

About the author

As a Kenyan-born and American-trained physician, Dr. Joe Ngatia has written a novel that is not far removed from his life's journey. The author, like the protagonist in this riveting story, was raised at the foothills of Mount Kenya as a member of a closely-knit tribal community. Along a path strewn with unique challenges and experiences, he left his indigenous village and made it to the U.S where he is a board-certified anesthesiologist. The author provides vivid and moving depictions of the thrill, humor, and heartache expected from such an epic journey. This is only possible because he constructs the rich narrative by drawing from a deep repository of intimate experiences. The reader is given a front-seat view of the working of a truly brilliant and reflective mind. In this debut novel, Dr. Ngatia has managed to put something more than a novel on the table: he has provided the reader with an enriching and transformative experience.

S H E P H E R D S
o f t h e S U N

A Novel

Joe Ngatia, MD

First Kindle Edition, June 2013

Copyright © 2013 by Joe Ngatia

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in any form, in whole or in part, without written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction set in a background of history. Public personages both living and dead may appear in the story under their right names. Scenes and dialogue involving them with fictitious characters are of course invented. Any other usage of real people's names is coincidental. Any resemblance of the imaginary characters to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

eISBN: 978-0-9889192-0-4

Cover design by Rebecca Swift

*For my sons Lumumba, Marcus and Madiba, who continue to enrich my
heart with love and my mind with wonder.*

For Victoria who guards the orchard and attends the bloom.

Contradictions if well understood and managed can spark off the fires of invention. Orthodoxy whether of the right or of the left is the graveyard of creativity.

CHINUA ACHEBE, *Anthills of Savannah*

C O N T E N T S

Cover
About the Author
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Epigraph

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two
Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six
Chapter Twenty-seven
Chapter Twenty-eight
Chapter Twenty-nine

Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-one
Chapter Thirty-two

Author's Notes and References

PROLOGUE

With her headdress gently stroking her cheeks, she spoke to an only child she would never see again. In spite of the surge of emotions in her heart, she braved her inner tempest. She had been only a teenage girl when fate had forced her to conceive and raise a son whom she could not fully claim as her own. Now, at last, the moment she had dreaded had come. The gods had returned to stake their claim.

As they sat across the fire from each other, their solemn faces shone under the radiance of the glowing embers. Outside the warm hut the chirping of crickets merged with the croaking of frogs to mock the repose of nightfall. The moonless sky cast an impenetrable shroud of darkness upon the remote coastal village. On such nights most villagers did not venture far from the safety of their huts. The solitude allowed mother and son to enter into a meditative dialogue without interruption from passersby. With strained optimism, perhaps intent on calming her impetuous son, she spoke with a voice filled with hope and vigor.

“When I was a little girl,” she said, “my grandmother told me a simple but powerful story.”

“I am sure by now I’ve heard it at least once,” her son replied pensively.

“And if you have, I am certain it will leave you unscathed to hear it one more time,” she declared with a smile. “It was a story of lizards, a group of delightful lizards. After a long and dreadful dry season, they felt cool droplets of rain on their sunbaked backs. They broke into jubilant songs and dance to welcome the rain. *Rain, rain, rain / The tears of the clouds are upon us / Rain, rain, rain / The malice of the sun is conquered at last*, the lizards sang lustily. I was so taken by the occasion as a young girl. In my mind’s eye I could see a troupe of lizards dancing triumphantly in the rain...”

“And then what happened?” her son inquired, unable to resist his mother’s charm.

“Well, the dance of the lizards rose into ecstasy,” she continued. “With joy they lent their bodies to the soothing breeze. The dry season had at last come to an end, but almost imperceptibly rainwater began to collect underneath their feet. By and by, puddles became pools, streams became floods. And then, one by one, the flood washed the celebrants away, carrying them off to a distant place far from home.”

“A hopeless celebration indeed!” her son exclaimed disapprovingly.

“Not so,” she interjected, “because even if they could no longer return to the crevices they called home, a pleasant surprise awaited them downstream. Fields of abundance lay there! They had lost the luxury of familiarity, but downstream they were repaid with bounty and mysteries galore.”

“*Mama*, I understand the meaning, but it still saddens me that I must abandon you to the misery of loneliness and tears,” he said in a somber voice.

“My brave son, it is a fact of life that every victory comes with loss and that every loss nurtures its own victory. Every delight begets its own sorrows, while every sorrow ushers in its own delights,” she said reassuringly. “Life is a dance of lizards! That is why the lizard is such a powerful symbol among us, the Mijikenda people.”

“Is that why you never take off your lizard necklace?” he inquired.

“A diligent shepherd must be attentive, and that you are!” she answered with a smile. “It was given to me when I was a little girl by my grandmother. It is very precious to me.”

CHAPTER ONE

The usual verdict is indisputable: the birth of a bastard son occurs at the fateful intersection of lust and debauchery. But in the case of Yusuf Ibrahim there were a few twists in the saga surrounding his birth, such that in the end greatness was interwoven with calamity. Had he been born legitimately, perhaps he too could have claimed the privilege of entering this world “trailed by clouds of glory.” It is unlikely, however, that such clouds accompany those who are born in secluded caves and doomed to a restless existence.

It was a dreary night. A torrential rainstorm was descending fiercely upon Amina Ibrahim’s coastal village when, under the cover of dusk, she gathered all her worldly possessions into a knapsack. When she stepped out of the hut for the last time, she wept as she looked back at her parents’ homestead. The knowledge that their lives would be ruined by her decision pierced her like a knife. As she left the village, the inviting scent of food gave way to the peculiar smell that rises from the ground when rainwater meets scorched earth. Although Amina was afraid, she had to press on. For her own sake, and for the sake of the parents she loved, she forced her trembling feet to carry her away into the impenetrable darkness of an unknown future.

The slippery ground made the hike up the hill that separated her father’s homestead from farmland an arduous task. On several occasions she made it halfway up the hill only to slip back down to the bottom. As her feet struggled with the miry slope, her morbid fear of darkness combined with the thought of being apprehended. When at last she reached the hill’s crest, she breathed a sigh of relief as she hastily made her way into the frightful darkness ahead. The lashings of a fierce monsoon wind tormented her drenched body relentlessly as she dragged herself forward into the night.

Amina sobbed silently at first, then loudly, as she realized that fate had made her an army of one. She wanted the world to witness her protests against the injustice that had been inflicted upon her under the pretext of loyalty to heritage, but the furious storm and deafening thunder drowned out her terrified sobs. In her anguish it seemed as though nature had conspired with her betrayer to keep his knavish acts safely concealed.

Hope had abandoned her in this crisis, and for Amina the consequences were as irrevocable as they were momentous. The paradise of her yesterdays lay in the ruins of an irrecoverable past while an uncharted future beckoned her into its tortuous maze. Her brief but epochal experience with romance had transformed her into an infidel. She knew that soon the night’s silence would be shattered by the distressed calls of anxious villagers in search of her. With good reason she dared not meet their disappointed faces. She had to confront the dark night alone in her quest for life and refuge. It was the only choice that fate had left within her reach.

Burdened by the weight of crushing fear, she forged through thick brush and marsh toward the haunted sanctuary of an ancient shrine. To the villagers it was known simply as the *Kaya* forest, a place they avoided at all costs. Amid the freakish calls of marsh creatures, Amina followed the path away from the village with the assurance that no one would follow her there. Like the condemned who must march to a rendezvous

with death, she hurried on bereft of choice. As she approached the forest, she recalled her parents' endless horror stories concerning those who had dared to trespass its boundaries.

"The *Kaya* forest is home only to the *Tabibu* (mystical healers) and the skeletons of the condemned," her mother's impassioned warning echoed in her mind. "Even in the midst of a drought when food and firewood are scarce, no one dares intrude into the sacred forest. It is a place where powerful spirits wrestle with evil in broad daylight."

"Amina," her father had sternly admonished, "now that you are old enough to fetch firewood, I warn you never to venture into the *Kaya* forest in search for it. Such an act would undoubtedly bring untold wrath upon our household."

But what was she to do now? Was it better to die under a barrage of stones thrown by an angry mob of former friends? Was it better to carry to her death the haunting images of outraged kith and kin whose mores she had violated? She walked further into the eerie darkness, courting with each step the fierce displeasure of the ancient shrine's unseen guardians.

After hours of weeping, Amina's tears had dried up, leaving a burning sensation in her eyes. Other than the rustle of tall trees in the wind, the forest was still. She felt as though she were on a stage and the world had paused to witness her acts of defiance with bated breath. Amina wandered in the forest like a zombie for most of the night. The break of dawn found her hungry and exhausted. Somewhat disoriented, she went about plucking wild fruit and bananas, which she gathered into a sack improvised from her headdress. On a log by a clearing in the forest, she then permitted herself to enjoy the early morning sun's rays while savoring some of what she had foraged.

Her loneliness in the depths of the forest was interrupted by a female antelope that came to graze a short distance from her. At first the antelope did not notice the solitary intruder, and when the creature finally saw her it held its gaze for a long time before leisurely walking away. Based on the animal's distended belly, Amina suspected that it too was pregnant. In the silence she wondered whether the antelope had perceived their shared condition—and the tragic destiny that bound them as females in a world dominated by male aggression. If they could only sit down and chat, what sorrows, what wisdom, could the antelope whisper to her comrade in the struggle for survival?

But there was no time for self-pity. She needed to find shelter where she could be safe from the nightly chill and marauding beasts. As she roamed in her search, it troubled her to find droppings from what appeared to be large predatory animals. Although she had survived the night, she was aware that her fate could change at any second and without warning.

Confronted with this bleak reality, her mind turned relentlessly. *Should I make a nest high in a tree or find a cave? A tree would provide safety from ground animals, but I'd be risking a deadly fall. A cave might provide warmth at night, but it would make me an easy target.* Her mind wrestled for answers to her dilemma.

After a lengthy search Amina came across a large baobab tree with a hollow trunk. A small door-like opening led into the tree's warm and spacious center. She cautiously peeked into the cavernous interior. After her fears were dispelled, Amina squeezed inside to continue her guarded exploration. Despite the previous night's heavy rainfall, the tree's interior was dry and cozy. The trunk had grown to an enormous size over several centuries. She recalled the many stories she had heard about the baobab as the "tree of life."

The tree was located only a short distance from the seashore. Although empty, it was in such pristine condition that Amina suspected it was someone's hideout, perhaps that of an outlaw. She nervously explored the surroundings but, finding no evidence of human presence, carried her meager belongings into the dim interior. She then made a fire by rubbing together two dry sticks as she had learned from her elders. After blocking the entrance with a boulder, she hung her damp clothes by the fire and began her new life as a forest dweller.

That morning sleep came easily to Amina's exhausted body. In one of her fleeting dreams she was revisited by the antelope she had seen earlier.

"Why are you so sad?" the animal inquired in her dream.

"I am friendless and stranded in a hopeless existence," Amina answered dejectedly.

"You call this a hopeless existence? Look around you at your new home! It is a place filled with serene meadows guarded by imposing trees. Take in the enchanting fragrance of these colorful flowers in bloom. Learn to revel in the sun's life-sustaining warmth. Is this not a paradise?" the antelope asked.

"To you perhaps it is a paradise, but you forget I am a human, and humans have homes and families and memories they treasure."

"When you immerse yourself in the beauty that surrounds you," said the antelope with a smile, "you'll never long for sweet memories or home or friends."

"Aren't you afraid of carrying a pregnancy to term in this place where speed is life, or of giving birth here where the life of an offspring can be snuffed out in front of you without warning? I am sure you have thought of these things, haven't you?" Amina inquired anxiously.

"I don't live for the tragedy that *could* happen. I live only in the beauty that *is* happening," the antelope answered as she strolled away.

Amina woke up shortly after her dream, which remained vivid in her mind. While she slept, her clothes had dried in the fire's warmth. She emerged from the tree's safety just before dusk and, guided by the setting sun's amber glow, made her way to the deserted shoreline. The magical scenery drew her out from the cocoon of her anxieties. A group of forest monkeys playfully combed the beach for food, while vigilant antelopes grazed nearby. Moved by her surroundings, Amina walked to the water's edge and washed her tear-stained face. She tried to approach the animals, but they scurried away when she came too close.

In preparation for the long night ahead, she gathered some coconuts and baobab fruit before returning to the safety of the tree just before nightfall. As she had learned from her elders, she barricaded herself inside with a boulder and log. Although she was aware that they would not keep human intruders away, at least she could rest safely out of reach from wild animals. In spite of this knowledge, it took her several weeks before she could rest peacefully at night.

At dusk the forest became a haunted place, a world that expressed itself in ghastly laughter and blood-curdling screams. On occasion Amina awoke to frightening growls of menacing beasts that seemed determined to make a meal of her. Experience had taught her that, when all else failed, striking the nose of any animal with a burning ember drove the threat away instantly.

As weeks turned into months, her physical condition changed remarkably. When her bulging abdomen forced her to enlarge the opening to her baobab redoubt, she contemplated the possibility of a twin pregnancy. This was a matter of great consternation to her as she was acutely aware that even under the best conditions many women in her village had died in the process of delivering twins. She hoped that her situation would be different, but she could only wait helplessly for the outcome. In the back of her mind she knew that each passing moment brought her closer to the banks of a dangerous river whose crossing was not guaranteed. As she sat alone in the wee hours of the night reflecting on her looming crisis, her mind returned to the circumstances of conception.

The nine clans of the Mijikenda shared their coastal homeland with venerated mystics. Although ordinary villagers kept a cautious distance between themselves and these mystical healers, there were rare occasions when the call of life thrust the uneasy neighbors together in joint celebrations filled with dance and ecstasy. On these occasions neither the villagers nor the mystics insisted on conducting their lives by the dictates of a familiar creed, for at their convergence even the gods restrained their fury and waited for a new generation of shepherds of the sun to emerge.

On these festive occasions the mystics approached the villagers in their ceremonial regalia, concealing their faces behind tight-fitting masks and elaborate headdresses that matched their colorful skin decorations. Offerings given to the reclusive mystics were said to bring immeasurable prosperity to the giver, and thus villagers threw themselves and their fortunes at the mystics' feet. This was precisely how one benevolent villager, Hakeem Ibrahim, found himself torn between loyalty to heritage and affection for offspring.

"The quest must carry on until we who are by night guarded by shimmering stars can arise at dawn to shepherd the lustrous sun," intoned a solemn mystic. As he closed in on his target, he seemed fully immersed in and animated by a powerful force raging within his unsearchable mind.

"I beg you to leave her. She is my only child. Take my cows. No, rip my heart from this bosom, but please leave her with me," Mr. Ibrahim pleaded with the determined mystic.

The unyielding healer wrapped his robust arm around the delicate waist of the aging man's daughter like a vise. Mr. Ibrahim knew that his appeal to the mystic was an affront to powerful ancestral spirits. Considering everything they did to maintain a favorable balance between bounty and calamity, indeed between life and death, nothing was beyond a reasonable offering to the gods.

Oblivious to Mr. Ibrahim's pleas, the masked figure continued to pull the graceful girl away from her tormented parent. He gave no response to the distressed man's pleas, as though his voice guarded a dreadful secret. For her part Amina Ibrahim did not resist the stranger's grip, flattered by the holy man's desire for her even as she marveled at the rare tears of an indomitable father.

"*Mzee* Ibrahim, when man and deity wrestle, man is always the loser!" an elderly woman implored the father. "Let her go, and if she is yours she'll return. These are the ways of the Mijikenda!"

On that moonlit night the girl disappeared with the mystic. She giggled and laughed under the spell of his adoration as she danced her way to the waiting feast in his

secluded dwelling. And when the two weeks of celebration ended, she reluctantly rejoined her equals, but her heart she left with a lover who had remained in his regalia even while shepherding her through a ritual of pleasure and renewal. In his arms she had partaken of life as from a pristine spring. His whispers of admiration had conquered her heart and liberated her spirit in the orchards of fulfillment.

The brief courtship ended as unceremoniously as it had begun. As she plodded homeward, she silently pleaded with the mystic to return and claim her as his own. She waited a long time. When the waiting outlasted the cycles of her patience, she pitched her tent of hope on the shifting sands of affection. And even while she craved his touch, she regretted their ever meeting. After all, contact with him had exiled her from humanity forever.

The dreaded moment came in the middle of a chilly night. Amina awoke to insufferable waves of abdominal pain. She tried to change positions, but the pain only intensified in spite of her attempts to alleviate it. She felt as though her organs were being ripped into pieces by a thousand swords. Unable to contain herself, she paced back and forth on her knees inside the tree cavern, but it was all to no avail. She moaned and groaned and cried for help where no one would venture.

After a prolonged struggle her water broke. Now more than before the waves of pain came in rapid succession, each one more intense and unbearable than the previous one. She could no longer endure her agony gracefully. She pushed and screamed and pleaded with death to take away her misery. Drenched in sweat, she feared that something had gone terribly wrong after hours of unsuccessful pushing. Although it was still dark outside, she attempted to get up and return to her village for help, but she collapsed back onto the floor in the attempt.

She was drifting in and out of consciousness. With a feeble scream she called for help as she contemplated her approaching demise. To her great surprise she heard the sound of approaching footsteps outside. As the protective boulder rolled away from the entrance, she feared that her agonized screams had caught the attention of a predator. In the darkness she saw the silhouette of a strange figure as it entered the cave. She was cornered, and all she could do was to wait for the final moment.

“Please, please, I beg you,” she gasped in terror. In the silence she felt a strong grip touching the borders of her swollen uterus.

“You need help desperately,” the stranger declared. “I am the guardian of this ancient shrine. When you entered the *Kaya* forest, you violated sacred decrees.”

“I beg you, please help me,” Amina pleaded with the stranger.

“I do not serve my own wishes. I am governed by a greater will than my own,” the figure declared.

“Who are you? I beg you, please help me!”

“I am Kajiwe, the son of the sea,” the stranger replied, his attention fixed on the task at hand.

After speaking these words, he rekindled the fire and under its glow reached into his bag. In silence he palpated Amina’s abdomen.

“The baby is facing the wrong way. You will not live to see daylight if we can’t change that,” Kajiwe declared as he tried to maneuver the fetus into proper position by pushing on Amina’s abdomen.

She screamed in pain and begged for a reprieve. After a short break she felt his strong hands on her abdomen again, this time more determined to turn her unborn child toward the birth canal. After several failed attempts she lapsed briefly into unconsciousness before hearing her baby's cries. After quickly severing the umbilical cord, Kajiwe cleansed the newborn with medicinal herbs before wrapping the boy in his coat. He then hurriedly made his way out of the cave cradling the infant in his arms.

"My baby!" pleaded Amina. "Give me back my baby! Please don't take him away!"

A disturbing silence filled the cave as Amina fell back on her makeshift bed. The difficult birth had caused her to lose a lot of blood, leaving her weak and dizzy. Although she wanted to jump to her feet and pursue the stranger, she lay utterly exhausted on the hard floor. Bitter tears streamed down her face. Consciousness deserted her again before she could muster the strength to rally.

Kajiwe meanwhile made his way toward his dugout canoe. The unusual quandary before him demanded urgent attention. The events of that morning had violated important conventions. As the reigning *Tabibu*, he had a duty to maintain a peaceful coexistence between his people and the *Wahenga*, the ancestral spirits who guarded the Mijikenda homeland. By saving the woman from imminent death, he had acted on impulse; now he needed to discern the divine will before the harm was irreversible. Should the child and its mother live, or had they committed a capital offence against the gods? He needed to find out swiftly. Firmly grasping his staff, he hurried away. His strong hands trembled under the magnitude of the momentous task before him.

When he reached his place of divination, he placed the sleeping baby next to the warm fire and began to invoke the ancestral spirits. He followed the familiar steps of a ritual dance, humming and chanting in his quest to enter that world where spirit and matter coalesced. When it finally happened, the moment of vision came to him as it had countless times before. His body dissolving into a sea of light and fire, he saw in his trance a graceful woman and her infant son on a turbulent sea drifting in a canoe without a paddle. A flock of seabirds dropped fish on the woman's lap, which she fed to her son during their arduous voyage. Mighty waves propelled the canoe forward.

