been for your grace, Mama Ayub would still be suffering. Had it not been for your mercy, who knows if she would still be alive?” I looked at Baba who was staring at Pastor Wamae, whose hand was still on Mama. His face was blank. Something was building up in him. I had seen that

face before: the face he had just after he lost his job and just before he started drinking; the face of transformation – from the Baba I knew to the Baba I wanted to forget.

Pastor Wamae continued to pray. He called out on angels and the Spirit of God. He called out for the heavens to open up for Mama. He called out to powers that, apparently, dwelt within us to come alive and restore what the locusts had stolen from Mama. I stared at him, spittle shooting from his mouth. I saw him, in his resplendent silver suit, standing on the platform in the market. He was praying, cursing the powers of the cock that were in contestation with the powers of God. Then a grey cloud floated from the direction of the house with the painting of the red cock. As it floated closer to the platform the entire market was engulfed in a deafening buzz that came from within the cloud. The cloud became a swarm of countless locusts that ate at everything and everyone leaving Pastor Wamae praying for a desolate world where his words echoed through horizons and joined the emptiness that surrounded him.

“Father God we bind all forces that are working against Mama Ayub,” he continued, and we rebuke them and cast them into the sea. And may peace and love abound, and strength to do whatever is necessary to achieve freedom from the forces of evil surrounding her.”

Baba had had enough. “Amen!” His voice was firm and stolid.

“Amen.” Everyone else joined in.

There was fire in Mama’s eyes. “Thank you Pastor.”

“It’s the Lord my dear.” Pastor Wamae laced her hand on Mama’s shoulder again. His face came alive with excitement. “I had an amazing dream last night, but before I tell it to you, please turn your Bibles to the book of Isaiah chapter number...”

“Before you... Sorry to interrupt Pastor. Before you get into it, I’d like to say something.” Baba’s face had completed the transformation. He had become the Baba I wanted to forget. But the more I stared, the more I saw tiny nuances that reminded me that he was in there somewhere, battling the beast that circumstances had turned him into, trying to be the Baba we all knew, we all loved. “First off, you are welcome to *my* house. It is indeed a pleasant surprise that you are here,” he paused and looked at everybody else, “all of you.” Mama looked on in horror. Baba shifted on his stool and then continued, “thank you for your prayers. I am sure the evil forces and the locusts, and Satan himself are immensely shaken and will most certainly not be showing themselves here in a long time.”

“Baba Ayub...” Mama tried.

“No no no. I’m not done.” Baba was not himself. A strange spirit had taken control of him. He had lost all the peace he had garnered throughout his recovery. “I would very much appreciate it if you would not touch my wife.” Pastor Wamae lifted his hand off Mama’s shoulder gently and placed it on his lap. It was as if it was an alien delicate object. Okwaro coughed. “I appreciate the fact that you are all invited guests, but that does not mean that...” Baba stopped talking and clasped his chest. His face showed that he was in some pain.

“Are you okay?” Mama asked rushing to him.

“I am fine!” Baba shouted. Everybody stared at him in silence. I looked at the open window and thought of what was happening outside beyond whatever Baba was doing, beyond Pastor Wamae’s suffocating presence, beyond Mama’s pain. Baba started talking again, but my attention was on the evening noises outside. I could hear the birds finding their nests, and children screaming along the paths, and bicycle bells rolling down the road, and a truck slowly

driving outside our compound. Beyond that I could hear the infinite silence of the universe, and beyond that I heard rumours of an impending war. Baba's voice trailed on and on Mama's voice occasionally interrupting, trying to stop him.