"It is enough for me. The mind of *Wahenga* is clear," declared Kajiwe.

He dashed into his hut and retrieved a large machete. When the baby awoke from his nap crying vigorously, Kajiwe tried in vain to console him by singing ancient lullabies he faintly recalled from his childhood. With the screaming infant in one hand and the menacing machete in the other, he hurried to his canoe and headed out to sea. He placed the baby on the canoe's floor and secured it safely between his legs as he paddled toward the cave where the weary mother lay helplessly. As he approached the baobab tree, his mind was tormented by misgivings. The situation at hand required him to be decisive and detached, but he feared that he could not quell a revolt in his heart. He had no doubt that the matter would turn more precarious if he failed to obey the ancestral spirits. This was his duty, though an ominous and dreadful one.

"Here, take him. He is hungry," Kajiwe said as he handed the baby to its mother.

"Thank you for saving our lives," Amina mumbled as she awoke from a restless sleep.

“Your decision to trespass into the sacred *Kaya* forest was a grievous affront to the *Wahenga*,” Kajiwe declared. “While mistakes can be pardoned, there is no remedy for insolence toward deities.”

“I had no choice. I beg the *Wahenga* for lenience,” Amina pleaded as Kajiwe picked her up, her newborn still attached to her breast, and strode toward his ancient canoe.

CHAPTER 2

As Kajiwe steered his canoe away from the shore, Amina and her newborn son sat silently behind him, staring at the calm sea and uncertain of her fate. She searched her infant’s eyes for hope, but his was a world far removed from her anxieties. He smiled and napped peacefully, unmoved by the storms brewing in his mother’s mind.

“The *Kaya* is not a home for ordinary mortals,” Kajiwe announced solemnly.

“Where does one go when she is rejected by man and deity?” Amina inquired thoughtfully.

“She must learn to see and follow the footprints on the sea,” Kajiwe said with conviction.

As she stared into the deep water, Amina considered bringing her troubles to a permanent end. What was worse, being stoned to death or sinking to the bottom of a tranquil ocean? She pressed her son gently against her breast as she pleaded with fate for deliverance. The little boy emerged from his fleeting dreams with a chuckle and broad smile. In her son’s eyes Amina detected a promise of redemption. For his sake she resolved to cling to life, if only to look death in the eye and demand safe passage for the defenseless child.

After an anxiety-ridden journey they rounded a bend by the shore and spotted a fisherman alone in his boat. From a distance his hazy face did not stir Amina’s emotions, but the man’s familiar features soon fell into place as they approached him. Amina trembled with trepidation on the brink of an uncertain reunion.

“Aah, *Mzee* Ibrahim, how pleasant to see you this morning,” Kajiwe greeted the fisherman.

“Kajiwe, to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?” responded the fisherman wistfully.

“I knew you were starved for good fish.”

“You are a great healer and now a fisherman too?” *Mzee* Ibrahim said teasingly.

“Your daughter and her son have finally returned. The boy is fresh out of the womb,” Kajiwe announced cheerfully.

Mzee Ibrahim could not restrain his joy at the sight of his only child. He jumped into the water and made his way toward Kajiwe’s canoe. He wept as he embraced his daughter.

“Is it true? May I begin to believe my eyes? Amina, you have returned alive!” The elated man could hardly contain himself. “Where did you find them?”

“She will tell you all about it. I am only a messenger,” Kajiwe replied.

“My daughter, my child, I thought I was doomed to spend the remainder of my days in this terrible sorrow! You have come home; you have returned!”

“I am sorry, *baba*. I’ve brought shame to your name.” She too wept.

“Hush, my child. Do not utter such foolishness! You have given me a second chance to live,” he replied. “If only your mother had lived to see this little boy! If only she could have held on longer!”

“What do you mean?” Amina asked. “What happened to *mama*?”

“Her heart broke. She lost hope, and life cannot exist without hope.”

“It is all my doing,” Amina said mournfully. “I killed my mother; I dishonored my dear parents.”

“*Mzee Ibrahim*,” interjected Kajiwe. “Teach your daughter to be calm and deliberate in the face of life’s storms.”

“He is right,” said *Mzee Ibrahim* to his daughter.

“The *Wahenga* will return to stake their claim,” Kajiwe declared as he departed. “None of us can escape their retributions.”

Mzee Ibrahim helped Amina and her son onto his boat. After thanking Kajiwe profusely, he started on his way home.

“My child,” the father asked, “why did you leave us? I feared that you had eloped with a murderous villain and that I’d never see you again.”

“I had dishonored my family. I did not want to bring shame upon you,” Amina explained.

“Where have you been living all this time?” he inquired.

“I found a place in the forest. It was safe and comfortable,” she lied, hoping to allay her father’s distress.

“I cannot bear the thought! My only child living in the forest like a wild animal! Mistakes are made every day. I make them; everyone makes them. The way forward is not to throw yourself into the jaws of death when you err in life,” he explained. “There is no shame in the birth of a child. He comes as a gift from the Almighty.”

“I am nervous at the thought of returning to the village,” Amina fretted. “You’ll not be able to stop villagers when they charge at us.”

“No one will harm you,” the aging man declared. “This is the way of the *Mijikenda*. Someday you’ll understand.”

“*Baba*, I am sorry I’ve brought you so much heartache,” she said tearfully.

“My child, you have brought me immense honor. How much you do not know!” *Mzee Ibrahim* stated. “You’ve rendered a great service to the *Wahenga*, and they are obliged to protect their offspring.”

To Amina’s great amazement the villagers welcomed her little boy. As village gossip would have it, the birth of her son had followed an established tradition. She had assumed that she knew the full story—after all, she had consummated the act that led to his birth—but she quickly learned that her role in the saga was transient and peripheral at best.

“His name shall be Yusuf,” *Mzee Ibrahim* declared as he anointed his grandson’s head with coconut water, “and may he abound in piety and power as he grows.”

“My sweet Amina,” an elderly woman said at the end of a cordial visit, “feed him well and nurture him, but detach your heart from Yusuf. His destiny lies in the reclusive shrines with his forefathers where he’ll become a shepherd of the sun. They never return from that pilgrimage.”

The elderly woman's words left an indelible impression on Amina's mind, creating a backdrop of nervous anticipation against which Yusuf would be raised. Henceforth Amina felt compelled to watch over her son with the vigilance of a hawk. She rarely let him out of her sight, and she seldom entrusted her son to anyone other than her father.

When *Mzee* Ibrahim grazed his cattle on the plains, he took his grandson with him as soon as the boy was old enough to endure the long treks. The boy was not much help when it came to herding cattle, but he kept the old man amused with his endless play and antics. In the middle of the day when the sun was hottest, they routinely took shelter under the shade of large trees to chat and share a meal. The boy cherished his grandfather's stories, and each new one left him craving for the next. The boy's insatiable appetite for adventure endeared him to his similarly inclined grandfather.

"*Babu*, tell me a story," Yusuf pleaded one day while they sat in the shade watching their cattle graze.

"But it does no good telling a story to someone who is not attentive," the elderly man teased. "You don't seem to remember anything I tell you for very long."

"I've never forgotten a single story you've told me," the boy replied.

"Well then, I'll tell you a story that you must never forget," *Mzee* Ibrahim declared much to the boy's delight.

"I promise I'll remember everything!" Yusuf replied eagerly.

"Once upon a time," the old man said in a solemn voice, "there lived a boy in a village much like ours. One day, just before sundown, a stranger was passing by on the path that led from the village to the forest. The stranger smiled at the boy and straightaway began to show him a set of beautiful feathers attached to the back of his head."

"Feathers on the back of a man's head? Did he eat too much chicken?" the boy inquired, unable to restrain his curiosity.

"Pay attention," the old man admonished. "The boy was enchanted by the colorful feathers. The man promised him that if he accompanied him on his journey, he could pluck a feather every few steps along the way. The boy was beside himself with excitement. Without giving it much thought, he walked behind the stranger who, true to his word, allowed the boy to pluck a feather every few steps. Before the boy realized it, they were deep in the forest and dusk was falling quickly." Here *Mzee* Ibrahim paused to say, "Wait a minute. Go head off that cow before it wanders into someone's garden!"

"No, not now, *babu*!" Yusuf protested. "You see, it is not going to the garden. It's turning around."

"If you don't get up and do it, I'll have to do it myself, and it will take a while before I can make it back here."

"No, let me do it. I'll be right back!" Yusuf replied as he dashed off toward the straying cow.

"You are quicker than lightning!" *Mzee* Ibrahim said in praise of Yusuf when he returned. "Now where were we?"

"The boy found himself in the forest, and it was getting dark," Yusuf reminded his grandfather impatiently.

“Yes indeed. As darkness fell, the boy found himself in the depths of a haunted forest with a total stranger,” *Mzee* Ibrahim continued. “Just then he pulled the last feather from the back of the stranger’s head. To his great astonishment he discovered what lay concealed beneath the feathers.”

“What was it, *babu*?” Yusuf inquired.

“Much to his dismay he discovered that beneath the feathers was hidden a second mouth. The stranger was an ogre! Now it was too late for him to escape or be rescued. The ogre turned on the boy and dragged him to his dungeon where water was boiling in a pot. Because he was deep in the forest, no one heard his terrified screams for help. In the end he paid a steep price for his mistake.”

“He must have been very scared,” Yusuf mumbled.

“The moral of the story is this: do not follow strangers, and always let your mother or me know where you are going.”

Judging by the powerful emotions his stories stirred in the boy’s heart, *Mzee* Ibrahim felt gratified in his efforts to protect Yusuf from the hazards of an uncertain world. Forging a bond through shared activity, the elderly man and his inquisitive grandson were nearly inseparable. Together they roamed the nearby plains side by side, deepening their fund of trust and insight along the way.

CHAPTER 3

Although his real name was Hakeem Ibrahim, most people knew Yusuf’s grandfather by the nickname he had earned from his days as a freedom fighter. His dedication to the birth of a nation had made him *Mzee* Mzalede—“the patriotic elder.” Despite a physical handicap, the old man had proven invaluable in the war that drove British colonists out of East Africa.

When the elderly man was yet in his prime, the British colonial government in Kenya had drafted him into the King’s African Rifles. After a crash course in modern warfare, his platoon was shipped to Burma and other war theaters in Asia to fight “for the Crown” during World War II. During his three years of active combat, *Mzee* Ibrahim incurred a serious injury to his right hand that required an above-the-elbow amputation. What was most disconcerting about this tragic injury was the fact that it came not from enemy fire but rather from the commander of his platoon under suspicious circumstances. The British Army had promised to compensate him for this life-altering injury upon his honorable discharge, but not long after the war he found himself summarily dismissed from service along with all other Africans. The promises that had been made to him and fellow African veterans were quickly forgotten as soon as the war came to an end.

Unlike their white counterparts in the colony, African veterans returned from the war to a pathetic life of servitude at the hands of British settlers. In spite of their bravery and zeal as soldiers, they learned that, in its resolve to preserve political and economic domination, the British colonial government was prepared to use oppressive force against anyone who challenged its legitimacy. Shortly after their discharge the native veterans organized a military campaign to overthrow the colonial government and its network of exploitation and humiliation. Thus was born the Mau Mau Resistance, which the disillusioned *Mzee* Mzalede joined.

But if these veterans imagined that their troubles would end with the collapse of British colonialism, post-colonial reality brought a rude awakening. Over the years Hakeem Ibrahim had nursed the wounds of his disappointment silently. In the face of his failing health, however, it dawned on him that he had little, if anything, of real value to lose by protesting.

“My dear Yusuf, I am deeply proud of you,” *Mzee* Ibrahim announced to his twelve-year-old grandson one rainy evening as they sat by the fire in his hut. “I have heard that you are a great champion at school. It is a mark of honor to excel in all things worth the effort.”

Yusuf knew his grandfather well enough to understand that he did not offer compliments lightly or without purpose. Noticing a change in the old man’s demeanor, he wondered to what the conversation might lead.

“*Babu*, I do my best to make you and *mama* proud,” Yusuf replied. “*Babu*, did you go to school?”

“I learned to read and write when I was a soldier. I read everything my eyes fell upon. It was as though my brain had discovered a secret world in which to wander and revel. I loved poetry, plays and of course the Koran. When I was not holding a gun or fighting the enemy, I was reading a book.”

“And you could also write?” Yusuf inquired.

“While one can read as long as he can see, it is impossible to write without your dominant hand,” the old man responded with a smile. “My army service cost me my right hand. My father used to say that a child who plays with fire is lucky if all he burns are his fingers. I suppose I was lucky.”

“So did you lose in battle?” young Yusuf inquired innocently.

“Twice I was on the winning side, yet that fact only multiplies my regrets. It is a painful blow when you realize that you have unwittingly fed the beast that preys on you. But it is also the case that we must not squander present opportunities by crying over spilled milk,” he declared with firmness.

“*Babu*, if you ever go back to battle, I will fight on your side,” Yusuf replied in admiration of his grandfather.

“I’d be in brave company with you at my side,” *Mzee* Ibrahim stated. “Your mother tells me that you read and write very well. If that is true, I shall waste no time before enlisting you as my special warrior.”

This conversation opened the door to the elderly man’s most guarded thoughts. For several weeks thereafter Yusuf returned to his grandfather’s hut to act as his scribe. *Mzee* Ibrahim was determined to grapple with the demons of his past. His mission in compiling his dossier was twofold. First, as a veteran freedom fighter he wanted to place his testimonial in the archive of national memory to remind the young nation that its liberty was not an unassailable fact but instead a fragile treasure to be defended from corrupt hands. Second, as an avid observer of post-colonial politics he felt obliged to indict a government that seemed determined to renege on the premise upon which the Republic was founded.

Many Friday nights found Yusuf laboring faithfully under the dim light of a kerosene lamp in his grandfather’s hut. The weathered warrior rewarded his young lieutenant’s diligence with warm cups of tea and roasted sweet potato during the rigorous exercise. In an attempt to keep sleep at bay, *Mzee* Ibrahim taught his grandson to dip his

feet in cold water while they worked late into the night. It did not escape Yusuf's mind that the letter he was writing was addressed to the man whose picture hung in every civic building, a fact that made his involvement ever more thrilling. The dossier read in part as follows:

January 9, 1972

To Mzee Jomo Kenyatta,

Nearly a decade has passed since our beloved Republic broke free from the insufferable chains of European colonialism. Most of us who fought to bring about that joyful change are now living in the twilight of our lives. Given this harsh reality, patience is overthrown from the throne of virtues. I look around me and ask: is this the fruit of the freedom so many dreamt of and died for? In the bloodiest battle for independence, the justice of the cause was every freedom fighter's shield, but today poverty and despair besiege us everywhere. From the political freedom we achieved, only the merciful hand of death can deliver its victims to true liberty. When his life ends, each freedom fighter dies unthanked and unmourned.

Your government has chosen to undermine the importance of the freedom fighter. Fortunately we will never forget what we had to fight against or the purpose of that struggle. We will never forget our comrades who exhaled their last breath in bone-chilling agony; we will never abandon the memory of those we left behind in desolate graves. And we will remain dedicated freedom fighters long after the last battle with you and your cronies!

The Republic is yet in its infancy, but already it is mourning one of its valiant sons. To which gods have we sacrificed Tom Mboya? Was his death a warning to those who dared to entertain a dream different from the official version of history? Has power deprived you of every claim to conscience? That boy was young enough to be your own son, but an "unexplained" bullet has silenced him forever. Why this injustice? I have heard that his mistake was failure to conform. If true, that report makes him dearer to my heart. I strongly believe that political conformity is a function of moral deformity.

An African dictator of an "independent Republic" who exploits his fellow Africans is no more tolerable than his European predecessor. This nation has become one man's fiefdom and its treasury his personal bank account. And I am told that one can only partake of the bounties of this land after bowing before your bloated legion of opportunists. If this is the case, let me perish in hunger! I will go to my grave with my dignity intact before I defer to a dictatorial villain!

I will conclude my letter by reminding you of the fleeting nature of illegitimate power, which is like the coolness of shade. The shade exists only where the tree is willing to endure the scorching sun. When the tree sheds its leaves, the shade vanishes.

I also would remind you that those whom you expect to survive on the crumbs that fall under your table built the table upon which you dine. Take comfort in knowing that old age and sickness have deprived me of the little strength I had when I left the British gulag. I hope that it is not too late for you to change your ways.

*Yours untamed,
Mzee Mzaledo*

Several months passed after *Mzee* Ibrahim mailed his scathing letter to the Provincial Commissioner in Mombasa. As he did not have the address to the President's office, he hoped the Commissioner would do the honorable thing by delivering the letter to his boss. The excitement generated by his grandfather's bold declaration was beginning to wane in Yusuf's mind when there came a moment of reckoning that he would not soon forget.

Yusuf and his grandfather were chatting when a dark green Land Rover arrived at the old man's homestead. Two policemen jumped out of the vehicle. One of them kicked the hut's door off its hinges, and moments later both agents reappeared with their captive. They beat *Mzee* Ibrahim severely in front of the terrified villagers before throwing him into the back of the Land Rover. When the old man's dog inflicted a deep gash on one of the assaulter's right hand, his companion pulled out a pistol and shot the dog in the head. An eerie silence ensued. Then, as abruptly as they had arrived, the thugs jumped back into their Land Rover and sped off, leaving terrified villagers covered in dust.

After *Mzee* Ibrahim failed to return home for two consecutive weeks, the villagers feared the worst. None could muster enough courage to walk to the police station in a nearby town to inquire about his whereabouts. At the end of that time *Mzee* Ibrahim returned home alone late at night. Anyone who saw him might have been forgiven for assuming that the old man had staggered back to life from the grip of death. He kept to himself and rarely uttered a word. It was as if he had taken a vow of silence that he was determined to observe to the bitter end.

The old man's health eventually took a turn for the worse. He walked with a cane and shook with every step. On several occasions he collapsed and had to be carried to his hut. His neighbors predicted that death would soon overtake the elderly man. His failing health, however, did not deter the two policemen who returned to interrogate him every couple of weeks to ensure that he was not brewing any more sedition against the government. As one of them explained to agitated villagers, threats to national security had to be dealt with swiftly and decisively.

After keeping death at bay for several months, *Mzee* Ibrahim was recovering from his severe illness when he approached Yusuf with an unusual request. The boy had come to his grandfather's hut on a routine visit when the elderly man requested his company to a nearby beach. It was a cold day for swimming, a factor that made Yusuf even more suspicious about his grandfather's intentions.

"My brave Yusuf," the frail man said with uncharacteristic cheerfulness as they walked along the beach. "Your hands have served me extremely well. You have given me a victory that I never thought I could obtain on this side of the graveyard. And now, dear Yusuf, even before I pay off one debt I must add another to it. May I borrow your hands one more time?"

“I am not sure. I would hate to see a repetition of what happened last time,” Yusuf replied.

“My brave soldier, are you afraid to see a little fracas? Compared to the battles I’ve seen, that was only a dress rehearsal,” the aged man said with a chuckle.

“*Babu*, why were they so angry at you?”

“Truth is too bitter for some to swallow, but the threat of violence or suffering should never force us to abandon a just cause,” the feeble man said with renewed vigor.

“Well, I didn’t like it, and I refuse to participate in any way,” Yusuf answered firmly.

After further persuasion Yusuf agreed to act as a scribe for his grandfather one more time. When the two finally came together in the old man’s hut for the task, Yusuf held the pen uneasily and wrote slowly and reluctantly. Aware of his mother’s disapproval of his grandfather’s dangerous indulgence, he was hopelessly torn between his desire to please a beloved companion and concern for his well-being. And although the old man’s words were captivating and at times poetic, they left a harsh ring in his youthful mind. He forced the words onto the paper almost against his will, and when they took shape they stared back at him like skeletons in a mass grave.