“So what is a man if not one who is head of his own home and can decided who and what comes in it?” He said. Tabitha looked mortified. She sat on Baba's chair staring at him, her hands close to her chest, her palms together like they were when she was praying. Baba stopped talking and walked around the living room in silence before saying: “The world is changing. Soon you will not recognize what you think is normal. And when it has all changed, then you will look for God or whatever it is you are praying to and find that it is only emptiness that you speak to, a vast barren emptiness.” Everybody looked wounded. Baba's words had cut through what they believed in. Mama said nothing. Pastor Wamae made as if to speak and then refrained. Okwaro placed his empty mug onto the table. The silence sat on everything and seemed to last an eternity. Then outside the birds stopped singing and the children stopped screaming and for a few moments the world was in silence as if in anticipation of something, and then it happened.

In the distance we had a faint roar like a strong wind sweeping towards us. In it we heard screams and the voices of terrified souls. And then we heard an explosion – so loud that everything around us rattled.

“It must be coming from the market.” Okwaro suggested.

“The war is here.” Tabitha said.

“Lord save us.” Said a woman whose name I had forgotten.

“Everybody calm down.” Pastor Wamae Started.

“Shut up!” Baba interrupted. “Everybody get out of my house. Now!”

The group, utterly confused, stood and headed for the door. They walked quickly as the explosions and screams filled the air. I watched them as they broke off into running once they left the door. Pastor Wamae was the last one to leave. He wanted to say something, but Baba stood between him and Mama. Pastor Wamae buttoned his silver suit and ran out towards the uncertainty, towards the deathly din, towards the man who was dressed in a red shirt and black trousers – who I had not noticed until then.

Baba shut the door and walked back to his chair. “Good riddance.”



## CHAPTER 12

The night was heavy with anxiety and uncertainty. Baba stayed in the living room until late changing channels on the TV every so often, always finding static. All channels had been switched off. Mama went to her bedroom and sat on her bed reading her new Bible. I left Baba standing next to the window staring at the darkness outside. His eyes were fixed to the clouds above the market that were had an orange haze under them.

Mama was turning a page when I walked in.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m reading the Bible Ayub.”

“Why?”

Mama lifted her eyes off the big black book with pink sides and exhaled. “It give me comfort.”

“Does it help when you are scared?”

“Yes it does. Why? Are you scared?”

“A little.”

“So am I.” Mama let out a weak smile. “Come, we’ll read together.”

I sat next to her and leaned on her shoulder. It was soft and warm. She turned a few pages and started to read out loud.

“Where are we?”

“In the valley of shadows.”

I could barely hear my secret friend. The wind blew hard across the meadow towards the crystal lake. A great storm was coming from the mountain towards us.

“I need to go home.”

“Everything will be fine. Soon you will be home.”

We stood in silence, watching the storm come. Everything it hovered above turned a dreary grey. The storm sucked the magic of life from whatever it touched.

“Are you afraid?” He asked, shouting over the thunder.

“Not anymore.”

“Good. When the storm comes you will need to...” A flash of lightning appeared in front of us interrupting him. And then all at once, the rain fell on us – clear polished crystal rain drops.

“The storm is here.”

“What do we do?”

“What everyone should do; ready your seeds for planting.”

“I do not understand.”

“You will. Now go.”

When I woke up I was in my bed. The noises in the market had died down but I could still see the orange haze underneath the clouds. I stared at the darkness around me pondering what I had seen and then it started raining. I could hear Mama and Baba talking in their room. Their voices were inaudible in the rain. I got lost in the darkness surrounding me and tried to imagine what was going on. I imagined the rain falling on the earth and flooding the world. I imagined the road swelling up into a river that swallowed everything it touched. I imagined a flash of lightning striking a giant red cock. I imagined the world celebrating its new season of liberty. I imagined many things, drawing images that came alive in my room. I imagined new things to replace the dying old ones and kept imagining until Mama ran into my room.

“Get up! We are leaving!”

The images disintegrated and transformed into the form of Mama’s body. She did not switch on the light. The sound of the rain falling on iron sheets filled the air, until we got to the kitchen and heard the sound of men singing. A momentary flash of lightning revealed the crowd that stood outside the house. Another revealed the gate, broken, lying on the wet earth.

“Quiet.” Mama said.

Baba was nowhere to be seen. The lightning flashed once more and I saw the crowd running after a man towards the road.