September 11, 1972

To His Excellency Mzee Kenyatta,

I am writing again to inform you that the boys you sent found their way to my hut. Unfortunately they arrived a lifetime too late if you were sending them to teach this old dog some new tricks (though you may be delighted to learn that they killed an innocent dog, who was a far better companion to me than you can ever be to the nation). I remain unbowed after two weeks as your guest at Shimo la Tewa Maximum Security Prison. In the middle of the night when your boys returned to torment me, they would joke that they were only smearing my body with Jomo’s oil. I guess that is the sort of creativity you have inspired in our armed forces. What a unique breed of patriots! For the sake of “state security” they will whip and torture a dying man, one who cannot even fight back because he lost his hand fighting for their freedom. In spite of my incurable bitterness, I was forced to proclaim some words with which you may be more familiar than I am: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

As I approach the end of my earthly sojourn, I am pressed to give my last words to you. Years ago, when it was announced that you would be our new leader, I had my misgivings. I had learned from my father to be wary of two-faced men. It is a truth known to you and me that you landed in your present office only through dumb luck. You are neither a freedom fighter nor a statesman. In England, we’ve learned, you did not waste a minute before jumping into bed with the enemy to gratify your ruthless ambition. It is also obvious that you are and ever were an enemy to the Mau Mau.

I was therefore not surprised when I discovered that your first act after ascending to the presidency was to meet with British settlers to reassure them that your government would protect their illegitimate

wealth and privileges. I am sure they patted each other's backs for days after your little tryst—and why not? The new king had infinite benevolence for his mortal enemy at the expense of his immortal kindred! That sort of thing only underscores your unsuitability for the office you hold.

The day will come when you will be seen for what you are. In my book you will remain a traitor, an opportunist, and a ruthless dictator. As a child of the savannah I've learned many priceless lessons from generations of revered forebears. Among these lessons one is especially timely: it is better to fall prey to a lion than to a hyena. A lion is a conscientious killer: he goes for the throat, bringing about a quick death. But the hyena is a messy, heartless killer whose focus is fixed on her ravenous appetite only. Her prey is eaten alive until death is mercifully ushered in on the stream of lost blood. This nation is governed by a vicious gang of marauding hyenas!

*Yours unbowed,
Mzee Mzaledo*

PS: Next time you send your boys over, tell them not to break my door. As you might know, timber has become very expensive nowadays, and while some men can live without a heart and still appear like men, a hut cannot remain a hut without its door.

After writing the letter on behalf of his grandfather, Yusuf waited nervously for the return of the green Land Rover. He dreaded the thought of the government thugs abusing his frail grandfather again. He was certain that his aged grandfather could not survive another round of such cruelty, but the young boy felt powerless to prevent such an event from occurring. Yusuf therefore did the only thing he could do: he placed himself in a position to gather up what remained of his grandfather when the fateful moment arrived. During the ensuing weeks he faithfully called on his grandfather daily after school before going home for supper.

It was during one of these visits that he stumbled into a gruesome scene. After several of his calls at the doorway to his grandfather's hut went unanswered, he decided to force his way inside. The door offered little resistance. After taking two steps into the hut, Yusuf saw the old man's lifeless body dangling from a rope above the fireplace. The boy froze in his tracks. The frightening sight made him suddenly weak and confused. Unable to escape or scream for help, he staggered toward the wall and huddled against a large water pot.

Time came to a halt as Yusuf sat staring at the corpse. There was an unusual sense of restfulness and peace in the hut. As he looked at the body, it seemed as though it was gliding effortlessly in the breeze, like an eagle soaring casually in a clear blue sky. As composure gradually returned to him, mournful words escaped his quivering lips.

"Why, *babu*? Why? How could you leave us this way? Didn't you think of me, *babu*?" he pleaded, weeping bitterly when no answers came.

In spite of the chaos unleashed in Yusuf's mind, order was apparent in the scene itself. The contents of the humble hut were organized neatly around the fireplace. It was obvious that the old man had painstakingly swept the floor before ascending to his death.

The only connection between the dangling corpse and the hut was a single speck of blood on the handle of a broom leaning against the water pot. In his final and irrevocable act the old man had managed to extricate himself flawlessly from his former existence.

A bright sheet of paper lay out of place on top of a three-legged stool beside the fireplace. It was folded in half with the writing on the exposed surface. From where he sat, Yusuf could see letters jotted in red ink on the paper. From the moment he spotted the paper, he was torn between gratifying his curiosity and avoiding the curse of forbidden knowledge. After minutes of tormenting hesitation, he warily made his way across the hut, being careful to avoid coming into contact with the corpse. When he finally opened the note, he saw an unfamiliar poem. Although he was certain that he had not written it, the handwriting on the paper was nearly indistinguishable from his own. Immediately his mind was assailed by a stranger's rebellious poem. Who was this William Ernest Henley whose dreadful words had beckoned an indomitable warrior to an inglorious death? In subdued whisper, Yusuf read the poem slowly and ponderously:

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

Yusuf folded the note neatly and placed it in his schoolbag before hurrying home to break the devastating news to his mother. Along the way he wrestled with how to utter the unspeakable to her. By the time he arrived home, he had reached the conclusion that no words were capable of shielding his mother from the inevitable devastation.

When their eyes met, Yusuf's mother saw the terror in her son's haunted gaze. Yusuf's words merely explained the grief already conveyed by his eyes. Together mother and son wept inconsolably.

A day after his discovery Yusuf found himself in a procession of mourners en route to his grandfather's funeral. As he followed the cortège he wept bitterly, partly because he knew that he was not entirely blameless in the tragedy. As if this were not enough, his grandfather's body slipped from the mat as it was being lowered into the

grave, crashing to the ground with a loud thud. The shocking sight overwhelmed Yusuf, causing him to faint at the grave's edge. A sheikh carried the boy to the shade and poured cold water on his forehead until he regained consciousness.

"Where am I?" Yusuf mumbled in confusion as he recovered.

"You fainted. You are alright now," an older woman reassured him.

"That was a strange feeling. It was as though someone snatched the light out of my eyes," Yusuf explained as he rose to his feet.

CHAPTER 4

"My son, when what is lost cannot be recovered, we must find a way to carry on. There must be life after death," Amina counseled her son after weeks of intractable mourning.

"I miss him terribly. Even in my sleep I see him dangling from a rope, and it scares me. I am afraid to fall asleep at night."

"I know that it is not easy. I wish I could erase these dreadful things from your memory," Amina whispered to her sobbing son as she pressed him tightly against her chest. "But for your mother's sake you must try to cleanse your mind of that image. Yusuf, I now have only you, and you of course have me. I too have suffered a terrible loss. I've lost both of my parents."

"I am not as strong as you, *mama*. My heart is broken," Yusuf replied, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Heartaches and disappointments are inevitable for anyone who lives long enough. Our role in life is to wrestle boldly with what we cannot escape," she said resolutely. "Do not imagine that those who refuse to weep have no sorrows or fears. They only refuse to allow them to cloud their vision forever. Son, my heart is also broken."

For the first time in his life Yusuf saw the little girl in his mother. She was lonely and vulnerable. The little girl longed for her parents' touch as keenly as he craved his grandfather's company. He felt pity for her. In an ironic turn of the tables, he wanted to reach out to her in consolation. He raised his palms to her cheeks and tenderly wiped away her tears.

"Thank you," she whispered with a smile.

"We will be alright," he managed to say.

"I know. I have a strong warrior at my side," she said teasingly.

The grievous death of *Mzee* Ibrahim strengthened the bond between Yusuf and his mother. His grandfather's departure also stirred in Yusuf an unquenchable thirst to learn about his ancestral roots. In the evening, while they sat around the fireplace waiting for supper, Yusuf ambushed his mother relentlessly with myriad questions. For her part Amina was glad to provide answers because doing so allowed her to turn back the wheels of time to seasons when life was full of blooms. By entering into the world of the departed through the stories he heard, Yusuf could bridge the frightening gulf between the living and the dead.

One windy night months after *Mzee* Ibrahim's death, Yusuf had a strange dream, which remained vivid in his memory for a long time afterwards.

“Yusuf, why haven’t you returned to visit me?” *Mzee Ibrahim* inquired in the dream.

“*Babu*, I wanted to come back, but I did not know where to find you. You deserted us!” Yusuf replied accusingly.

“I would never abandon my children. I only moved my hut closer to the river where I can be closer to fresh water and big fish,” the old man answered.

“Where can I find you, *babu*?” Yusuf asked.

“You will not need to look for me. I’ll always find you,” the elderly man said with a warm smile as he placed several colorful feathers on his grandson’s head.

“They are beautiful!” Yusuf exclaimed joyfully.

“Now let’s venture forth,” *Mzee Ibrahim* said.

As soon as his grandfather uttered these words, Yusuf found himself levitating from the ground. At first he was afraid, but the higher they soared the more confident he became. They glided effortlessly above the forest canopy. Throughout the adventure his grandfather remained at his side as a guide. He showed Yusuf many breathtaking attractions, places and things he had only heard of and desired to see. The grandson was quick to note that the old man’s sense of humor had only intensified during his absence.

“*Babu*, tell me a story,” Yusuf begged his grandfather before they parted.

“I was hoping you’d ask,” *Mzee Ibrahim* responded, “because I forgot to tell you an important story before I left.”

“You have my undivided attention!” Yusuf replied eagerly.

“Once upon a time when animals could talk,” *Mzee Ibrahim* began, “there lived a greedy hyena. So greedy was he that it irked him to answer the calls of nature. Each time he moved his bowels he complained that he was losing the delicious meals he had eaten earlier. After some faulty calculations he devised a strategy to curb the waste. He asked his friend, the raven, to stitch shut his anus and reinforce the stitches with glue. . . . My boy, stop laughing and pay attention,”

“But that is so foolish. Please give me a moment to catch my breath,” Yusuf pleaded amid hearty laughter. “Okay, I am ready now.”

“Well, you can imagine what happened next,” *Mzee Ibrahim* continued, “for as soon as his anus was sealed shut the hyena returned to his appetite with reckless abandon. For many hours he ate and ate, and then ate some more. He reveled at the thought of endless satiety and rejoiced at the sight of his protruding belly. His joy, though, was short-lived. Soon he came face to face with the full consequences of his gluttony. His swollen stomach ached at first, then throbbed with pain. Waves of excruciating fire swirled in his abdomen. He begged his friends to open his anus, but none could muster enough courage to stand behind him when the pressure in his abdomen was relieved. In the end he died a miserable death, which can be attributed to his refusal to accept waste and decay as necessary in the cycle of life.”

After this dream Yusuf woke up a changed person. He found great comfort in the thought that his beloved grandfather had not forgotten him. More importantly, the cheerful image of his grandfather in the dream replaced the macabre image that had been seared into his memory while he gasped for breath under the old man’s dangling corpse. In his dream *Mzee Ibrahim* appeared at ease and energetic, and much to Yusuf’s amazement he had even recovered his missing right hand.

The dream also brought needed closure at a time when Yusuf's academic performance was hanging in the balance. After his grandfather's death the boy had come to believe that words on paper were the culprit behind *Mzee* Ibrahim's horrid end. His grandfather's remarks in the dream, however, had disabused Yusuf of this notion. Although his grandfather's misery could be attributed, at least in part, to the scathing letters he had mailed to the President, pen and paper had not wrought the tensions that had driven the old man to his revolt. They were merely the tools by which a soul in crisis had vented its deep-seated anguish and frustration. The stirring words from his grandfather's farewell poem rang soothingly from memory: "*Out of the night that covers me, / Black as the Pit from pole to pole. . .*"

His appetite for knowledge in all its forms was both renewed and deepened. In his quest for academic mastery he hoped to fulfill his grandfather's deferred dreams. And since he was too young to offer libations to the dead as his elders did, he hoped that he could honor the old man's spirit by venturing into regions of thought where *Mzee* Ibrahim had loved to roam.

A year later, when the results of the National Primary School Examinations came out, Yusuf found himself designated the top pupil in the Coast Province. This achievement guaranteed him a coveted place in one of the eight Government Secondary Schools in the country. When the letter from the Ministry of Education finally reached him that December, he learned that he had obtained entrance to the school of his choice. Among his possible options he had ranked Shimo la Tewa High School highest, primarily because it was conveniently located close to his home. In addition, the school had an impeccable track record as one of the most academically prestigious in the country.

For several weeks Yusuf walked with a spring in his gait, and he eagerly described his feat to anyone who cared to listen. This was news that everyone needed to hear, he thought, but it gradually was eclipsed by the heartache of his wretched circumstances. For the first time in his young life he envied the materially wealthy. The injustice of poverty stood like a thorny fence to prevent him from attaining his dreams.

He tried to keep himself gainfully employed by going out to sea with commercial fishermen. The little income he earned from peddling fish at the local market was a useful supplement to his mother's meager income, although it did not make a dent in the required tuition and fees at Shimo la Tewa High School.

December passed without a real solution to his financial plight. The rich, to whom his mother had gone begging, paid little more than lip service. Each one found a handy excuse why the timing was terrible, although a few had promised to "give the matter serious consideration." January also came and went without a solution. By the end of the first week of February, Yusuf was already two weeks late for enrollment. Under the weight of despair, his mother's resilience began to crack. Alone at night she wept for her only child whose dream she could not nurture. For months each dawn had found her on her tireless feet in pursuit of some elusive remedy to the crisis. Now at last it dawned on her that in spite of her heroic attempts she had failed miserably.

It was during this melancholic time that Yusuf agreed to take a night journey by canoe to meet an eccentric but benevolent stranger. Throughout the treacherous voyage he sat in front of a fisherman who was risking all by daring a stormy sea at night. Fierce waves slammed against the canoe, and twice along the journey they nearly capsized. When they finally docked, Yusuf was led to the homestead of a strange man who

possessed an unusual sense of humor and generosity. The man had introduced himself only as a *Tabibu*, a mystical healer, and Yusuf learned that nothing more needed to be said about the stranger. He had learned of Yusuf's plight from the fisherman, he said, and if Yusuf was "as intelligent as was trumpeted about," he was willing to offer assistance.

At first Yusuf's mind was flooded with doubts. There was little in the stranger's simple hut to suggest that it was an appropriate place to expect meaningful aid. Furthermore, the man who sat cross-legged before him on a threadbare mat did not bear the glamour he had witnessed in the wealthy occupants of the seafront mansions who had failed to come up with the desired assistance. Had he known beforehand whom he would meet at the end of his treacherous night journey, he would not have risked his life in the stormy sea to meet him.

As though he could discern Yusuf's doubts, the mystic reached into his ancient leather bag and pulled out a thick wad of bank notes. One by one he dropped them on his lap as he carefully counted the money.

"Here you go: four hundred shillings—one hundred for each term and one hundred for books and supplies," the healer said as he handed Yusuf the money.

"*Bwana*, are you sure? You know that I cannot possibly pay you back, at least not any time soon." Yusuf struggled to find his words.

"If you could, you would not have come here. You will pay me back when you can. As you see, I am in no rush to go anywhere." The healer used humor to ease Yusuf's anxiety.

"I have no words to express my gratitude," Yusuf stuttered in disbelief.

"Do not worry, my son. They will teach you new words in that great school and you'll never struggle to express your feelings again. I only request of you to pay me a visit whenever you come home for holidays," the healer said with a smile.

As strangely as it had started, the mysterious encounter ended. After this surreal meeting, Yusuf was filled with mixed emotions. Although he welcomed the prospect of taking his place at the renowned Shimo la Tewa High School, the mystic's unusual generosity to a total stranger thrust his mind into confusion. Simple as he was, why would the healer risk an enormous fortune to help a desperate stranger?

On the journey back he held the money tightly against his chest with one hand while clinging to the canoe's gunwale with the other. Now more than earlier the raging sea threatened to swamp the small craft. Ali, his companion, waged a heroic battle against the towering waves with his worn-out paddle, but at some point in the struggle it was snatched from his hands and swallowed by the sea.

"Hold on tightly, and whatever happens don't let go!" cried the seasoned fisherman.

Within minutes the canoe was thrust against enormous rocks at the foot of a cliff. Ali was tossed overboard before his battered canoe crashed against the shore. He waged a spirited struggle for his life, but he was no match for the fierce waves. An eerie silence descended as the trembling boy stood alone on the shore. Ironically he had outwitted the raging sea by following Ali's advice.

The darkness around him felt hostile. After repeated calls to his friend had gone unanswered, the futility of his efforts registered in his mind. Nervously he began his long hike home. After stashing the money safely in his underwear, he began the treacherous ascent up the rocky cliff. The sound of venomous snakes hissing in the crevices terrified

him more than the tempestuous sea below. He struggled ever upwards until he found himself on a dusty road that led to his village from a nearby quarry. Once on the deserted road he ran, every now and then ducking into bushes at the rare approach of a vehicle. After an arduous journey he arrived home late in the night.

“My son, what happened?” cried Amina at the sight of her son. “Your clothes are torn, and look at those cuts on your hands and legs! Was it a wild animal?”

“We had problems at sea, but I am alright, *mama*,” he tried to reassure her.

“At sea? In this weather? You are lucky to have escaped with your life! Didn’t the fishermen see the storm coming? Who goes fishing in the dark anyway?” Amina’s voice rose with anger and maternal concern.

“I’m fine, *mama*.” Yusuf attempted to calm her, but his lips began to quiver.

“You are fine? Here you are shredded to pieces, and that is all you can think to say? And why are you holding your arm like that? Is it broken?” she inquired solicitously.

“Please, *mama*, I have important news,” he said. The gravity of his voice commandeered her attention. With suspended breath she returned to her seat and invited him to sit by the fire across from her.

“We were not out fishing tonight,” he began. “*Mzee* Ali and I took a journey by canoe this evening to the homestead of a man I had never met before. The stranger said that he had heard about our struggles and wanted to help. He insisted, and I accept. Here is everything he gave me.”

Yusuf did not know how his mother would receive the news. Ever since his childhood she had repeatedly warned him against accepting favors from strangers. With nervous excitement she quickly counted the money. When the last note fell onto her lap, she sat silently in disbelief.

“Yusuf, who is this man? Did he tell you his name?” she asked tremulously.

“He said that he is a medicine man. He lives alone in a remote grove by the sea.” As Yusuf spoke he found it difficult to conceal the crisis that was brooding in his mind.

“*Allahu Akbar!* Thanks to Allah the beneficent! God has heard my anguished cries for help! Praise to Allah!” she exclaimed jubilantly. “Yusuf, this is joyful news! Why aren’t you happy?”

“On our way home we encountered a storm. The canoe was smashed against sharp rocks by the waves. *Mzee* Ali was tossed into the sea. He let out a few screams, and then there was just silence. I waited for a long while by the shore, but he never surfaced.” The boy’s voice trembled as tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Ali! Dear Ali lost in the sea? You didn’t call for help?” Amina was beside herself.

“We were alone at sea in the dark. There was no one to call to,” he explained in a voice heavy with emotions.

“Hush, my son. Do not weep. There is no time to waste. We must get help for Ali,” Amina said, jumping to her feet to alert her neighbors about the tragedy.

A search team of veteran fishermen was quickly assembled. The search went on for the rest of the night, but it was a desperate and futile effort. When dawn broke, the search team hoped that daylight would reveal the terrible secrets of the night. Ali’s worn-out sandals had washed ashore a short distance from the foot of the cliff, but nothing else had surfaced. Under the rising sun gentle waves swept the shore as if they had been

charged with the task of removing all incriminating evidence from the sea. By mid-morning the sorrowful fishermen blessed the sea and called off the search. The sea, they agreed, had the right to take what it had nurtured.

CHAPTER 5

From the moment he accepted Kajiwe's largesse, Yusuf felt deeply indebted to his enigmatic benefactor. In the ensuing weeks he came to learn that the reclusive man was a renowned mystical healer who acted as the supreme guardian of his craft. The healer's secluded homestead was surrounded by a thick forest. No one ventured into the sacred forest because such an act was considered a gross insult to ancestral spirits. In ancient times the *Kaya* had served the Mijikenda people as the last resort of defense against external threats. It contained sufficient provisions to sustain the nine clans over an extended period of time. With the passage of time, however, the *Kaya* had assumed a strictly religious purpose as a place where only the *Tabibu*, the supreme mystical healer, and those who sought his interventions were permitted. Four gated paths led to the *Kaya*. The eastern pathway connected the *Kaya* to the sea, while the other three led to the surrounding villages.

For days following their initial encounter Yusuf longed for a chance to return to express his gratitude to his benefactor. Although he had his late grandfather's boat at his disposal, Ali's tragic death had made him deeply wary of attempting to make the arduous trip alone. After several days of planning, the opportunity to visit the healer finally came the day before he left home to join his classmates at Shimo la Tewa High School. His mother had employed all her culinary skills in preparing a feast for the *Tabibu*. Unbeknownst to her son, Amina's indebtedness to the healer went beyond his magnanimous act.

"When you give this to the *Tabibu*, tell him it is a simple token of appreciation for a debt that is infinite," Amina instructed her son solemnly. "Tell him that our lives and hopes have been renewed. My adoration is the only treasure I have, and I offer it to him in full."

Yusuf left home at the break of dawn with the goal of arriving at his destination before the sun turned the earth into a furnace. Although Ali had used the seaward approach to the *Kaya*, Yusuf took the forest pathway instead. Alone and fearful, he walked briskly through the dimly lit forest, stopping every now and then to scan his surroundings for lurking predators. The smallest noise sent his heart racing and filled him with a sense of impending doom. After what seemed like forever he came to a series of gates that led to the mystic's homestead. Entering its precincts, he saw Kajiwe meditating while sitting on a traditional mat under the shade of a large fig tree outside his hut.

"My good friend, I am glad you have returned," Kajiwe said, elated at the sight of Yusuf.

"I am sorry that it took me so long. I was held back by difficult circumstances," Yusuf explained.

"I am glad to see you. You don't need to apologize. You are always welcome here," Kajiwe replied reassuringly.

“My mother prepared some dishes for you,” Yusuf said, handing Kajiwe a knapsack.

“Oh, what have we here? The aroma of stew. Goat meat and *chapati*! Your mother must know the way to a man’s heart. And deliciously cooked too! Please have a seat. We must share this meal. I am sure you are hungry after your long journey here,” Kajiwe said as he set the meal on the mat.

“She hoped you’d find it appetizing,” Yusuf added. “She wanted you to know that she holds you in honorable adoration.”

For reasons unknown to Yusuf, even had he sensed the *Tabibu*’s reaction, those words sent a jolt of electricity through Kajiwe’s heart. His habitual loneliness intensified his longing for a woman’s soft touch and the scent of skin warmed by love and passion.

“My hunger is getting the best of me,” Kajiwe stated. “Do you mind fetching some bowls from my hut?”

“I’d be happy to!” Yusuf answered, jumping to his feet.

“You will find them beside the fireplace,” Kajiwe instructed.

After a minute the boy returned. “Here they are,” Yusuf said, handing his host a large wooden bowl. “I will take the smaller one.”

“Please sit down. Where is Ali today?” inquired Kajiwe.

“I take that it you haven’t heard the tragic news,” Yusuf replied.

“I haven’t heard anything. What happened?”

“We encountered deadly storms at sea that night after I left your home,” Yusuf explained sorrowfully. “The canoe was destroyed, and I found myself alone in the dark. I called his name, but he did not answer. The fishermen from my village returned to search for him, but they returned only with his sandals.”

“You mean he is missing?” asked Kajiwe.

“Yes, and we are afraid that he is dead.”

“What a terrible thing! Ali was like my own child. He had a benevolent and caring heart. May his spirit find serenity wherever it wanders,” Kajiwe said reverently, as he poured a libation on the ground.

“I can’t stop wondering what happened to him,” Yusuf confessed.

“Do not spend too much time wondering. You are at an age when the mind insists on finding meaning in everything, but you will learn that there are times when meaning is unattainable. Instead hard facts stare you in the eye—cold, incomprehensible, and daunting. I tell myself that it is perhaps a good thing not to know everything. The burden of meaning may be too much for my fragile mind,” Kajiwe declared, his voice lowered to a whisper.

Although the healer was much younger than *Mzee* Ibrahim, he exuded the same air of invincibility and fearlessness. It was something Yusuf could not fully fathom. Both men did not recoil at the inevitability of death or the threat of annihilation.

After their shared meal Kajiwe asked Yusuf to keep him company for a few more hours. The mystical healer used the occasion to introduce his young friend to the history of his ancient craft.

“The *Tabibu* lineage of healers predates memory,” Kajiwe began. “My father brought me into this craft. He in turn was introduced to it by his father, and so forth back to time immemorial.”

“How old were you when you became a healer?” Yusuf asked.

“Well, I was perhaps slightly younger than you. I was probably nine or ten years old when I embarked on this journey. It took my father many years to make a healer out of me. Of course, back then all I wanted to do was to play on the beach with my friends,” he confessed with a chuckle.

“It must have been difficult—I mean, the first time you had to heal someone,” Yusuf observed.

“Everything seems daunting until you attempt it,” Kajiwe replied. “I remember that first experience vividly. The little child lay on its mother’s lap convulsing incessantly. The woman’s eyes were heavy with grief and begged me to intervene on behalf of her feverish son. At first I hesitated, turning to my father only to meet a fierce gaze. I hesitated no longer. Reaching for a bowl, I poured the cold regimen on the child’s head and then on his body, uttering chants as I rubbed the concoction on his emaciated torso. Gradually the convulsions stopped. From then on I had my awakening as a healer.”

“What happened to the child? Was he cured?” Yusuf inquired eagerly.

“I had the same question for days afterwards. I did something that I haven’t ever done since then: I went about searching for that boy. I found him playing with his friends. Not once after that did he convulse again. He grew up to become a great fisherman,” Kajiwe answered with pride.

“Do you still see him?” Yusuf asked.

“I saw him several days ago before the sea took him away. You know him. It was Ali,” Kajiwe answered.

“Ali?” Yusuf exclaimed in disbelief.

“He was both a child and a parent to me. I gave him life, and he gave me the inspiration to carry on in the darkness of uncertainty. Whatever he asked from me, I did my best to give it to him. He brought you to me, and he was right on the mark.”

“I am very grateful for your generosity. We were almost in despair,” declared Yusuf.

“When the sick are healed, the healer is renewed and filled with new vigor and confidence,” Kajiwe replied.

“Can you make someone like me a healer?” Yusuf inquired with keen interest.

“The healer must first enter into a sanctuary within himself. From there he obtains the power to embark on this transformative journey,” Kajiwe said to his captivated companion.

“How does a person retrieve the power?” Yusuf inquired.

“The power to repair ruined minds and mend broken hearts emanates from a well within the healer. Foremost, the task of the healer’s apprentice is to tend the garden in which the dormant seeds of this power bloom,” replied Kajiwe.

“There is a garden within?” Yusuf asked in some confusion.

“A wondrous garden indeed! The healer’s expansive mind and awakened spirit must become a garden of wisdom. To attain the art of healing, an apprentice must take a pilgrimage to the nursery where knowledge germinates into wisdom. In this sanctuary he learns to see amid blindness and to hear amid deafness. Only then is he ready to dance in healing rituals with the ancestral spirits.” Kajiwe spoke as though in a trance.

“To become a healer requires a person to change then,” Yusuf hazarded.

“A healer’s new heart becomes a tomb in which life’s sorrows are laid to rest. His awakened mind burns fiercely, like the inferno on the summit of a live volcano, and

constantly spews epiphanies,” Kajiwe declared in an authoritative voice. “This is the prize in search of which the apprentice endures dark nights guarded only by shimmering stars, but his quest must continue until he greets the dawn when he is privileged to shepherd the lustrous sun.”

After this peroration Kajiwe guided Yusuf to a narrow path that led to a valley at the forest’s edge. When they came to a grove at the bottom, they were welcomed by a splendid chorus of life. Enchanting the eye in every direction was a verdant paradise. On the western horizon a majestic mountain’s twin peaks were etched against the sky.

“A long time ago, after a heroic and treacherous voyage by sea,” Kajiwe declared, “a wise healer found and tended this grove. He wanted it to thrive as a connection between the future and the past. Since then every plant that grows here, every bird that sings here, recites the sacred poem of life in its purest form.”

“Where did the healer come from?” inquired Yusuf.

“His name and title were simply *Tabibu*. He is the father of the Watabibu lineage of healers,” Kajiwe explained. “The people he found did not know where he came from, and, when he failed to give them an adequate description of his homeland, his neighbors referred to him as ‘son of the sea.’”

“Do you know his actual origins?” asked Yusuf.

“He left a homeland in ruins. For many weeks he faced the cold and dreary sea by day and night alone, trying to escape the wrath of furious deities. Through recklessness a priest there had angered the gods, causing great calamities to come upon the people. Everyone was scattered afar, and the Valley of Sanctuaries—which by the way was the name of the place he came from—devolved into chaos. Upon this very site he tried to recreate the serenity and grandeur of the homeland he had left behind,” explained Kajiwe.

After walking some distance through the grove, they came to a small stream. The trail came to an abrupt end near a large rock on the bank of the stream. In a small pond at the base of the waterfall, a school of colorful fish and tadpoles raced playfully from one end to the other. Kajiwe sat on the rock and pulled off his sandals. Dipping his feet into the cold water, he attempted to catch the fish with his bare hands. Without waiting to be invited, Yusuf joined him.

“I give up!” exclaimed Kajiwe as he returned to the flat rock. “The fish are just too vigilant and swift this morning.”

“I’ve caught three,” Yusuf boasted. “I could have caught more had they not been so slippery.”

“You are young, just like the fish!” Kajiwe said by way of gentle rebuttal.

“But you have had a lot of time to practice. I am sure you come here to catch fish frequently!” declared the proud Yusuf.

“In the noonday heat,” Kajiwe replied pensively, “the healer is beckoned to this rock by the cool mists from the waterfall. But this is more than a swimmer’s pond. The soothing water of this stream descends from the lofty peak of a sacred mountain to revive and cleanse all those it touches. Riding in its gentle waves are guardian spirits who ensure that the river flows along its proper path.”

“Who are the guardians?” Yusuf asked as he sat down next to Kajiwe.

“Every healer is guarded by a community of past healers, who guide him in ritual observances and draw his thoughts to the wishes of the shepherd spirits.”

“And what are shepherd spirits?” Yusuf asked.

“Your curiosity is indeed insatiable! Beware lest it lead you into muddled paths, but you have asked a good question. You see, life is governed by many different spirits. Earth spirits keep trees and vegetation alive, and shepherd spirits govern ancestral spirits, who in turn govern us. There are also animal spirits, some of which may enter into man and overthrow human consciousness, leading to insanity.”

“Are you a spirit or just like the rest of us?” asked a naïve Yusuf.

“Ha ha,” Kajiwe chuckled. “I am a *Tabibu*, a healer. Healers are sons of the sea, which means that humanity is surrounded by our power just as the sea encircles dry land. With this power we destroy ill omens. The *Tabibu*, unlike the new breed of false healers, cures ailments of the spirit, thereby allowing the body and mind to heal themselves. The false healers in hospitals treat only the body, ignoring the functions of the spirit.”

“My friend broke his leg, and when he went to the hospital they mended it. Do you mean that is not good?” Yusuf asked.

“It is good that they mended his leg,” answered Kajiwe. “What you must learn, though, is that before the leg was broken a principle of natural order was broken. If that break is not mended, how often are your friend’s healers willing to fix his broken leg? How many times can a bone break and still remain suitable for mending?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask,” Yusuf replied.

“The process of healing involves the restoration and maintenance of the balance between the various forces of life. The healer must therefore have an intimate understanding of the natural order,” Kajiwe said.

After a brief silence the two carried on their tour of the healer’s grove. They crossed the stream to the thicker side of the grove. In the middle of a dense thicket Yusuf was surprised to find a neatly kept homestead. Nine large huts stood in a circle with their entrances facing the center. The peculiarly decorated huts were round with conical roofs. At the center of the circle was a fireplace made of three rectangular black stones placed at equal distances from each another.

“The story began here,” Kajiwe announced in a solemn voice. “When *Tabibu*, the first healer, arrived here, the Mijikenda people received him with warm hospitality. He was offered the most gorgeous daughter for a wife and became a true son of the household. He was so moved by the hospitality that he built this homestead as a memorial to the Mijikenda spirit. The term ‘Mijikenda’ stands for nine households or clans. From the days of *Tabibu* until now, we have kept the fire in this hearth alive.”

“Does anyone live here?” Yusuf asked in amazement.

“We stand in the company of ancestral spirits. They congregate around the hearth awaiting the return of their offspring. The first hut belongs to the Giriama household, the second to the Digo, the third to the Duruma, the fourth to the Kauma, the fifth to the Rabai, the sixth to the Chonyi, the seventh to the Jibana, the eighth to the Kambe, and the ninth to the Ribe. Those are the nine clans of the Mijikenda, and each has a home here,” Kajiwe declared proudly.

The mystic silently made his way into the first hut. He returned with two three-legged stools and handed one to Yusuf. He set his stool by the hearth. Yusuf sat across the fire from him and watched quietly as the healer kindled it.

“Fetch me a pot and the bag of herbs from the Jibana hut. Then bring some water from the Digo hut,” Kajiwe instructed Yusuf.

“The Digo is the second. Which one is the Jibana’s?” Yusuf asked as he rose to his feet.

“The seventh,” answered Kajiwe.

Yusuf entered the dimly lit hut cautiously. He had heard scary stories of mystic healers who kept strange creatures as pets. The fear of stepping on a snake caused him great terror. Upon his entering the first hut, however, his attention was diverted to a mystery of a different kind. Upon the walls were depicted hieroglyphic figures and characters arranged in perfect lines. He wondered what some ancient artist had encrypted there.

Arranged neatly inside each hut were various jars, some bearing images of familiar animals. A large shiny box lay beside the fireplace in each hut. On its top each box bore the image of a man’s face and torso. The torso was decorated with the same characters as were found on the interior walls of the hut. In the Jibana hut Yusuf was about to reach down to open the box when he was startled by a firm grip on his shoulder.

“Do not disturb his rest,” Kajiwe’s admonished.

In unbroken silence they returned to the central hearth, where Kajiwe employed his skills in making a pot of herbal tea. After pouring the tea into two cups, he returned to storytelling. Within a short time a thick blanket of clouds gathered in the skies above the grove. Almost immediately the valley became cold and dark. The two companions pulled their stools closer to the fire as the healer continued his discourse. Every now and then he broke into long poetic chants that were beautifully woven into the fabric of his story. His chants partly entertained and partly captivated Yusuf’s youthful mind.

“Why do healers chant?” Yusuf inquired at the end of a long incantation.

“Healers recite the ancient chants in the hope that the words will kindle a longing for home among their scattered kin. Here the chant becomes a ritualistic poem guiding the attentive mind toward its deliverance. By chanting the healer attempts to retrace an ancient trail left by his ancestors where he may walk with the gods. And when he returns from his trance, he awakens to unlock the meaning of the symbols dispersed around him by ancestral spirits, thereby preserving the connection between the living and the dead. Chanting is a journey to a sacred essence,” explained Kajiwe.

“The tea is boiling over,” Yusuf observed.

“I must not allow it to spill,” the mystic stated as he poured the special drink into two cups. “It is not ordinary tea that is prepared on this hearth. Those who drink it are bound to carry the fire of the *Tabibu* in their hearts until their dying moment.”

The potent drink began to exert its psychedelic effects upon Yusuf’s senses. The flame of elation that previously burned in his heart became a blaze of euphoria. He felt disconnected from the force of gravity, his body seeming to float freely in the breeze as he lay on his back beside the fire. The beams of light that penetrated the canopy above him reached his eyes as a magnificent kaleidoscope. The trees in the grove bent into unimaginable forms. The tea had totally unhinged his mind.

Kajiwe stood up and helped Yusuf to his feet. He too had succumbed to the tea’s euphoric effects. They sang and danced around the fire until they collapsed in exhaustion beside the hearth. It was late in the afternoon when they awoke. Thin plumes of smoke now rose lazily from the fireplace.

“You said that tomorrow you will be leaving for school,” Kajiwe said pensively.

“It is well. Every good warrior must learn the tactics of his enemy in order to defeat him.

Upon your return the household of *Tabibu* will receive you into its noble fraternity. Be diligent, but remember the wisdom of our ancestors that persuades us not to discard our worn-out mats for the dazzling carpet in a stranger's hands."

CHAPTER 6

January is a hot and dreary month in Mombasa. The exhausting heat and humidity paralyze all forms of life from noon to sunset. Panting dogs seek the refuge of scant shade, while human beings retreat behind closed doors. Only the sea, with its waves breaking incessantly against the shore, remains unaffected by the scorching sun.

It was on such a day that Yusuf found himself in a bus en route to Shimo la Tewa High School. His mother had taken the day off from work to accompany her son on his first day at secondary school. The occasion was even more extraordinary because Shimo la Tewa High was an all-boys boarding school whose regulations discouraged unscheduled visits by family members. For three months Yusuf would be confined within the school compound with no opportunity to see his beloved mother. Here his mind would be nurtured in complete isolation from society at large. The school's enviable academic record came at the cost of its students' personal freedom, a fact that was not lost on the older boys who devised various strategies to recover some of their lost liberties.

"I was worried that you would not make it," stated Mr. Wilkins, the headmaster at Shimo la Tewa High upon meeting Yusuf.

"*Bwana*, we had problems with school fees, but all that is now behind us," Amina explained apologetically.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but we are delighted to have you here, Yusuf. You'll certainly need to work very hard in order to catch up, but with your track record I've no doubt you'll measure up to the challenge," Mr. Wilkins stated.

"Thank you, sir. I am glad to be here," Yusuf answered respectfully.

"Master Kenji, you are right on time. Please meet Master Yusuf Ibrahim and his mother," said Mr. Wilkins, introducing a student who had walked into his office. "This is Brian Kenji, and he will be your dorm prefect."

"Welcome to Shimo la Tewa High School," the older boy offered. "I will take you to the dormitory and give you a brief tour of the school. Please let me help you with your suitcase."

"Thank you, Master Kenji," remarked the headmaster. "Please allow him a minute to say goodbye to his mother. Ms. Ibrahim, rest assured your son is in very good hands. Goodbye for now," Mr. Wilkins added as he shook hands with Amina.

"I know it is not home," Amina whispered to her son, "but this is a good place. Be strong, and if you need anything write me a letter."

"I didn't imagine that saying goodbye would be this hard," Yusuf confessed to his mother. "I have longed for this moment for so long, yet I'm anxious and afraid."

"My boy, you have not changed much since nursery school. Back then you were terrified to leave home. You even accused your grandfather and me of abandoning you to strangers when we took you to school. Don't be afraid. Soon you'll make friends, and

then this place will become a second home to you,” Amina reassured him as she hugged her son.

“I hope you are right,” Yusuf answered softly.

“Your friend Kent Musa is also here. I am sure he will find you and show you the things you need to know. Do not forget what has brought you here. Our elders remind us that those who seek hidden treasures must not shy away from bowing to reach them. Goodbye, my boy.”

“Goodbye, *mama*,” Yusuf said, fighting back tears.

“I know how tough it is to say goodbye to parents,” Brian reassured Yusuf. “I am from Nairobi, and, believe me, the distance made the separation even more unbearable.”

“I didn’t realize it would be so difficult,” Yusuf said in a voice heavy with emotion.

“It gets easier with time. When like me you are in Form Four, this place will be home to you. In fact, going back home will be the difficult part!” Brian added.

“I cannot imagine that,” Yusuf replied politely.

“You won’t need to. It’s just that way. Think about it: this is our own special world, a castle in which we are the royals. With time you will see that you have a lot more freedom here than at home,” Brian explained.

“You mean the freedom of a prisoner in his beautiful cage?” Yusuf rejoined skeptically.

“Oh thou of little faith!” Brian chided him. “Alright, welcome to your new home. You are now the newest member of Lumumba House. Here you will walk in the footsteps of great men. I need not mention that some of our country’s biggest fish were hatched in this pond. Just to illustrate, this house was once home to Chief Justice Hakim, Ambassador William Tuma, and of course the infamous mobster Jaja Sugu, among others. That leaves the doorway to fields of opportunity wide open—from the honorable to the dishonorable. Nothing is beyond your reach!”

“How many students sleep here?” Yusuf inquired.

“There are fifty students per dormitory, give or take a few. If you are like me, this will be your first night in a bunk bed. Do you prefer the top or the bottom bed?” Brian asked.

“Which is better, top or bottom?”