“Come quick!” Mama said. She pushed the door that was already unlocked, and then we ran into the rain, towards the road, and in the opposite direction the crowd had ran towards. We ran past Mama’s hotel, towards the forest.

“Where is Baba?” I asked. The rain made it hard to speak.

Mama ignored me. We ran until all we could hear was the sloshing sound of our shoes in the mud and the wind beating against our numb faces. We ran until we disappeared into the unwelcoming shadows and deathly silence of the forest.

Mama was in obscurity behind a curtain, talking to someone in the darkness of the room. Next to the bed was a pair of round-rimmed spectacles placed on a stool. The room was dark. I lay on the bed, awake, lost in thoughts and questions. A part of me rose up from my body and floated in the dark and joined my secret friends in exploring the room, the darkness, the world. My secret friends took me above and beyond the house, past clouds that hit the earth ferociously with heavy rain. We went higher with incredible speeds until the world was a distant sphere far below us. I thought I would never return to my body. From there I could see the world suffering under its own causing; its salvation had become its damnation. I could hear the *tuk! tuk!* of gun fire and the loud *boom!* of explosions spreading like a rash all through the earth; I could hear the wails and screams of a world that was calling out to a savior they knew not, a savior who could not hear their crying. I could feel the loneliness of a world that was all alone in its suffering; I could feel the despair of a world that had given up on itself.

And as that part of me stayed lifted from my body, I saw Mama talking to the old man. Her face was twisted in worry.

“He led them the other way.” She said.

“Did they catch him?” The old man’s raspy voice pulled me back towards my body.

“I don’t know.” Mama let out a heavy sigh. “They ran after him and then I took the boy and we came here.”

“Rest. We will look for him tomorrow.”

“Will he be alright?”

“Don’t worry yourself. Get some rest.”

The two figures moved behind the curtain. The part of me that had lifted from my body started to fall faster and faster towards my body. Suddenly I was lying on the bed listening to the old man console Mama who was crying.

I spent the next three days alone in the house staring at the forest through the window, looking at the plumes of smoke rising above the trees, choking the clouds and wringing them of their life force. I never saw the old man during the three days. Mama left in the morning and came back in the evening. The uncertainty of the world around me kept my secret friends at bay. There was so much to wonder about that I could not follow them into the beautiful worlds we created. It was as if the uncertainty and wonder of the changing world kept me grounded to it.

On the third day she came home with a brown envelop and placed it on the bed. There were tears in her eyes. “I found your father.” She sat down on the bed next to the envelope. “They arrested him.” She put her hand on my back and rubbed it gently. “They say they are holding him for trial, but I don’t... I don’t know Ayub. I don’t know if they will let him go....”

The bed shook under Mama’s sobs.

I wanted to say something, but I saw myself falling deeper and deeper within me. I did not know what to say I stared at her and thought of a world without Baba, without the Mama who *was* because of Baba. I could not fathom such a world; so I chose silence, and in the silence I felt a strange peace, a detachment from any responsibility. Mama continued to talk and I fell deeper and deeper within me until I could hear nothing except the sound of waves crushing against rocks. And then I saw her holding the brown envelop with new tears running down her face. “But I managed to get your papers. You are going to see your uncle.”

The words fell on my ears like warm rain. I liked how they made me feel but did not mean anything.

“Did you hear me Ayub?” She stared at me, puzzled. I nodded. “You are going to live with your uncle now.”

## CHAPTER 13

The world had become a new place. I ventured into the streets and into the realization that I had been granted a greater freedom in this world than in any other. Everything around me was new and strange like something great and mysterious had altered the world. Around me people milled around, oblivious and aware of my presence. I could feel the difference, see it. For the first time in my life I was an alien, new to a world where I did not subscribe to normalcy and sameness. The buildings were tall and old – a dull brown – preserved in a state of perpetual decrepitude. The streets were new and strange, paved with cobblestone. In between the stones little shoots of grass tried their best to grow. Above us the rain promised to fall. I longed to wander but Uncle had not yet come and so I waited for him regarding this new world where nothing held and my presence stood on the shaky ground of uncertainty.