“It only matters if you like to go to bed early, in which case the bottom bed is more sheltered from the glaring lights. On the other hand, the top bed may be preferable if your bunkmate leaks at night,” Brian answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Leak? You mean there are high school students who wet their beds?” Yusuf asked.

“You just have to hope it is urine; otherwise it might be safer to sleep inside a condom,” the prefect answered. Yusuf did not know how to take this remark.

“Fine then,” he replied decisively. “I can deal with glaring lights. I definitely prefer the top bed.”

“Splendid. That is all that was left anyway. Here is your bed. Are you a Christian or a Muslim?” Brian asked nonchalantly.

“I suppose I am closer to Islam than to Christianity,” Yusuf answered hesitantly.

“Very well. Then I can assure you that your bunkmate is a full-fledged Christian and in good standing, so there will be no need for nocturnal baptism. I believe I speak for most when I say there can be only one baptism per Christian,” the prefect stated in jest.

“If it is of any comfort to you, I’ve never wet my bed,” Yusuf explained defensively.

“Only time will tell! Are you ready to explore the school?” Brian inquired as he prepared to give Yusuf a tour.

“Where is everyone?” Yusuf asked.

“Afternoon classes are still in session. This is a great time to show you around before the evening commotion. I will put your valuables in my cubicle for now. Let’s get going,” Brian said as he led the way toward the exit.

In the following weeks Yusuf went through a difficult period of adjustment. For a boy who had never spent a night away from home, the pain of separation was almost overwhelming. His dorm mates were cordial and even helpful at times. He learned that the first month of school constituted a “grace period” for incoming students, during which the upperclassmen treated them with hospitality and respect. There also were no cleaning duties to wake up to before dawn or other challenges yet to come. The only unfairness involved where in relationship to the dormitory toilets the Form One students slept. The bed arrangement was such that the more senior students’ beds were furthest from the toilets. Yusuf’s bunk was the very first one next to the restroom. That location was especially intolerable when the plumbing system failed, which occurred frequently.

Life at Shimo la Tewa High was highly organized if not inflexible. School started each day with breakfast at 6:00 in the morning before classes. This schedule was an effective anti-snoozing system because those who failed to wake up on time missed their three slices of bread and cup of tea. Since there were no maids for the task, students rotated as waiters to their fellow classmates. It was the waiters’ privilege to keep all the bread crusts, which was a handsome reward because the crusts were twice as thick as regular slices. Each day there would be a new set of waiters for each table.

The morning prep, a block of time dedicated to personal study, started at 6:45 and lasted until 8:00 a.m. when the morning assembly convened. During the assembly, the teacher on duty walked around lines of students inspecting their grooming and personal hygiene. The most common infraction came from upperclassmen who frequently came to the assembly without socks or wearing dirty ties. On occasion an overly clever student would be remanded to the staff room for corporal punishment for trying to fool the teacher on duty by painting their legs to appear like socks.

After the inspection the school chaplain led the student body in hymns and prayer, followed by announcements from the school prefect or his deputy. The headmaster was always the concluding speaker. The role of the headmaster’s speech was primarily to inspire academic excellence and instill discipline in the students. His discourses were carefully chosen and powerfully delivered. Some of his remarks, no doubt, were addressed to the teachers as much as they were to the students.

Classes were divided into periods of forty-five minutes and ran from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Demanding subjects such as Mathematics and English were usually scheduled in double periods. Lunch was served between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m., while tea breaks occurred twice each day at 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. After the afternoon tea, students were free to engage in recreational activities until 6:00 p.m. when dinner was served.

Every weekday at 6:45 the evening preps started and ran until 10:00 p.m. At midnight the dorm prefects switched off the lights.

Two weeks after starting school Yusuf had mastered the daily routine and could find his way around without too much difficulty. He had managed to make a sizeable number of new friends among his classmates including his best friend Kent Musa. Although his longing for home still gnawed at his heart, he no longer wept under the cover of his beddings at night.

One evening after preps he returned to Lumumba House to find the upperclassmen singing and dancing boisterously. The unusual display of jubilation seemed to seize Form Four students with greater force than the rest. They danced and cavorted from one end of the dormitory to the other. Some played mock field hockey while others staged fake boxing matches.

“Silence, everyone!” Brian, the dorm prefect, yelled to the celebrants. “I have great news. The results of last year’s National Secondary School Examination are official, and Shimo la Tewa High is number eight in the country!”

Deafening cheers followed the announcement. Everyone except the Form One students, derogatorily referred to as *mono*, sang the school anthem at the top of his voice.

“This also means that the ‘grace period’ is officially over,” Brian declared amid huzzahs.

“*Mono*,” shouted an upperclassman to peals of laughter, “now if we kill you, no bad omens will befall the school!”

“*Mono*, you are about to learn who wears the pants in this house,” yelled Dura, a short, thin-faced Form Four student.

“I nearly died waiting for this day,” exclaimed another of his cohorts, “but now I’ve no more reason to wear dirty socks. We’ll make you men by teaching you how to be good women!”

It did not take long to appreciate how much grace had been lost when the “grace period” came to an end. Unfortunately for Yusuf, his trouble with school fees had slashed the period of indulgence in half. From that day onward all sorts of strategies were invented to make life hell for every Form One student.

“In Chemistry,” explained an upperclassman nicknamed Gypsy, “the term *mono* stands for ‘one,’ but here *mono* means a maid. It is your duty to keep the toilets clean. You will learn that sometimes it takes special maneuvers to get them to flush. On those occasions please feel free to consult with Dura, for he is an expert in that field.”

“And Gypsy will likely teach you that the best strategy for conserving water is to avoid the shower, but understand that he is a member of the cat family,” rejoined Dura.

“And not just any cat,” shouted another student. “He is a pussycat!”

“Without further ado,” announced Dura, “I need three *monos* to wash my socks and shirt for tomorrow. I’m going to bed, and I want them clean when I wake up in the morning.”

The misery of the Lumumba House *monos* began that night when they failed to take Dura’s order seriously. Around 4:00 in the morning they were roughly aroused from sleep and paraded outside in the dark by a horde of menacing upperclassmen. After a severe beating they were lined up prone in the grass and sprayed with bone-chilling water. More beatings followed before they were forced to jog barefoot around the soccer field three times. They then were herded back to the dormitory to tend to a mountain of

the upperclassmen's laundry. It was clear on that dreadful morning that every Form One student had become a member of an endangered species. Out of necessity they invested every free second of the day in plotting tactics to survive amid a hostile environment.

"You have to be clever to make it through your *mono* year," Rafik, a Form Two student, advised Yusuf. "You have to make yourself unavailable. Don't return to the dormitory until late at night, and that way you won't become anyone's maid."

"But how will I get my cup and spoon before meals?" Yusuf inquired.

"Eat with your fingers and drink from your palms if you have to. I used to take my spoon and cup to the classroom and hide them in my desk."

Yusuf soon learned that the classroom was the safest place for a *mono* during the daytime. An unwritten rule prohibited the upperclassmen from venturing into this refuge for purposes of harassment. In the classroom the disgraced *monos* converged to narrate their daily misadventures, albeit with gallows humor. Yusuf learned that, as bad as his experiences had been, there were hotter zones of hell than Lumumba House. For example, King House was infested with a vicious breed of sadists who went the extra mile to rid their *monos* of any shred of dignity. The unlucky King House *monos* routinely sought overnight refuge outside their dormitory.

"After watching Abdul come close to death at the hands of Pepe," explained Maina, a Form One student from King House, "I was no longer afraid to sleep outside."

"What a heartless beast! Why was he beating Abdul anyway?" Yusuf inquired.

"The bastard had sent Abdul to fetch him some hot water from the kitchen. On his way back Abdul was hijacked for more chores by another Form Four guy, so by the time he made it to Pepe the water was cold and it was almost time for preps. Incidentally, I have been warned that we should brace ourselves for Saturday."

"Why?" Yusuf inquired eagerly.

"After midnight on Friday your back belongs to them for the rest of the weekend. You will wash clothes until your fingers blister. The nights will be worse, I have been told," Maina continued.

"Unity is strength!" urged Yusuf. "We can find a way out if we work together."

"Don't forget that they also work together," Abdul pointed out. "What are you going to do anyway? Fight back? That would be suicidal! We are doomed to suffer until the year ends."

"I find it difficult to believe that the headmaster is unaware of this cruelty. A blind man can see it from miles away," a student stated in frustration.

"Of course he knows about it!" retorted another *mono* angrily. "For heaven's sake, he lives in that house over there. In fact if he suffers from such a severe lack of imagination, history should shed some light on the matter."

"Back in Central Province we have a saying that we use during the rainy season when the rivers are flooding: *Wiringie ni rwa nyariri!*" Maina declared in a firm voice.

"Save your Kikuyu proverbs for the right season, *mono*. As you can see, it is very hot here in Mombasa," responded Salim contemptuously.

"It means that when you are trying to cross a flooded river, it is wise not to try to carry someone else on your shoulders," Maina explained.

"That is one of the wonders of these Kikuyu bush-men! They make up ridiculous proverbs for everything they do, and as if that's not enough they turn around and quote this rubbish in front of civilized people. Next time he'll tell us, 'If you have to fart don't

squeeze your anus too tight.’ I say, no kidding!” jibed Salim, triggering an eruption of laughter.

“There is nothing *common* about common sense,” Maina declared resolutely.

The first Saturday after the “grace period” found most Form One students unprepared for what was coming. Across the campus small groups of them could be spotted walking reluctantly behind their tormentors like slaves en route to the auction. Some were made to parade like soldiers, while others were unceremoniously frog-marched to their chores. The most difficult chore by far was that of cleaning dirty underwear and socks. While one could muster the stamina to scrub off dried mud from a blazer, the same could hardly be said of cleaning someone else’s underwear. A similar problem was encountered with dirty socks. After the same pair of socks had been worn for days on end, a stunning transformation occurred in which they hardened like boots. The overpowering stench from these socks devastated its victim’s olfactory system.

On Saturday nights the student body gathered in the Assembly Hall for entertainment. Yusuf had been warned to stay away from this gathering as it was a convenient place for upperclassmen to corral an unsuspecting *mono* for sadistic harassment or forced labor. He had worked tirelessly to spread the warning among his classmates during the morning preps. On his second Saturday night at the school he found himself hiding alongside his friends in a field of long grass in a remote corner of the school compound. They established surveillance points and took turns watching for encroaching danger. Some of his friends had managed to sneak blankets to the hideout, which they used to make a community bed on the grass.

In their hideout the boys told each other stories and struggled to suppress their hearty laughter. In spite of the great diversity in their backgrounds, they huddled under the moonlight for warmth like offspring from the same litter. They entered into each other’s worlds via the stories they whispered to one another as they kept vigil.

“I can’t believe this! How can a fifteen-year-old man be a virgin? Yusuf, explain this to us,” mocked Juma, a large, domineering classmate.

“At least I am willing to admit it. I am sure that I am not the only one, although I nearly lost it once,” Yusuf said in self-defense.

“What do you mean when you say that you nearly lost it? You do not lose virginity in bits and pieces!” Juma continued, teasing Yusuf mercilessly.

“Let me explain. I had this girlfriend two years ago, and we had some steamy plans for the night. As her father was known to be an armed and dangerous man, my plan was to sneak into her room through the window at night. So I hid myself in the bush by her window and waited for the signal. We had agreed that she would open the window and beckon me in after the old lion retired to his bed. It was a hot night in December, and I must have been very tired because I fell asleep in the bush while I waited. . . . Guys, stop laughing and listen.”

“So I must have fallen asleep because I don’t remember seeing the moon come out. I woke up in the middle of the night cold and confused under a full moon, and just then I noticed a man approaching the bush where I was hiding. He came right next to me. I remained as still as a corpse when I realized that it was my girl’s father. When he unzipped his trousers in front of the bush, I realized what I was in for. I didn’t want to move or startle him because I was afraid that the man was armed or would hurt me. Well, long story short, he relieved himself on me, and he must have been holding it for a long

time. When I left I was both drenched and disappointed. I decided if that was the price one had to pay to lose his virginity, I'd hold onto mine for as long as it was necessary." Yusuf's friends rolled on the grass in gales of laughter.

"What a heroic effort to shake off your virginity," retorted Maina amid the hilarity.

"In Nairobi," added Jeff, prompting further laughter, "most of us lose it to the housemaid. I suppose that is the least a dutiful son can do to supplement a maid's income."

"It is true what my grandfather used to say," announced Yusuf after the laughter subsided. "Every joyful experience has its bitter side, and every bitter experience has its joyful side. Look, here we are sons of very different households sharing a bed, laughing and weeping together. It is a wonderful experience."

"Very true," several voices answered in unison.

It was late when Yusuf and his friends finally fell asleep. During the wee hours of the night they huddled to stay warm in the chill that descended upon the land. In a strange dream Yusuf saw *Tabibu*, Kajiwe's ancestor, encouraging him to endure the dark night so that he too might arise at dawn to become a shepherd of the sun. The night passed quickly, bringing the students' scant rest to an abrupt end. As dawn broke, they scuttled out of their hideout as rapidly as they had gathered in it. It was Sunday morning.

Sundays were generally peaceful and quiet at the school. Even such hardened heathens as Pepe bridled their sadistic urges in compliance with this atmosphere. At 11:00 a.m. every student was expected to gather in the Assembly Hall for a Christian worship service regardless of his religious background. The two-hour meeting was irredeemably boring, although it provided a harmless respite during which the belabored *monos* could catch up on their sleep.

The invited preacher on this Sunday was determined to make his sermon anything but dull. The tall, thin old man with large ears protruding from his bald head appeared like a relic from an anthropological museum. When he spoke, he clutched his Bible firmly in his gigantic hands as though the Devil had threatened to snatch it from him if he ever set it down. His flowing robe was colorfully decorated with images of the cross and the dove.

"My name is Reverend Abraham Tubu," the spirited preacher announced, "and the theme of my sermon today is 'Don't Kiss Ass.'"

"Amen, hallelujah!" shouted the student body.

"The text of my sermon is from the Book of Numbers, Chapter 22. Please open your Holy Bible and let us read together."

Reverend Tubu then proceeded to use the text of his sermon, as he declared, to "shed new light on the ancient conflict between man and his Creator." "Man is blind, and when left to his wits he is less than a dumb ass," the minister declared. "As a matter of fact, there have been occasions when man's salvation hinged entirely on the wisdom of a donkey or, if you will, an ass."

"Hosanna, hallelujah!" the students shouted cheerfully.

"Do I exaggerate? To whom does the Lord appeal when Balaam rejects divine guidance and insists on making a trip to a forbidden destination?" asked the old preacher in a loud baritone voice. "Why, he uses an ordinary donkey to deliver man from the ruins

of his stubbornness, and the poor donkey nearly loses her life in this hazardous work. Please, you must read verses 28-33 with me lest I be accused of fabrications:

And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, 'What have I done to you to deserve your whipping these three times?'

And Balaam said to the ass, 'Because you have mocked me, I wish I had a sword in my hand, for now I would have killed you.'

And the ass said to Balaam, 'Am I not your ass upon whom you have been riding ever since I became yours until this day? Was I ever inclined to behave this way towards you?'

And he said, 'No.'

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand, and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.

And the angel of the LORD said unto him, 'Why have you whipped your ass three times? Look, I went out to block your way, because your way is perverse before me; and the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times. Had she not turned away from me, surely I could have killed you, and saved her life.'

"I personally hope that Balaam kissed the ass in gratitude!" declared the old preacher to a chorus of reverberating laughter.

"Amen. Kiss the ass, Balaam!" echoed the student body.

"In each one of us there is a Balaam," Reverend Tubu continued in a subdued tone. "Therefore you must remember that it is wise to obey now, or else you might have to kiss an ass later! Listen to your teachers; be disciplined and diligent in your studies. Your life, perhaps even your ass, depends on it."

CHAPTER 7

"You will find my approach to this course unique, some would even say audacious," Ms. Apollo, the History teacher, announced to her Form One class on a lovely Monday morning. She was a young, beautiful, and recent university graduate in her second year as a high school teacher.

"I will challenge your minds by asking inconvenient questions," she continued. "My objective is not to be responsible for the greatest number of A's on the final examination but to incite your minds to examine your existence and the narrative that attempts to explain it. A Greek philosopher once stated that the unexamined life is not worth living. I intend to make your lives worth living."

After this bold introduction Ms. Apollo proceeded to the initial lesson without further ado.

"So what is history, and is it complete if it insists on ignoring *her-story*? That is the first problem we'll encounter. I will frame the second problem in the words of an old Maasai proverb: until the day when the lions shall produce their own orators, the hunter

will always be the hero. Whose point of view is voiced by the history you will be learning? Is the story of the taming and civilizing of ‘godless savages’ by European conquerors your grandmother’s narrative? If perchance she were to speak on the topic, how would her account differ from this official version? This course would be incomplete if the other point of view were to be entirely ignored. Unfortunately, the recommended textbook does exactly that. I was therefore left with the demanding task of conducting personal research to unearth the unrepresented point of view in this incomplete history. I hope that the product of my toil will enrich your experience,” she stated in a firm voice.

“That was the most satisfying forty-five minutes of my life,” Yusuf announced to his friend Kent Musa at the end of the History period.

“Isn’t she amazing? However, I suspect she is just bitter about something. Maybe she hates men,” Kent speculated.

“No, it is not bitterness; it is passion! She eats, breathes, and lives History,” Yusuf said in Ms. Apollo’s defense.

“Or, as she would have it, *her-story*,” Kent huffed angrily. “I am not feeling the passion right now. Did you see how much homework she piled on us? Goodness, every teacher around here acts as though we have no other subject but his—not to mention my cleaning duties for Pepe, with whom I have an unwritten contract to launder his nauseating socks and shorts.”

“Be strong,” Yusuf said with a sly smile. “This will make us better men.”

“Or great maids!” retorted Kent.

“It is easy to love History when it drips from those soft lips,” Yusuf whispered.

“I agree with you there! During the lesson I spent the whole time staring at her enchanting face—her soft eyes, her delicate smile,” Kent admitted with his eyes half closed as though in a dream.

“I am sure she has a man to whom she returns those lips and eyes at the end of the day,” Yusuf suggested.

“*Bwana*, why do you have to ruin everything? I was destined to have a sweet dream tonight before you ruined it,” Kent complained.

“Have you forgotten that you sleep on a bunk bed? Those sorts of dreams can lead to endless embarrassment. Someone could see you,” Yusuf pointed out.

“So what if someone sees me? He will just think I’m having a seizure in my sleep,” responded Kent.

“A seizure that only shakes the waist?” Yusuf asked, giggling.

“I will work out the details after the good times have come and gone,” Kent replied.

“Sit down boys. Settle down and put away those History books. It is time for Business Education,” announced Mr. Njenga as he cleaned the blackboard.

Mr. Njenga was a tall man in his early thirties whose passion was anywhere but in the classroom. Not that he was a bad teacher, quite to the contrary. He in fact was a masterful teacher, but chronic hangovers and chasing after women left him hardly any time for a demanding profession.

“Last time we discussed the different forms of entrepreneurship,” Mr. Njenga began. “Today we will move to the engine of entrepreneurship: supply and demand. What, then, is supply?”

“Supply is the means through which goods get to the market,” answered Kent.

“Great attempt, but what you are describing is more accurately called transportation,” Mr. Njenga quipped. “What does your friend think, the one who is laughing?”

“Supply is the taking of goods to customers so that they can buy them,” Yusuf answered.

“It sounds as though you are describing hawking, which, if the newspapers are to be believed, is no longer legal in this country,” he declared to everyone’s laughter. “Does no one at Shimo la Tewa High School know what supply is?”

“Supply is the force which avails merchandise to the consumer, in order for an economic equilibrium to be attained,” Abdul answered confidently.

“Precisely. In fact, that is our textbook definition of the term. Thank you for consulting the textbook on your lap under the desk,” he said with a wink. “In the interest of time and honesty I will refrain from asking the class to define demand. So what is demand? Simply put, it describes the need that exists for a given commodity in the market—or, in other words, the degree to which buyers seek a given commodity. With these definitions in mind, someone tell us how supply and demand are related.”