And so with nowhere to go and with nothing to do I was forced to be content with the distractions my surroundings offered. I watched an old man pulling a wheeled suitcase. I wondered if he was alone, like me, in this strange new world. I listened to the voice coming from the speaker above us announcing open gates and late flights. I pushed up my chair and let my legs dangle like awkward ribbons. Two children playing a short distance from me stopped to stare at me. It was not me they were staring at, it was the difference. It wrapped itself around me removing me from the new world's collective identity. A woman, who reminded me of Mama, came and pulled them away. Her face was sad with shame. She looked at me and then at the children and went away reprimanding them for something unknown.

A plane flew by filling the air with its presence. I stood up and walked to a wall made entirely of glass. Countless cars filled a vast concrete field decking it with a myriad of colours and sounds. It was a bizarre beauty. People walked towards the cars holding hands, laughing, some stopping to hug and kiss, pulling wheeled suitcases. Some danced to strains of music that only they could hear.

I went back to my chair as the voice from the speaker filled the air around me. On the far end of the platform stood a man whose familiarity called out. His gaze scanned the entire area and then fixed in my direction. He stared at me for a long time. And then he started to walk towards me. I did not move. I let my legs swing slowly wanting to look as calm and relaxed as I could. He was a tall man with a crooked walk, and the face of Baba. There was a curious exhaustion on his face. He stood in front of me, smiled, and said:

“Ayub! My goodness! Look how much you’ve grown! Do you remember me?”

“No.”

He laughed. “It was a long time ago.” He stretched out his hand and shook mine. “I hope you enjoyed your flight.”

“I did.” I said, without understanding what constituted an enjoyable flight.

“Do you have all your luggage?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll help you get it.”



We walked towards the conveyer belt that carried different bags and waited until mine was spewed from one wall and I watched as the others were swallowed by the same wall.

We walked towards the countless cars. I wondered which one belonged to Uncle. As we walked towards the cars I thought of home and then Uncle spoke:

“Here we are.”

I sat and watched the road and the world move under us. We did not talk. In the car – a cage of sorts – the world moved past us. Everything was rapidly moving beyond us, away from us. I wanted to stop and stare, and take in what was before me but here there was no time. Time was an outside concept: nobody had time for anybody. Life moved smoothly like parts of a well-oiled machine; humanity moved like robots privy to the programming of their souls and dreams. Inside the car I was and outside it I was not. Time only existed in the car, moving and relentless. I existed in that space and only that space existed; beyond us there was nothing: no time, no space, nothing, just empty vast vacuum with the memories of things I loved.

“I’m sure you are still tired. We’ll be home soon and then you can rest.”

I looked at the clouds floating above us: the only freedom I knew at that moment.

“Did you carry everything you need?”

The clouds became speck in the sky: lost and full with the potential to go anywhere. The sky: blue and endless.

“Anyway, we’ll get whatever you need.”

Uncle lived at the end of the street. His house – like all the other houses – was old and its walls had peeling paint and an insipid grey coat that matched the clouds that hang low above them. His door - the only bright thing on the street - was blue: a deep bright blue. There seemed to be a certain willingness, a secret agreement to keep the houses in that state – an attempt to keep their history alive, an attempt to look decrepit on purpose for the sake of an unattainable goal.

He parked the car on the street and then went out to the back to get my bags.

“Welcome home!” He was suddenly cheery.

I stood by the car and let him carry my bags to the house.

“Come on in.”