“The more a commodity is in demand, the higher the supply will need to be in order to meet it,” answered Yusuf promptly.

“Well said,” remarked Mr. Njenga. “That holds true in almost all cases. For the market to keep its balance, supply and demand must shift in the same direction. What suffers when this marriage between supply and demand is strained?”

“The price goes to the dog house,” Jeff answered jovially.

“So young and already acquainted with the dog house!” Mr. Njenga rejoined. “True. When an increase in supply exceeds the demand, you end up with a lower equilibrium price for the commodity. The opposite is also true. Somebody give us an example to summarize these three interactive forces.”

“I will try,” Kent volunteered. “Let us imagine a beautiful girl is standing in front of this classroom. If forty boys are clamoring for her attention, she is in short supply. The lucky boy who wins her can only do so after offering something that exceeds what everyone else offers.”

After the laughter subsided, Mr. Njenga responded, “Great analogy. But, young man, if your mind is where I think it is, you should just close shop and count your losses.”

“That is bad business. The market will definitely collapse when demand is removed from the equation,” Kent responded.

“You should know that for each consumer there is an appropriate market. The price imposes this restriction,” Mr. Njenga stated lightheartedly.

For the rest of the period Mr. Njenga kept his students captivated. They feasted on his refreshing humor and unique ability to bring complex concepts down to their level. Every now and then he would enrich his lecture with anecdotes from his vast repertoire of escapades.

“What good is a life that is lived behind a dark curtain?” Mr. Njenga asked rhetorically. “Experience—diversity of experience—is the engine that drives a worthwhile life. Each of these concepts in Business Education is only a piece of common sense to those who are not afraid to dive into the sea of life. Supply, demand, and price—

what are they? This is all common sense, boys. Allow me to illustrate. I am an Old Boy of this school. Nkrumah House was my den of residence long before you were born.

“There was a time during my final year when I got into some undeserved trouble, the details of which I’ll spare you. The headmaster felt compelled to recruit my father in the witch-hunt. I was sent home with strict instructions not to return to school unless my father was at my side. Knowing that my father would not take such a mandate lightly, I put my business mind to work—and that is exactly my point. You do not need to wait to become a CEO to reap the benefits of Business Education! Anyway, my father was a very traditional man and strict observer of the biblical admonition, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

“Well, after reflecting on the punishment that awaited me at home, I hatched a great strategy. I approached a haggard drunk in town with a proposal, a business proposal in fact. After I explained my dilemma to him, he very sympathetically—with my two shillings safely in his pocket—accompanied me back to school in the role of my father. We agreed that if the plot worked I would give him another two shillings after meeting with the headmaster.

“As it turned out, the headmaster just needed someone to knock some sense into me. It didn’t matter to him that the man who was supposed to be my father repeatedly addressed me by the wrong name. “Give him six strong ones on his buttocks,” the headmaster demanded. But the town drunk was no fool. To protect his business interests, he knew not to make it sting too badly. He thus overreached with the cane and hit the table on the other side, which naturally made a lot of noise and left the headmaster quite certain that I was paying the price for my crimes. At the end of it all we both were very satisfied with our new partnership. Of course, I gave him only one shilling when we parted because caning me, however inevitable, was a breach of contract.

“We’ll pick up from here next week. Meanwhile keep up your reading,” Mr. Njenga said as he walked hastily out of the classroom. He purposely avoided making eye contact with Mrs. Shabaan, who was waiting by the door to start her lesson.

“Alright, boys, put away those books,” Mrs. Shabaan, the Literature teacher, announced impatiently when she walked into the classroom. “This is the second time I’ve had to sacrifice five minutes of my lesson to Business Education. I suppose that the concept of time is nonexistent in today’s business world. I am almost persuaded to add *Death of a Salesman* to this term’s required reading.”

Her outburst was received with smiles by the students.

“Without further ado, last time I introduced the texts for this course. Today we’ll begin our literary journey in earnest. For some of you this class will be your first attempt to enter into the core of another person’s being. In our study you will wander into a cemetery of ruined souls and ascend to the paradise of passionate love. We will rise to the thrones above to join the gods in exalted thought, only to descend soon thereafter to purgatory, where the condemned scavenge for hope and redemption. As we witness fierce conflicts between heroes and villains, we will discover great lessons in the complexity of human experience.

“After hearing Shylock’s fervent plea for social justice in *The Merchant of Venice*, we will enter the shattered world of Okonkwo to watch his desperate entanglement in the web of fate. In the mirthless words of William Butler Yeats, ‘*Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer / Things fall*

apart; the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' Like vagabonds threatened with damnation, we too shall plead for deliverance.

"But it is not all gloomy, boys. From Juliet's balcony we shall test our commitment to loyalty in light of her sweet persuasions to '*Deny thy father and refuse thy name / Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love.*' After such an immersion in the heart's conflicting impulses, you will become intimately acquainted with your own souls. Even mummies struggle to restrain their passions here!

"You will also find that literature can be controversial. For example, I received a complaint from the Christian Union objecting to the addition of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jeroboam* to the course. After listening to their leader, however, I came to the conclusion that their discontent arises from hearing biting truths that are not too far removed from their own world. Dear students, do not be afraid of the truth. Truth may hurt, but hypocrisy maims!"

Mrs. Shabaan's passion for literature infused fiction and poetry with life. Her eloquent voice persuaded even the most cynical student to gather by the fire kindled by her masterful performance.

CHAPTER 8

Time flowed seamlessly from one lesson to the next at Shimo la Tewa High School. The endless academic exercises left the students craving extracurricular distractions. After Friday afternoon classes many students, especially upperclassmen, eagerly deserted their books for a weekend of carousing in town. These escapades, although common, constituted a serious infraction of school regulations. A mandatory suspension from school was the usual punishment for anyone caught in the act. Whatever the case, such distractions were out of reach to Form One students; the classroom provided the only avenue to adventure and excitement.

"I know it is late on a Friday afternoon," stated Sister Eunice O'Neal, "and, let's face it, religion is hardly the first thing on your mind right now. But I would argue that it is the best subject you could have to conclude your week. What is religion? The answer varies depending on the respondent. We view the world through the lens of our personal experiences, but is there a unifying belief that can reconcile a Swahili Muslim with a Turkana Animist, or an atheist with a monk, or, as in our case here, an Irish nun with youthful indifference?"

Sister O'Neal turned out to be the perfect punishment for any student who imagined that he had survived the worst of classroom monotony. Moreover, for students who had never encountered an Irish person before, her accent proved nearly indecipherable. Unlike the other teachers, she also appeared distant and lacked the fervor needed to stir interest where it did not naturally exist.

"I was wrong in thinking that Math will be the hardest subject this term," Kent whispered to Yusuf when Sister O'Neal turned to write on the board.

Resuming her monologue, Sister O'Neal said, "Our focus this term will be on the major religions of the world. Lads, what are the major religions?" she asked blandly. Several hands shot up simultaneously. "Let's start with you," she suggested, pointing to a student. "Please don't forget to introduce yourself."

“Hinduism. My name is Patel Singh from Malindi, Coast Province.”

“Thank you, Master Singh. Hinduism is correct. Who’s next?” Sister O’Neal asked over her shoulder while writing on the blackboard.

“Islam. My name is Yusuf bin Ibrahim from near Mombasa.”

“Thank you, Master Ibrahim. We now have Islam and Hinduism. Next please,” she said, pointing at Kent.

“Christianity. My name is Kent Musa also from Mombasa, Coast Province of Kenya in East Africa, planet Earth,” he answered with his usual humor.

“If anyone needed to find his whereabouts, that need has now been eliminated. Thank you, Master Musa. We now only have two more to go,” she announced drily.

“Seventh-Day Adventures. . . ,” a shy student answered. The class exploded in laughter before the student could introduce himself.

“The Seventh-Day Adventists are Christians, but thank you for the attempt,” she said by way of consolation to the humiliated student.

“Buddhism. My name is Kennedy Amollo from Kisumu, Nyanza Province.”

“Buddhism is correct. Thank you, Master Amollo. One more to go and we have our five,” Sister Eunice declared.

“Communism. My name is Jeffrey Lumumba from the Republic’s capital city,” he answered in a proud voice.

“Sorry. Communism is not a religion but a dehumanizing political ideology,” she said dismissively.

“Native religions. My name is Salim bin Hassan from Lamu, Coast Province.”

“The ignoble minds of most native peoples have failed to produce anything other than chaotic rituals as an excuse for religion. We’ll not waste time dwelling on those.”

“Ancient Egyptian religion. My name is Jacob Kipruto from Eldoret, Rift Valley Province.”

“The Ancient Egyptians were indeed the masterminds of a complex cult. Unfortunately, they do not make it to our list. At this point I must assume that no one knows the last correct answer, which is Judaism, the mother of Christianity and, as some have argued, the template from which Islam was plagiarized. The aim of this course is to introduce you to the fundamental principles of each of these world religions. You will be required to take three exams and several quizzes in addition to writing a research paper before year’s end. The paper will be on a topic of your choice, but it must be based on one of these five religions. You may hand it in whenever you are ready, but bonus points will go only to those who submit their paper before the mid-term.”

Sister O’Neal’s choice of Christianity as the entree to her course caught no one by surprise. The fact that she wore a large crucifix around her neck made her preference an open secret. Her in-your-face display of religious bias ignited a cold war between her and the class of Form One students who, being the school’s underdogs, were determined to prove their masculinity.

During the following weeks Sister O’Neal led the class in a mind-numbing voyage through the New Testament while the students conspired to thwart her efforts at every juncture. Yusuf chose to use his research paper as a platform for advancing this conspiracy. He was so determined to make his point that he completed and turned in his paper long before any of his classmates had even selected a topic.

“Master Ibrahim, follow me to my office immediately,” Sister O’Neal announced after class several weeks into the term. “It is about your paper.”

As he followed Sister O’Neal to her office, Yusuf braced himself for the worst. He had assumed that the gravest consequence of writing his provocative essay would be only its rejection, but judging from Sister O’Neal’s tone his future at Shimo la Tewa High hung in the balance. His classmates whispered words of encouragement as he walked out, but everyone knew that Yusuf’s fate ultimately rested in the unpredictable hands of a mysterious stranger.

“Master Ibrahim,” Sister O’Neal said as they walked into her office, “when I invited the class to write a research paper, I could not have imagined how far you would push your liberties.”

“I am very sorry. It will not happen again,” Yusuf apologized, hoping his swift expression of remorse would preempt disciplinary action.

“I am the sorrier for it! From the moment my eyes fell on your paper, I have hardly been able to sleep at night. I have stayed awake wondering what else lurks behind those dark eyes that gaze back at me in the classroom. Perhaps I misunderstood what I was reading. Here is your paper. Please indulge me by reading the last paragraph aloud,” she said while leaning forward to listen.

Yusuf nervously reached for his paper and began to read:

Jesus’ insistence that he had to suffer for man’s sins lest all mankind perish came at a grave personal price. That price was his own life. In other words, the “betrayal” of Jesus was a predictable consequence of his sermons. It does not take a lot of imagination to guess the reaction of those who heard Jesus repeatedly taunting them with news of their inevitable destruction without his services. It is therefore not solely from greed or malice that Judas is driven into action, but his actions must be seen as the inevitable reaction of a convinced disciple who dared not wait for his redemption any longer. As long as Jesus was “God with us,” redemption could not be with him or anyone else. At his own insistence Jesus had to die for man to live. We must see, then, that Judas was only following his master by betraying him, and in so doing he became the most devout disciple and Christian, having jumped at redemption before all others. For salvation he gave up everything—his reputation and peace of conscience—by sacrificing a dear friend for the greater good. Unfortunately, the Good News will remain incomplete without the input of this very important disciple. We are left to wonder what dangerous truths Judas would reveal if history had allowed him to speak. Christians may not expect to hear this, but their religion is incomplete without the gospel of Saint Judas.

“You are a provocative writer, Master Ibrahim,” Sister O’Neal said in an unusually soft tone. “Maybe you will become the next Wole Soyinka or Ngugi wa Thiong’o. They were not much older than you are when they discovered the power of the pen. At any rate the reason I called you here is to ask for your assistance.”

“What...but of course. How may I assist you, Sister?” Yusuf was baffled.

“You will probably miss the afternoon tea, but I am not interested in making your punishment any more insufferable than necessary. It thus appears I have no choice but to share my tea. Fortunately, there is plenty in the kettle. So how did you decide to write on this topic?” she inquired while pouring a cup of tea for Yusuf.

“Uh, well, as a newcomer to the Bible I found I had questions that were left unanswered even after reading very attentively.”

“Your writing invites the reader to look at the biblical text from a new perspective. I must say that it was rather unexpected, especially in this place where a lot of things go unquestioned. Your piece is both refreshing and engaging. I especially like the catchy title: “Judas: Saint or Traitor?” I believe that the root of academic excellence lies in asking and grappling with difficult questions. The questions you raise here are truly important if not critical. I also liked your choice of words, which by the way is the key to effective self-expression.”

“Thank you, madam,” Yusuf said cautiously, unsure of how the meeting would end.

“I left the nunnery to escape the deadly drought of boredom and monotony,” Sister O’Neal continued. “After spending seven years of saying the same prayers, in the same order and at the same time of day, my resolve finally wore down. I wanted to touch lives, you know, make a tangible difference. So I chose to become a teacher in Africa. At the time it felt noble. I had naïvely imagined that I’d be herding souls of converted natives to heaven in droves, but it has been eight long and tedious years wasted in rehearsal for a festival that never comes. My only fulfillment, macabre though it is, comes once a month when I guide a condemned man in his final prayers before he is hanged.”

“Where does that happen, if you don’t mind my asking?” Yusuf inquired, unable to contain his curiosity.

“Right next door at Shimo la Tewa Maximum Security Prison. Perhaps you would like to come along next time?” she asked with a rare smile.

“I don’t know. I am not sure I can,” he replied hesitantly.

The very mention of the prison provoked a visceral reaction in Yusuf. His memory of the menacing brutes that had descended on his grandfather’s hut and taken him for torture at Shimo la Tewa Maximum Security Prison was still fresh. Could he now willingly venture into the den of these beasts?

“Finally the truth comes out!” Sister O’Neal taunted him. “I mistook your boldness for bravery.”

“I have never seen anyone die. I am not sure I would enjoy the sight,” he said defensively.

“For your information I do not go there for entertainment, and I cannot say that anyone does. I volunteered to be a spiritual shepherd at the gallows because, for strange reasons, I sought a meeting with death. Once a month I thus make this pilgrimage in a quest which only seems to provoke more discontent with my current existence,” she confided.

“So you are not required to go?” Yusuf asked inquisitively.

“Well, master Yusuf, if we only did those things we are *required* to do what would that make of us? I just couldn’t help but sympathize with terrified souls on their

way to an ignominious end. I must confess that I have learned precious lessons about life while staring into the eyes of death,” Sister Eunice continued.

“You must be very brave,” Yusuf said, unsure of how to respond.

“No, not brave, just stubborn,” she replied.

Teacher and student sipped their tea silently, each absorbed in their own thoughts. Yusuf’s imagination now harbored an uneasy curiosity about the prison. As strange as it seemed, he hoped for a spiritual reunion with his grandfather at a venue where the old man’s soul had been tormented sorely enough to contemplate the inglorious release of suicide.

For her part Sister O’Neal was carried away across the seas to a distant homeland. She saw its beautiful meadows spread across rolling hills, but then a terror descended as intensely as the day she wept helplessly beside her dying parents. The misery of her loss threatened to annihilate hope forever. Now more than ever, though, the means to attain her ultimate ends seemed within her grasp.

“Master Ibrahim, do you sing?” Sister O’Neal inquired.

“Not very well,” he admitted.

“I am planning to organize a support group for the prisoners on death-row during their final hours. I was hoping you would assist me in this endeavor,” she almost pleaded.

“I’d be glad to participate, but as a singer I cannot be very useful,” Yusuf answered.

“Not to worry. We’ll work on it together. We’ll need to get a select group of your friends involved. Your assistance will be highly appreciated, both by me and, I am sure, by the prisoners.”

“I am willing to help in any way,” Yusuf answered with increasing confidence.

“I have been collecting material for the project. The task will require meticulous planning. I have some undeveloped ideas, and judging from your writing you have what it takes to deliver the crucial message,” Sister O’Neal continued.

“How many students would you want me to bring along?” Yusuf asked.

“It will require a tightly knit group. My guess is that three to four students should be enough,” she answered.

“I think I can easily do that. When and where shall we meet?” Yusuf asked.

“That is a tricky point. I was hoping to bring the headmaster on board, but he is not in a position to be supportive at the moment. That said, I feel strongly that this is an essential endeavor and one that can develop a student’s social and moral sensibilities. We might therefore be forced to work outside normal protocol . . . in the meantime, that is.” She lowered her voice as she spoke these words.

As the discussion progressed, Yusuf felt his heart quickening with expectation. The allure of the forbidden beckoned him as irresistibly as nectar attracts a honeybee. On the other hand, Sister O’Neal had played her hand perfectly. She had managed to broach a sensitive topic without compromising her status as a nun or as a teacher. No doubt she had employed a mixture of enticement and manipulation, but she felt that the end would ultimately justify the means. She knew that time was not on her side. In the face of the tragic consequence of failure or delay on her part, she had no choice but to rush the matter as she had done. It was as if the wheels of time had reversed direction and returned her to her helpless childhood. This time, however, she was determined to triumph over weakness. The grand secret, though, she kept safely locked in her inscrutable mind.

“During my time as a teacher here,” she said as they parted, “I’ve learned that this place is inhospitable to Form One students. If you keep your side of the bargain, my house shall be a safe haven for the support group on weekends.”

After the strange rendezvous Yusuf drifted toward the football field. His head felt heavy under the weight of his thoughts. Sister O’Neal had been so warm and motherly that his heart reached out to her. For the first time he was remorseful for all the negative feelings he had harbored towards her.

“What happened?” Kent inquired, catching up with Yusuf. “I didn’t see you in the dining hall.”

“Oh, nothing. She just scolded me for my irreverent paper,” Yusuf replied offhandedly.

“*Bwana*, shouldn’t you be jumping up and down then? That woman is capable of greater harm. You are very lucky. I was afraid that you would be suspended from school.”

“I was afraid of that too, but she was actually quite nice to me,” Yusuf replied.

“Ah, maybe she is a shy girl. You know, shy girls treat those they secretly admire harshly in public but nicely in private,” Kent teased.

“*Bwana*, what rubbish! She is old enough to be my mother. Show some respect,” Yusuf chided.

“Sorry, I forgot that I’m talking to a monk. What has gotten into your head? You are all serious business. Aha, I can guess what happened. Did you get caned on your ass? Is your bottom a little sore, brother?”

“I have no time for this foolishness. If you want to be useful, come with me to the hideout. I think I left my spoon there,” Yusuf said as he turned toward the creek.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to head that way at this time,” Kent cautioned. “There are bound to be some man-eaters around there. Let’s wait until just before dinner.”

“Good idea! I had forgotten that today is Friday. Let’s get out of sight before it is too late,” Yusuf suggested.

The two boys ran toward the tall grass by the hockey field, where they carried on with their playful arguments. Kent struggled to cheer up his friend, while Yusuf pondered the best occasion for sharing his secret with his friend.

Meanwhile Sister O’Neal walked briskly back to her house. She could hardly believe that she had mustered the courage to take the critical but risky step towards her final solution. Her calculated plot was the product of months of careful planning. Now she could relax as she watched the last pieces falling into place. She retired to her bed earlier than usual and slept soundly for the first time in years.

Her diary lay open under the bedside lamp where she had placed it before falling asleep. The short poem she had composed before dozing off read:

*The garden is empty no more. Upon the earth the seed has been cast.
My cloak they may cast into the fire, but love must set the night aflame.
The threat of futility haunts no more. To my dreams this torch I bear.*

CHAPTER 9

When Saturday dawned, the Form One students were pleasantly surprised to find their school flooded with students from many other schools. The visiting students wore uniforms unique to their schools, creating a brilliant assortment of colors. The occasion was the sports competition for both boys' and girls' secondary schools from across the Coast Province. From the outset the Form One students knew the day would bring back some of the grace that had been lost at the end of the "Grace Period." Upperclassmen roamed the school compound trying to recruit lowerclassmen to serve as cheerleaders for their favorite teams. Most Form One students cheerfully joined the troupes of cheerleaders in exchange for the usual punitive chores.

The presence of girls brought Shimo la Tewa High School students the rare privilege of proving their manliness in a public setting. Yusuf joined a group of his classmates by the volleyball field to formulate the basic rules for the crucial test of their interaction with the opposite sex.

"Do we all agree on these rules?" inquired Kent impassionedly. "The student who gets the prettiest girl takes the bounty! Everyone who is participating should write his name here. The registration fee is one shilling."

"I am not entirely satisfied with the rules," Yusuf protested, "because I don't think we all agree on the definition of beauty. That will only lead to disagreements at the end of the day."

"We can easily resolve that dilemma," O'Koth declared. "We will sit here and grade the girls in the vicinity. After we all agree on one, we will vote on who should make the first move. We'll award one point for each of the following: making a smooth approach, striking up a conversation, strolling around with her, and getting her contact information. Bonus points will be awarded for a hug and an additional two points for a letter from her within a week. That is a total of seven points maximum."

"How much is in the jackpot?" Kent inquired.

"Eighteen shillings," answered Maina.

"Okay, I'm ready and eager to start," announced Abdul. "Hey Salim, keep an eye out for me. I don't trust these guys from Central Province counting my points or guarding my money."

"*Bwana*, you are already making up excuses?" Maina teased. "You are about to learn that not even the best witchcraft can help you today!"

"Remove the temptation from the Kikuyu. Hide the money," Abdul rejoined.

"Okay," announced Maina. "We will do this in teams of five. The first team includes Kent, Salim, Yusuf, Abdul, and Jeff."

By the time the competition ended that evening, there had been plenty of entertainment for the Form One students. Kent had nearly won the competition, but his masterful strategy met a dismal end at the hands of an upperclassman. In an effort to impress the girl, Kent had escorted her to see his flower garden by the dormitories. He was in the middle of his courtship when he was spotted by Gypsy and rounded up to clean his filthy socks. In spite of Kent's heroic efforts at negotiation, Gypsy proved an absolute mule and went so far as offering to keep the girl company while Kent performed his chores. The girl declined his offer, suggesting instead that Gypsy should have called his mother to do his laundry. Her insult only made the situation more precarious for Kent.

Yusuf, on the other hand, had started on a very shaky footing. It took serious self-discipline for him to muster up his courage, and for good reason because Maina had chosen a dauntingly charming girl for him in an attempt to guarantee failure. After tiptoeing timidly behind her for several minutes, while his classmates jeered on the sidelines, Yusuf seized the brief moment when the girl was separated from her friends to make his move. He dared not look back at his classmates for fear that their mockery would only exacerbate his terror.

“Hello, my name is Yusuf. What’s yours?” he mumbled.

“I was wondering who it was going to be,” she replied in a stern voice.

“I beg your pardon,” Yusuf said, somewhat confused.

“My friends and I have been watching you and your friends. It didn’t take long to figure out what you were up to,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I apologize for the misunderstanding. I . . . we like volleyball a lot,” Yusuf stammered as he searched for a way out of the embarrassing impasse.

The girl remained silent for a moment before replying, “Look, I am not a fool, but I am ready to make a deal. If you agree to split the proceeds fifty-fifty, I’m all yours. How much do I stand to gain?”

“Shouldn’t we at least get acquainted before we become partners in crime?” Yusuf asked.

“What do you want to know?” she answered.

After wading through some murky terrain, Yusuf managed to make some headway with the witty girl. She informed him that her name was Rose and that she was from Nairobi. Unlike other girls he had met, Rose turned out to be level-headed and engaging, asking questions that repeatedly caught him off guard. She was also devoid of the kind of shyness that transformed simple conversations into insufferable monologues. Her natural inquisitiveness ensured that there was plenty to talk about, a trait that was complemented by their shared sense of humor.

“Isn’t it terrifying to approach a total stranger?” Rose asked Yusuf at the end of the day.

“It is like opening a beehive,” he explained. “You get either a handful of sweet honey or a nasty sting.”

“That is a great analogy. Were you nervous?” she asked.

“Oh, not at all!” he answered dishonestly.

“And all the fidgeting, was that by design?” she asked with a smile.

“Okay, I was a bit nervous, I’ll admit.”

“Just a bit?” she asked with fake disappointment.

“Extremely nervous, in fact, and intimidated too,” he confessed.

“You really know how to make a girl feel special. You tell her that she is scary and intimidating,” she joked.

“Not intimidating in a bad way but differently,” he replied.

“How differently?” she asked in pretended seriousness, but she broke into laughter upon seeing his look of anxiety.

“Do you find pleasure in torturing me? My mind is spinning at top speed, trying to find acceptable answers for your very difficult questions,” he protested.

“Alright, fair enough. I am actually glad that you had the courage to approach me,” she said as she reached out to squeeze his hand. “I hope you will stay in touch.”

“I will need to. I owe you half the prize, don’t I?” he said sheepishly.

“Here is a piece of paper. Do you have a pen?”

Yusuf reached into his shirt pocket and then frantically into the rest of his pockets. He was certain that he had brought a pen to the rendezvous, but to his great dismay it was missing.

“Here,” Rose said with his pen in her hand. “You dropped it in the middle of your fidgeting.”

He grinned and asked, “What is your address so that I can send you the bill after I visit my heart doctor?”

She offered to write down her address for him, after which she jotted down his, “just in case I don’t get my money on time.”

Dusk was gathering when Rose’s bus pulled into the compound. Her schoolmates boarded the bus where they continued their celebration after a victorious day of sports competition. When she finally made it to the bus, most of her schoolmates were secretly watching Rose through the windows.

“I didn’t think it would be difficult saying goodbye to a friend of only six hours,” Yusuf said.

“I enjoyed your company too. You have proven to be a worthy partner in crime,” Rose said as they hugged. “Do you promise to write?”

“I am afraid with my impatience I’ll reply to your letter before you even write it,” he joked.

He watched her disappear into the bus amid a chorus of teasing voices. The old bus made a loud roar as it rolled toward the main gate before escaping into the outside world. For a long time Yusuf stood alone in the darkness. His heart already ached for his newly-acquired princess; in a cruel mockery, humid dusty air moved in quickly to occupy the empty space created by the departure of her enchanting smile and soothing touch.

“Yusuf, you have put all of us to shame,” a voice declared from behind his back. He turned to see his envious classmates standing behind him.

“*Bwana*, a promise is a debt,” exclaimed Kent to his companions. “The difficult moment of reckoning has come.”

“You made us all look like amateurs,” said Maina.

The rest of the group came forward and presented Yusuf with his reward. The moment concluded a painful chapter for Jeff who, in spite of his incessant bragging, had only managed to receive a slap from an impatient girl.

“*Monos*,” came the ominous voice of Dura from behind the group, “you rascals are gambling on school property! I will be lenient this once. Give me the cash, and it will end here.”

Yusuf hesitated at first, but he was reminded of what could happen if he dared to infuriate a hardened bully. Reluctantly he reached into his pocket and emptied the money onto Dura’s outstretched palm.

“Aha! I now have enough for dinner, entertainment, and a very special brew,” Dura said mockingly before he disappeared into the dark.

“We should tie him up and drown him in the creek,” Abdul suggested after Dura left.

“We have a saying that *yubukaga na kiria imeretie*,” stated Maina.

“For Pete’s sake, not another stinking Kikuyu saying!” Salim protested.

“Please leave him alone. I actually find these proverbs interesting,” Yusuf insisted. “Maina, what does it mean?”

“Well, it means that when birds are dispersed, each can fly away only with what it has swallowed.”

“I’ll be damned!” Kent retorted. “I am now convinced that common sense is a rarity in Kikuyu-land.”

“It may sound simple,” Maina explained, “but there are always two meanings in these proverbs. The superficial meaning satisfies the uninitiated mind, like Kent’s, while the deeper meaning must be unearthed by careful contemplation.”

“What is the deeper meaning?” inquired Yusuf.

“In this case it is that, even though Dura has robbed you of your bounty, there remains that part which you have already swallowed—that is, the girl’s heart—which he cannot take from you.”

“True indeed. I like that proverb,” exclaimed Yusuf.

“Don’t take it too hard,” Kent consoled his friend. “Visiting Day is coming up soon, and I’m sure there will be plenty of good things from home to replace what the man-eater has snatched.”

“Guys,” announced Yusuf as the group headed toward the dining hall, “don’t forget that today is Saturday. Let’s meet up at the hideout after supper.”

“Yes, there is plenty to talk about. I’ll volunteer to bring some warm water to massage Jeff’s sore cheek,” Kent teased.

“What can I say?” Jeff replied jestingly. “My love overwhelmed the girl’s failing heart.”

CHAPTER 10

“Wake up, lazy *monos*! This is not a holiday camp. Everyone follow me!” Dura yelled in a drunken rage as he shook their beds violently.

It was a Sunday morning before daybreak. Dura led his victims toward the upperclassmen’s section of the dormitory and commanded them to kneel down next to his bed.

“As you all know, today is Visiting Day,” he continued, “and it is also rather obvious that orphans cannot expect the dead to pay them a visit. I am certain that your parents would not commend you for feasting while others are starving.”

As Yusuf listened to the diatribe, it slowly dawned on him that behind Dura’s malevolence was a frightened child haunted by the demons of harrowing despair and untold sorrows. Dura’s sunken eyes and stunted body attested to the abject realities of his life. At the heart of the ruthless image he tried to project was the helpless orphan who craved release from the crushing grip of misery.

“All you need to do this morning,” decreed Dura, “is to sign your name in my new *mono* taxation log. By signing it you are promising to bring me a portion of whatever treats you’ll receive from home.”

One by one the Form One students signed their names, hoping thereby to appease their tormentor. Those who hailed from far away provinces signed with great anxiety

because they knew that they probably would have nothing with which to quell Dura's wrath at the end of the day.

"Thank you, boys, and don't forget I know where you live. You can run, but you cannot hide!" Dura declared as he dismissed them.

"Here's our chance to poison the bastard," said Kent to his classmates when they were outside the dormitory.

"And nobody will ever know what happened? That will only make us like the proverbial moth that flies into the furnace," Maina observed.

"Maina, you'll get my vote to speak at his funeral. Just think of how many proverbs you can tell and to such a perceptive audience," Kent replied.

The school's gate was opened to outsiders once a term. Visiting Day was scheduled halfway between the beginning and end of the term in the hope of rejuvenating weary students. It was also by design that Visiting Day came immediately after midterm exams, an arrangement that allowed parents to evaluate their children's academic progress. For most Form One students, the day was an occasion during which interaction with loved ones restored faith in and focus on the purpose of education.

Yusuf chose to wait for his mother alone under the trees by the school gate. He was not sure she could make it, given her unpredictable schedule as a housemaid, but he had no doubt that she would seize the slightest chance to pay him a visit. By mid-afternoon he had nearly given up hope when he saw her trademark headdress. Overcome by joy, he ran towards his mother at top speed. When she saw her son approaching, Amina dropped her luggage to the ground and extended her arms to embrace him. For several minutes the two embraced without saying a word. He wept unashamedly as she stroked his head tenderly with her long fingers.

"Yusuf, my child!" she cried. "My heart has ached for you through many lonely nights. My son you have lost weight!"

"Life is tough here. We work very hard," he replied evasively.

"You must spare some time to eat, however. No one learns on an empty stomach. Where can we sit down and talk?"

"I know a perfect place where we can rest in the shade," Yusuf said as he picked up his mother's knapsack.

"Our neighbor Rehema wanted to come along," said Amina, "but her little Juma fell ill last night, and she couldn't leave him unattended. Everyone in the village misses you. They are very proud to have you representing them here."

"Tell them I won't disappoint them," Yusuf replied. "And next time they can express their support with something more tangible like food or cash!"

"*Bwana*, it is true when they say this school is intent on cultivating its students' appetite," Amina remarked in jest.

"They've perfected the art indeed," Yusuf quipped.

Yusuf's mother had prepared a variety of delicious dishes for the occasion. As soon as they found a place to sit down, Yusuf devoured the contents of several bowls. He didn't say much, but his silence allowed a mother's perceptive eye to inspect her only offspring at close range. In spite of his lost weight, there were features that reassured her of her son's general well-being. Just like the awkward bush of hair around an adolescent lion precedes its majestic mane, Amina detected signs of imminent manhood in Yusuf's ravenous appetite. For his part the experience of a full stomach felt surreal after months

of partial starvation. He closed his eyes to savor the surge of energy that spread lazily from his abdomen to his limbs. After gulping a cupful of partially brewed porridge, he was ready to engage his mother in conversation.

“Remember *Mzee* Jabbazi, the famous hedgehog hunter?” Amina asked eagerly.

“How could I forget him after all those times he made me wet my shorts by throwing dead hedgehogs at me? Did he die?” Yusuf inquired casually.

“No, but it turns out he is not the master hunter he pretends to be. His deceptions finally caught up with him. *Mzee* Cheche found him tying hedgehogs to his traps. It was discovered that he reuses all the hedgehogs he catches and sometimes carries dead ones from one farm to another to maximize his profits,” she explained amid laughter.

“It sounds as though he has adopted the government’s new policy of recycling. What did the villagers do to him?” Yusuf asked.

“They made up all sorts of songs to mock him. Of course, he has lost all his credibility as well as his customers,” she said.

Time passed quickly while Amina carried her son back to familiar places on the wings of her humorous stories. During their three hours together, Yusuf’s attention to his mother was only interrupted by his hearty laughter.

Just before 6:00 in the evening all visitors were required to leave the school compound. It was an emotional farewell for Yusuf as he prepared to return to a life fraught with turmoil and heartache. After a long embrace his mother kissed his cheeks and tried to reassure her teary son.

“Very soon you will be coming home for the holidays,” Amina said. “I’ve a grand plan that will keep us cheerfully occupied.”

“And what is that?” Yusuf asked.

“Now that you are stronger we can put your late grandfather’s boat to use. We can go fishing, and, if we are successful, we can sell some of the fish at the market.”

“That is a great idea!” Yusuf exclaimed. “I know the best places to net some big fish, and I am sure Kent would be eager to join us.”

“You should invite him to come along then. We could use an extra pair of hands,” Amina added to her son’s delight.

“Excuse me,” the school watchman interrupted, “but I have to close the gate.”

“I must be going,” Amina said as she kissed Yusuf goodbye. “Dusk is already approaching. Farewell, my son.”

Heavy tears coursed down Yusuf’s cheeks, which his mother tenderly wiped away with her handkerchief as she struggled to hold back her own tears.

“The weeks will go by quickly. Soon you will be coming home,” she said reassuringly.

In the depths of her heart, Amina hoped that the wheels of time would turn more rapidly this time around. Their fleeting reunion had come like a brief rain shower at the peak of a drought. Although it had renewed her, she silently wondered whether she could survive another bout of solitude and loneliness. In spite of her neighbors’ supportive and caring friendship, she could not escape the gnawing longing that accompanied her daily chores and followed her deep into her dreams. While the death of her parents had left her emotionally vulnerable, her son’s absence threatened to dismantle her sanity.

“Write me a letter and send it to Salaam Primary School. The village children will deliver it to me,” she told him as they parted.

“I will write, and please make sure that the boat is seaworthy,” he replied.

“I’ll have it repaired as soon as possible,” Amina said as she stepped outside the gate.

Yusuf and his mother walked away reluctantly in opposite directions. They felt the weight of each step which distanced them further from their reunion’s momentary reprieve. She returned to her lonely two-room hut, while he remained to confront a *mono*’s hazing at Shimo la Tewa High. Time apart had allowed both of them to establish an uneasy equilibrium in their separate worlds, but the reunion had disrupted the tenuous balance.

The dormitory was empty when Yusuf arrived there. He had waited to return during suppertime when everyone else was occupied in the dining hall. He hid his leftovers and untouched dishes in his trunk and locked it before hurrying out of sight. During the evening study time he could barely keep his eyes open. Twice he was caught by the teacher on duty snoring atop his books. Time dragged along slowly as he waited for the prep to end. When the bell finally rang, he hastily finished his chores and got into bed as soon as he could.

In the middle of the night he was awakened by a thunderous commotion. Before his eyes could adjust to the bright lights, someone was banging on his bunk with a hockey stick. When he finally recovered from his bewilderment, he was surprised to find his dormitory filled with prefects dressed in ties and blazers. Yusuf realized it was serious business when he heard the voice of the teacher on duty.

“Everyone wake up and open your trunks,” Mr. Mustafa demanded.

“What’s going on?” Yusuf asked Rafiq who was standing nearby.

“No one told you? This is a random search. It’s a way to ensure that no one is storing contraband in the dormitory.”

“And they have to do this at 4:00 a.m.?” Yusuf asked angrily.

“Open your trunk and don’t waste our time!” a prefect yelled at Yusuf. “What is this? You can’t store perishable items here. They will decay and pose a health hazard to everyone around you. Sorry, but I’ll have to confiscate this.”

“Please no,” pleaded Yusuf. “I will eat it quickly...I will make the whole thing disappear in seconds.”

“*Mono*, I don’t doubt your prowess in such matters,” the prefect retorted, “but you should know that people get heartburn all the time from snacking in the middle of the night. It is simply too dangerous.”

With those words Yusuf watched helplessly as the prefect emptied his leftovers into a plastic bag. The smirk on the prefect’s face made it obvious that he was there to loot. The raid ended as abruptly as it had begun. Soon there was only silence, but Yusuf found it difficult to fall back asleep. The humiliating experience had exposed the rift between his instinct for self-preservation and his quest for dignity. Was he aiding and abetting his exploiters—was he colluding with his tormentors—by conforming to their unjust demands? Why hadn’t he resisted the unjust looting of his property? By failing to stand up for himself, could he be trusted to stand up for anything or anyone else? These questions haunted his mind as he lay in the dark unable to sleep.

He felt like the animals he had seen on many occasions at the slaughterhouse. Their images streamed through his mind as he stared into the impenetrable darkness around him. They were images of limp bodies hanging upside down on metallic hooks

attached to the ceiling; desiccated bodies entrapped in death, motionless and skinless, gutted out and exposed to the defiling licks of filthy flies, deprived of even the pretense of dignity. In the harsh silence, he lay on his back seething with anger. The time had come, he thought, to reclaim his dignity. His manhood demanded an insurrection.

CHAPTER 11

“I am sorry it took me so long to complete the assignment, but I am ready now,” Yusuf said when Sister O’Neal answered the door.

It was a moonless Saturday night, and the wind was blowing fiercely. Sister O’Neal could hardly make out Yusuf’s words, but she was delighted to see him on her doorstep. He had snuck away from his friends at the hideout and employed the utmost stealth to reach his destination. His heart trembled with excitement and trepidation as he entered the mysterious world into which his hostess had beckoned him.

After overcoming her initial surprise, Sister O’Neal led him to her impeccably neat sitting room where he sat on the sofa. She returned to the front door, turned off the outside lights, and engaged the lock before returning to her unexpected guest.

“What a pleasant surprise,” she said, trying to appear composed.

“Thank you. Is this a bad time?” Yusuf asked as he resisted an inner rush of anxiety.

“Absolutely not. I am glad you could come. Solitude forces mankind to appreciate warm-blooded company,” she said with a smile.

“My history teacher informed us that is how the dog found itself trapped in a friendship with man!” Yusuf said jokingly.

Amid a hearty laugh Sister O’Neal lightheartedly protested this characterization. “I take exception to that belief, but can I offer you something to eat?” she inquired.

“Thanks, but I am full,” he replied politely.

“Then I’ll be right back with a cup of tea for you,” she said, disappearing into the kitchen.

In spite of the pleasantries, there was an uneasy awkwardness between them. For one thing, nothing could have prepared Yusuf for seeing Sister O’Neal in shorts and a T-shirt. Contrary to his belief regarding nuns, she was physically strong and attractive beneath her signature loose-fitting costume. Her flawless skin was evidence enough that her usual attire had shielded her from the scorching rays of coastal sunshine.