His house was beautiful in the way strange things are beautiful. It was small, with warm colours and the smell of new unfamiliarity. There was a sofa facing a huge television and two chairs on either side of it. Between the sofa – that looked a bit too comfortable – and the TV was a glass table with magazines on it. Different girls stared and smiled at the ceiling and at me, calling out to me with their unmoving eyes. Behind the sofa stood shelves with countless books: new books, old books, tattered books, books with hard strong covers, flimsy books, thick books, colourful books, dreary books, tall books, small books; all sorts of books. The air smelt of ink and paper and reminded me of the old man’s house. Uncle walked into the hallway saying something. I stood there staring at the shelf and then I noticed some smoke coming from one of the books – a thin wisp of shimmering smoke. The book rattled on the shelf and fell. It took a thousand years to get to the ground and then it took no time at all. It hit the ground with a gentle muffled thud and then it lay, still, unmoving. The pages flipped as if an invisible wind was

blowing through them. Then from it a thousand colours came flying out; radiant colours that filled the room with all sorts of magic and blinding brilliance.

And as it is with all beautiful things – their impermanent nature of existence - from the book came a dark blackness that swallowed the light and spread through the room devouring anything it touched. And eventually the room was an enormous shadow into which I fell until I too was transformed into the blackness. In the dark I heard desperate sounds trapped in distorted histories, I saw images of ships in choppy waters driven by the wretched voices that came from within them, I smelt the festering wounds of civilization, I felt the searing heat of souls burnt to the stake, and I tasted the tears of a humanity cursed by its own spells. It was a depressing fall, full of realization and disappointment. I felt my world shaken. Everything I knew was now a distant illusion. And then I saw a seed - giant at first - shrinking over seasons and years. The seed fell into black earth soaked with tears, and suffering, and joy, and hope; then a mound appeared from the earth slowly, surely, subtly; and it was watered by a people who had the whitest cloths tied above their eyes and who held swords in their left hands. And over seasons it grew until it became a mountain that could be seen from all over the world, fed by all the winds of the earth. Then a spark appeared from behind the mountain raining specks of light that grew into all beautiful things and....

“Ayub.”

The living room was back to its original state. I took in its warmth, its freshness, its safety; then I looked at the book I was holding – the book I had unwittingly picked from the floor.

“Are you okay? You can sit.”

Uncle's sofa swallowed me. It was surprising how comfortably uncomfortable it was. Most of his furniture had a transparent plastic covering. His house was clean – too clean. It was clear he never got many visitors. Next to the TV, on the small shelf that had more books stood a picture of a white woman with an inconsolable smile.

“That's Victoria.”

I knew he wanted to tell me more, but I shifted in the sofa and looked at something else. He disappeared into the kitchen and came back holding a beer. His demeanour had changed in the few seconds he was away.

“Ayub, this is your home for the next few weeks. You have everything you need here. I know you miss home, but you know how it is. Try and get used to it. Get some rest we have much to do tomorrow.” He sounded too much like Baba. The words came out effortlessly. His voice had changed, he sounded like home – no pulled vowels and strange pronunciation.

“Okay”.

“I'll be in my room.”

The rain had started. Drops of water trickled down the window washing away nothing but themselves. I looked at the picture of Victoria, pondered about what it was that was different about her – there was something incongruous about her. I sat on the sofa taking in everything. Memories of home banged outside wanting to get in. I stared at everything for long moments. The books fascinated me: a thousand portals into a thousand worlds. Then at the furthest corner I saw it: hanged out of reach and out of sight. It summed up everything. It made sense of everything: the cleanliness, the plastic covers, the warmth, the freshness. It was not that uncle

spent most of his time cleaning but that he spent most of his time alone. He was alone. Maybe that is why Victoria's smile was so strange; she too, like uncle, was alone. I stared at it for a long time. It was a small fiddle with most of its strings missing. It hung on the wall limp in acceptance of its impotence, its inability to make any music.

Later, while lost in dream where an ancient civilization was at war with ghosts of uncanny whiteness, uncle put away the book that lay on my chest and then gently pulled me up.

“Ayub, It's time to sleep.”

“Okay. Tomorrow, could you take me to a forest?”

“Well, there is a park not so far from here, and I think there is a forest next to it. That wouldn't be a problem. Get some sleep.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

## CHAPTER 14

The lucidity of the light was sufficient to itself even at that hour. It normally would have been dark at home, but here the clouds were still bright and the birds still flew low and swift mocking my disorientation. The horizon was decked with sulphur-yellow linings under the grey clouds that bulged with the promise of rain. A cold wind blew past me carrying new smells: the crisp brown smell of beechmast, acorn husks, blackberries, nicotine, and dark black earth. Up ahead the forest stood, enclosed in a green mystery. The path ended haphazardly; fading more than ending just before the trees. There seemed to be no way through to the forest; it was as if it had reverted to its ancient privacy, keeping away anything that would disrupt its sanctity. I saw the forest back home; this was not it. This was nature fully aware of itself. It was all green as far as my eyes could see. Behind me the church bells rang. Uncle had been standing behind me the whole time, but I could not feel his presence. His presence, unlike Baba's, needed the world to vindicate it: the blowing of wind, the ringing of church bells, the gentle groan of earth underfoot. The church bells startled me back to the awareness of his presence.

There was a garden just before the forest. It was a mystical garden; a garden where all flowers became birds. There were bushes of soft white doves and purple sparkling wrens, rows of sleeping robins and golden orioles, hedges of helmeted crows and brown mistle thrushes. And as I walked through the garden the flowers came alive and filled the air with their radiance so that I was aware of my presence there.

“Can we go to the forest?”

“Sure.”

I was not certain of what he was sure about but we walked towards the forest anyway. We followed a path that led us deep into the woods and behind us the forest enclosed. We were no longer in the garden, open air, in the world. We were in another time, an in-between space between life as it was and as it should have been. Here you could not come and leave as you pleased; you had to reconcile with your own being and once you were ready the forest would let you out. Uncle said something and then disappeared in a grey mist.

The forest was aware of my presence there. Little creatures scuttled across the black earth between trees that groaned and whispered in the wind. From deeper in the forest came the cry of a bird, so desolate and ominous. The cry, with all the melancholy of the forest, sent a cold shiver through my body and I stood there frozen, in expectation of something unknown. A short distance away I saw the earth trembling, gently at first and then in violent eruption. Then from the earth a great spire emerged pushing its way towards the sky. It ascended slowly pushing away the earth stabbing at the sky until a church stood there. Around it menacing stone gargoyles knelt in expectancy. Their mouths were bloody from years of devouring souls. Men in hooded cloaks milled around its walls paying homage to an altar placed inside the decrepit structure. And then the door swung open and a strong wind blew from within carrying the howling voices of a million thousand black souls crying out to their ancient God. And then a thousand black souls appeared from the church in chains forming a long train and marched to the clearing next to the church. The gargoyles stood guard growling and licking their lips. Then the forest was filled with the cries of the black souls as they pushed and pulled under the weight of invisible whips until a new church was built and then they were hurled in it and then there was silence; the kind of silence that fills a moment in anticipation of a recurrence of what just happened.

“Ayub, let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 15

The realization that I was not home came to me slowly like dust: tiny invisible specks at first and eventually a thick coat of brown covering everything in unfamiliarity and impermanence. Everything was disconcerting. The sun went down too late and came up too early. It rained constantly and the wind was always blowing in violent gusts. Even in the smallness of Uncle's house I still felt distant and alone. He worked odd hours. He came home only to eat and sleep and wash. But he was never tired. He left the house and came back ever with the vigor of one always striving. I stayed indoors and watched the world. Stories of home became distant rumours in the wind. Uncle rarely told me anything except Mama and Baba were okay and we would be together again soon. The news on television did not offer anything useful except for lost cats and old women found dead in their houses. Home became a mirage in a desert of uncertainty. I began to imagine things, images constructed by the memory of Baba's words: Mama expanding her Hotel and feeding the Head of State and all his cronies until they were full and dead to their lies; and Baba back to work, working hard to correct a world curved out of wrongs and misdeeds. I saw them, at first, everywhere and then in my dreams and then I heard their voices calling me from the mountain in my mind, the mountain I had rarely visited since I came to live with Uncle; so I began my search for them. I looked down the cobble streets along streets whose names I still had not learnt to say, I looked up paths that led to unending moorlands, I looked beside giant crystal lakes that were rumoured to harbour monsters in their secret depths, and I looked above Victorian houses that ran – identical – down innumerable streets. They were nowhere to be found. So I started to look for them in Uncle's books. I scoured all the books: thin books whose words were so faint I feared reading them would erase them,



thick books whose size held vast wildernesses through which I had to walk for endless hours to reach the end, books with pictures both destructing and unnecessary, books with letters so small I felt them gnawing through my eyes to eat at my brain. I searched for them in the histories of many peoples, and in the stories of dead men. And as I read I began to see walls crumbling, walls that had held men's ways of thinking for millions of generations. Truths became clearer and I began to see the white ghosts in my dreams for who they really were. As I turned through the pages I saw things falling apart, histories being rewritten, and deliverance handed to the wretched of the earth.

"I see you like my books. How many have you read anyway?"

I had lost count. How could you count worlds and doors and windows and souls and times and generations and histories and lives?

I finally met Victoria. She brought Uncle new books every two weeks. I had been cold towards her at first. It must have been her dissimilarity: her nasal voice that vomited words often in undecipherable lumps. Or the way she laughed at things she said, things I felt Uncle laughed at out of obligation than sincerity. Or it was her pale skin that reminded me of all things pink. Or her one arm that wore too much jewelry – compensation for the arm she had lost to a childhood infection. It was all these things, but mostly her having one arm, that made her appear incomplete, imperfect, unfinished. She never hid it. She let it show through folded sleeves – a pink stub of flesh that moved awkwardly in response to her redundant laughter.

But I eventually warmed up to her much to Uncle's relief. She brought me a new book whenever she brought Uncle's books.

“You need your own collection. Every person needs their own collection.” She said handing me a book whose cover looked like an image of a little girl in a red hood running through a forest with a pair of menacing eyes watching her.

The book had grotesque stories: a story of a little girl who chopped off her grandmother’s hand and then went on to kill her, a man who married women and then killed them and mummified their bodies and entombed them in glass coffins, a girl sold off to an ugly beast, a girl made of snow who died and melted into a sad pool, a cat who....

She brought me more books. The more books she brought the fonder of her I became. Yet she still remained an unfinished work, an incomplete book; but Uncle loved her. He loved her in a strange way. He opened doors for her, laughed at her bad jokes, thanked her endlessly for the books she brought even though he never read most of them – but I suspected it had something to do with the fact that all the books she brought were either stories about women, or stories written by women. But I found myself lost in them, seeing Mama in the women who died for what they believed in, or women who were called witches for standing up against emperors, or women who fought dragons with courage and immense resilience.

Later Uncle came with news that I would soon join school. I said nothing. He stared at me, waiting for my response, but I stayed in silence.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

The awareness that things would never be the same again hit me with great intensity. Memories fought to replace the hope that had started to form. I still wanted to know if Baba was okay, when I would see Mama again. I looked at Uncle and asked, “when?”

“In two weeks.”

There was a strange finality in his words. And as he walked away, I felt it, the transformation taking place, and I knew that this was a new beginning.

That night I had a dream. In it I saw the old man. He was different, he looked older. His glasses were cracked. He stood atop a hill, the wind blowing his cloak.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, walking behind him.

“This is a new world, Ayub. This is a new you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look at the world,” he pointed at the city, “it is nothing g like we know it, everything is new. Everything, including ourselves. We need to find our place in this world, lest we lose ourselves.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Not do, be. You need to become.”

“Become? I don’t understand...”

“Become Ayub, become.”

And then a strong wind blew and he disappeared. The universe stayed fixed to that moment; nothing moved. Below me, on a narrow winding road, a car drove by, then another, then another, and then another.

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