She returned dressed in a pale blue nightdress. She had draped a white shawl over her shoulders but left her long black hair uncovered.

“A more appropriate outfit for a nun, wouldn’t you say?” she joked as she returned to her seat. “I tend to go to bed early on Saturday nights. I find it difficult to entertain myself late into the night.”

“You must be lonely. My mother lives alone ever since I left home,” he replied.

“I am sure the thought of her diligent son keeps her company,” she said with a smile.

“More likely she enjoys some relief and great rest from my long absence,” he quipped.

“I highly doubt it,” Sister O’Neal replied. “Most of my friends assume that I am used to solitude, but I tell them that human beings are hopelessly social creatures. It takes years before one can accept being alone, although one never really gets used to it.”

They chatted casually for half an hour over tea. The nun found Yusuf’s life to be as fascinating as he did hers. Although her attempt to create a friendly and relaxing environment had set him at ease, he could not dismiss the gnawing feeling that her agenda exceeded what she had described. His desire to break through this veil of mystery kept him alert and vigilant. When nearly an hour had passed without any indication that she would broach the topic, he felt obliged to steer their conversation in that direction.

“I have to admit I was afraid you would not like my paper,” he remarked.

“And why is that?”

“It wasn’t exactly in line with what I thought you were expecting,” he said.

“That impression is partly my fault,” she explained. “Sometimes we have to play roles that force us to distance the true self from the public self.”

“You mean you don’t like teaching religion?” Yusuf probed.

“Religious studies are a natural passion for me,” she said, “although the older I get the more I realize that one cannot truly teach religion in a classroom. A person can teach orthodoxy and rituals that way, but not the form of religion that inspires spiritual awakening and transformation of the soul. That form of religion must be whispered from one knowing heart to another.”

“That view must make it difficult for you to be a teacher,” Yusuf observed.

“It created a moral dilemma for me as a teacher of religion. I’ve resolved to deal with it by ‘exposing without contaminating,’” she said with a smile. “Please, come with me. I will show you some things you might find interesting.”

Sister O’Neal led Yusuf to her library. The spacious room was neatly organized with a large table at one end and a bookshelf at the other. She reached for a thick book and placed it on the table.

“This book, *The Gnostic Christ*, will reveal why your paper captivated me so deeply,” Sister O’Neal explained, “but of course you don’t have time to read eight hundred pages tonight, so I’ll give you a brief summary. Two thousand years ago Gnostic Christians formed secluded communities that sought to enter into a union with the Divine through a process of spiritual enlightenment. They immersed themselves in scriptures, meditation, and holy rituals as a pathway to purification. In return, they attained a rebirth after which they could perceive and interact with Christ and the saints. They compiled their visions and teachings on scrolls. Some of them have been discovered and translated into English.”

“Will you be teaching us about this in class?” Yusuf asked in a voice full of excitement.

“Unfortunately,” she said, “there are those who believe that education should be made as bland and insufferable as possible. Regrettably, they decide what enters into your head.”

“Have you read these writings of the Gnostics?” Yusuf inquired.

“I have read everything I have been able to get hold of. This book contains extracts from those manuscripts that have been found. I will tell you more when I finish reading it,” she said. “At any rate, you will be delighted to learn that one of the Gnostic books is the Gospel of Judas!”

“Really? What does it say?” he asked in awe.

“Rumor has it that it was recently discovered in Egypt, then found its way into the black market where it went missing,” she explained. “I just hope that it will resurface soon because I can’t wait to read it.”

The two carried on their engaging discussion late into the night. Sister O’Neal’s knowledge of Gnosticism was as gripping as it was evidence of a profound change in her religious beliefs. She led Yusuf through Gnostic rituals of sanctification, after which they sat on a white mat to partake of Gnostic communion. They dipped their bread into the same cup and repeated the words of Gnostic supplication as they sought to ascend into a holier realm.

“We have only knocked at the door,” Sister O’Neal said in a soft voice at the ceremony’s end, “and if we persist we too will become sons and daughters of Light, which is how the Gnostics saw themselves.”

“That was a marvelous experience,” Yusuf remarked.

“You said that you found some friends to join us?” she inquired with a smile.

“Yes. I spoke to two of my friends about getting involved with the support group. They were actually quite excited about the idea.”

“Do I know them?” she asked.

“They are both in my class—Kent Musa and Brian O’Koth,” he answered.

“Do you think they would be inclined to walk the Gnostic path?”

“Most definitely! I cannot think of any reason for either of them to refuse.”

“I’m convinced that we will be most effective in reaching out to despairing souls only after we have attained communion with the Divine,” Sister O’Neal said.

“Do you want me to bring them along next time?” he asked.

“You should invite them if they are willing. I will prepare some treats for the occasion. You also are welcome to borrow any of the books in my library,” she said.

“Have you read all of them?” he asked in amazement.

“Not all, but most of them. This is a lifetime collection. The section here is devoted to religious books: the Holy Bible, the Koran, the Teachings of Confucius, the Talmud, the Teachings of Buddha, the Apocrypha, the Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, and so forth. And in this section is my collection of sociopolitical works. Some of these you may not be familiar with: *The Communist Manifesto*, *Plato’s Republic*, *Les Miserables*, *The Brothers Kalamazov*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The River Between*, *Animal Farm*, *1984*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, among others. I even have a section for children’s books, though I couldn’t tell you why—perhaps for memory’s sake. You should read this one, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. In some ways the setting of the novel fits our environment. I love books, although some of these would be considered seditious by the government,” she said pensively.

“I wonder why that is the case,” Yusuf wondered with his eyes fixed on the books. The thought of sedition stirred a twinge of terror deep in his heart that seemed to arrest his thoughts momentarily.

“It is because the enlightened mind is irrepressible. It can be neither contained nor silenced, and that is an intolerable threat to tyranny everywhere. A pen in the right hand is a more lethal weapon than a loaded gun,” she stated.

“I would love to read all these books. I wonder what secrets they would divulge,” Yusuf replied.

“Feel free to read any of them, although some cannot leave this house. You are welcome to read in my study,” she said.

“I wouldn’t mind that at all. Your house is far more comfortable and cleaner than the school library,” he replied.

“Thank you,” she said.

“So have you always loved to read?”

“It was not always the case. When I was your age I did not value books the way I do now. But by and by, as one grows older, life presents dilemmas that push a person out into the world searching for solutions inside other people’s heads.”

“I believe I am there already,” Yusuf said to her amusement.

“You are still very young,” she replied. “The time will come when you will be forced to dissect reality in search of meaning and enduring purpose.”

“Have you found it?” he answered, genuinely curious.

“I believe I am getting there. I have come to realize that one lives a deceitful life until the day she sees reflected in another’s eyes the truth she treasures in her own heart. Unfortunately for me, the eye in which my truth shone was trapped behind an iron veil. Well, we’ll have to call it a night. It is getting late.”

The evening marked the beginning of a fascinating journey for both Yusuf and Sister O’Neal. For Yusuf it constituted a crucial first step into an enchanting world of potent ideas and spiritual arousal. For her part Sister O’Neal had launched herself into a trajectory that she hoped would lead her to gnosis and infinite fulfillment.

“I have very much enjoyed the evening. Thank you, Sister O’Neal,” Yusuf said as he prepared to leave.

“In my house I am Eunice,” she said with a warm smile. “That is what my friends call me, and you should too.”

“Thank you then, Eunice.”

“Don’t mention it. The pleasure was mine,” she replied. “Here, take this loaf of bread with you. I am sure you will be hungry later.”

“Thank you kindly,” he said as he stepped into the darkness outside her door.

Shortly after Yusuf left, Sister O’Neal turned on the outside light and stood by the window staring into the night. The wind was blowing strongly again, creating a whistling sound among the trees.

Yusuf meanwhile made his way stealthily along the dark trail to the school compound. Every few steps he looked around warily for fear of being detected. When he came around a corner, he was seized from behind by an attacker, catching him entirely by surprise.

“Tell me what you were doing in her house!” a deep voice demanded, while strong hands held Yusuf by the neck.

“Nothing. She is my teacher,” Yusuf explained in terror.

“A special tutoring session in the middle of the night, huh?” the attacker retorted before slamming Yusuf to the ground. “She is mine. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I am sorry! You can have her,” Yusuf said in a frantic voice.

“I am her guardian angel,” the menacing stranger said between punches. “Did you think you could steal her from me? What is this, bread? She gave you bread? You get

bread while I, who has to endure the bitter cold and rain, sleep on an empty stomach. Is that fair? You did not think someone was watching when you tiptoed into her house, did you?"

"She invited me," Yusuf tried to explain.

"She did? Why didn't she invite me too? She probably doesn't even know I sit here all night watching over her," the man ranted.

The more the assailant spoke, the angrier he became and the more severe were his blows. Yusuf realized that he was in a fight for his life. When he found an opportunity, he swung a vicious kick into the attacker's groin, leaving him groaning on the ground. Yusuf ran at top speed until he made it to the hideout, where he collapsed beside his classmates who were fast asleep. He was too terrified to sleep as he continually searched the dark night, hoping that his assailant had not traced his path of flight. Eventually sleep overcame his fearful vigil.

"Yusuf, where were you last night?" his friends inquired at the break of dawn.

"I had a meeting with death, but thanks goodness I prevailed," he muttered groggily.

"*Bwana*, you owe us an explanation. We spent the whole night worrying about you," Kent replied.

"Yes, you were so worried that you were sound asleep when I finally made it here," Yusuf retorted.

"We were out there looking for you in the middle of the night," O'Koth added. "You could have said something before you left. You didn't have to sneak away."

"Hey, relax. All is well," Yusuf said as he jumped to his feet.

"Man, your face is swollen!" Kent remarked. "Who was it?"

"Don't worry. I'm okay," Yusuf answered evasively.

"Let's get going before it's too late," Abdul announced, leading his comrades out of the hideout.

They hurried back toward the dormitories. After a quick stop under the water tank where they washed their faces, they returned to the school's main road. Along the way they came face to face with a disheveled man who appeared delusional. After every few steps he stooped down to the ground to engage angrily with some invisible beings. Yusuf recognized his voice as that of his assailant. The loaf of bread he had lost remained firmly wedged under the man's arm as he staggered forward on his worn-out sandals.

CHAPTER 12

Several weeks had passed since Yusuf had mustered the courage to approach Rose. He had waited patiently for a letter from her, but as days turned into weeks he could no longer blame the delay on the postal service. On a Tuesday, three days after his ruthless beating by a madman, Yusuf walked to the notice board before lunch to check for mail. To his astonishment he saw his name on the list and immediately dashed to the prefect in charge of students' mail to claim his letter. He recognized her handwriting immediately. As he held the letter in his hands, he wondered why she had taken so long to write him. He carefully folded the envelope and put it in his back pocket. He needed uninterrupted

privacy before he could venture into its contents. Against the urgings of his overwhelming curiosity, he put off opening the letter until after lunch.

Although he had not eaten anything except two thin slices of bread since early that morning, Yusuf found the rice and beans at lunch unappetizing. He could not bring himself to sit in the dining hall long enough to fill his stomach. After hurriedly forcing a few bites into his mouth, he abandoned the remainder and ran back to a vacant classroom.

When he finally opened the envelope, a pleasant scent escaped from it, reminding him of her soft cheek against his. The surge of emotions that had attended their brief time together had returned to electrify his heart. Rose's every line awoke in him a profound longing for her touch and refreshing smile. She wrote:

Dear Yusuf,

I hope this letter finds you well and cheerful. I realize that girls are supposed to hide their true feelings from boys. I suppose this is what they call feminine wit, but I readily admit that I lack such. That is why it took me so long to write as I struggled to find the right words to express myself to you. I finally settled for the plain and unadorned truth as it makes itself known to my heart. I've come to believe that honesty is the most direct path to happiness.

I have never had a "special someone" in my life before, so this is entirely new territory for me. I would guess from your fumbling and fidgeting that your situation is not much better than mine. Ever since we met my mind has been in a spin. It feels as though I have awakened from a deep sleep to a new life and self, one with which I must get acquainted. When I think of your shy smile and engaging eyes, I cannot wait to see you again. I crave your gentle touch, your shy smile, your mellow voice.

When our bus started toward the gate that day, I hurried to the back window to catch one more glimpse of the boy who had stolen my heart. I saw you standing alone in the dusk, and for once I thought that life is cruel in such moments when the heart's cravings are eclipsed by dusk and dust. I do not know when I will see you again, but I am enclosing a memento with this letter for your safekeeping. Please send me something of yours to treasure until we meet again.

So long, Rose

PS: Who won your silly bet?

"I knew you were up to no good," Kent announced upon catching up with Yusuf in the classroom, "when I saw you leaving the dining hall without licking your plate clean."

"It's just a letter," Yusuf replied with pretended calmness.

"Is everything alright?" Kent inquired.

"It is from Rose," Yusuf said shyly.

"Alas, there is life after death!" Kent exclaimed. "What did she say? Come on, let me read it."

"Okay, but you must read fast before everybody returns," Yusuf insisted as he handed the letter to his friend.

“*Bwana*, she really likes you,” Kent said with a tinge of jealousy after reading the letter. “What did she send to you?”

“Her heart in a box,” replied Yusuf.

“Come on, be serious! What did she send?” Kent pleaded.

“She sent a lock of hair,” Yusuf answered.

“And what will you send to her?” Kent asked.

“You are the imaginative one. I need your help,” Yusuf replied.

“Let’s see. I definitely would discourage you from sending some of your short hair. She might mistake it for pubic hair.”

“That would indeed be a disaster!” Yusuf agreed.

“You also need to be original,” Kent advised. “What else from your body are you willing to part with?”

“I suppose I could cut my nails and post them, but that’s gross when you think about it,” Yusuf said.

“Nails might be a bad idea,” Kent agreed. “I wish I had known about this a few weeks ago. My mother saved part of my umbilical cord. I could have asked her to bring it over on Visiting Day.”

“I think I overestimated your genius. You’re not being very helpful. Maybe you are the wrong person to ask,” Yusuf said in frustration.

From the moment he received Rose’s letter, Yusuf found it difficult to focus on his schoolwork. He knew that he needed to come up with an original idea to reciprocate her gesture, but even after obsessing over the matter for several days he was unable to reach any satisfactory solution. However, he had the presence of mind to know that time was of the essence lest Rose think that he didn’t share her feelings.

Yusuf was still struggling to resolve his quandary when he returned to Sister O’Neal’s house on Saturday evening. True to his word, he brought Kent and O’Koth along for their initiation into the Gnostic Society. Sister O’Neal surprised them with a sumptuous dinner to commemorate the occasion. They ate and chatted for a long time before finally addressing the real purpose of their meeting. She then led her flock of fledgling disciples to “the shrine,” where they sat in a circle on a large white mat.

“As you might have learned from Yusuf,” she began, “the Gnostic Communion is a society whose aim is to stir spiritual awakening within each of us. And like the ancient sons and daughters of Light, we too may ascend to that level of transcendence through meditation, ritual, and worship. I have designed this room in the likeness of the sacred shrines where the Gnostics lived and worshiped and where many attained union with the Divine.”

Sister O’Neal then led her captivated companions in a ritual of cleansing. They repeated the words of a Gnostic ceremony of initiation as they drank from a shared cup. When the ritual was completed, she gave to members of the new Communion a white silk headdress which they were to don during their communion.

“On this day you have begun your quest for the abundant life,” Sister O’Neal declared. “The Gnostics covered their heads with white headdresses as a symbol of the purity of their thoughts and purpose. We have become the sons and daughter of Light. Henceforth we must embrace and protect one another as siblings from the same womb.”

After Sister O'Neal's remarks they turned to one another in warm embraces. With deep emotion she hugged and kissed the three boys on their cheeks. Tears of joy trickled down her cheeks when she finally came to Yusuf. She could not mask the fact that she harbored special affection and regard for him.

"Every society rises or falls on the dedication, or the lack thereof, of its members to its creed," she continued. "I will therefore present for your consideration our creed. It is this simple: Pursuit of gnosis; Enlightenment of mind; Purity of heart."

After the group unanimously adopted the creed, Sister O'Neal delivered an impassioned sermon on Gnosticism. She kept the meeting open for discussion and encouraged participation by calling on the members to read aloud extracts she had selected from Gnostic texts. She had a deep affinity for the Gospel of Thomas and the Dialogue of the Savior from which the majority of her teachings were derived. Toward the end of the meeting, Sister O'Neal opened it to what she called the "dismantling of personal crosses."

"It is the sacred duty of the Gnostics to alleviate each other's burdens," she declared. "As such, we shall conclude each meeting by opening our hearts in expressions of our private or public agonies. In the sharing of these burdens, it is the Gnostic belief that they will be eliminated or made lighter."

Going around the circle, each shared his inner struggles. Under the direction of Sister O'Neal, youthful crises were handled with the utmost sympathy and compassion. Like a holy priestess among penitent disciples, she reached out to them in consolation and empathy. Yusuf felt comfortable enough to solicit a solution to his pressing dilemma. They all listened attentively and interrupted only to ask essential questions.

"Love is an empowering, sacred experience that expands the capacity of every heart. How can we help you attain fulfillment from this experience?" Sister O'Neal inquired of Yusuf.

"You see," he said, "I met this girl during the interschool sports competition. I think she is absolutely adorable, and I think she liked me too. Long story short, I received a letter from her recently. Inside the envelope was a lock of her hair. She asked me to send her something equivalent to remind her of me. I couldn't come up with anything, and I was wondering what you might suggest."

"It sounds as though you really like this girl," Sister O'Neal replied with a smile. "Let's see. Do you have something you cherish?"

"Here in school? I have a mug and a spoon but nothing of any real worth," he answered.

"I don't think that either a mug or a spoon will suffice. If you don't mind, we can look around my house to see whether we can come up with something your princess might like."

"I don't mind at all," Yusuf replied gratefully.

"Perhaps she might like a valentine necklace with a pink heart on it. Hold on, let me fetch it for you," Sister O'Neal said as she dashed into her bedroom. "See, it still looks brand new! I haven't worn it much. I got it for Valentine's Day from my father when I was in primary school."

"I like it very much," he said, "but it would not be fair of me to accept the gift. I imagine it is very special to you."

“That is very thoughtful and considerate, but don’t worry. I have cupboards full of souvenirs from my father,” Sister O’Neal said reassuringly. “I think she would like it, and your giving it to her would make me feel special too.”

“I cannot thank you enough, Sister O’Neal . . . I mean Eunice,” Yusuf answered.

“What is her name?” Sister O’Neal asked with a smile.

“Rose. She is a student at Matuga Girls’ Secondary School,” he explained while examining the necklace.

“Rose. That is a beautiful name,” she replied. “You are very fortunate. A lot of people go through life without ever experiencing the magic of love, not to mention that it took you only a single weekend.”

When the meeting ended, the three boys left Sister O’Neal’s house and headed to their hideout. The psychotic man who had unleashed a torrent of blows on Yusuf after his previous visit had been ejected from the compound by the school watchmen following Sister O’Neal’s complaint. Without a glitch, the boys arrived at their hideout where their friends eagerly awaited them.

In her case Sister O’Neal was delighted that Yusuf had stumbled on romantic love. At the very least, it would make it easier for her to enlist him in her grand scheme when the moment finally arrived. First and foremost, however, her mind was fixed on nurturing the hearts and cultivating the minds of the budding Gnostics.

CHAPTER 13

Yusuf set aside Sunday evening to write a reply to Rose’s letter. All day long he ransacked his mind for words to convey the depth of his emotions. When the evening prep began, he wasted no time in wielding his pen. He crafted his words carefully and paused often to ensure that they adequately expressed his overpowering emotions. As he struggled to transform deep feelings into words, his mind and body coalesced in a trance-like state where they were fully immersed in the introspective task. With a tight grip on his pen and a bowed head, he wrote the following:

Dearest Rose,

It was with immense pleasure that I received your long-awaited letter. My impatient heart had nearly succumbed to pessimism, but I can reassure you that it has been bounteously repaid for all its longings. Your lock of hair has bound my faith in our friendship. I carry it with me wherever I go.

When you left our campus, I was extremely dejected. It was as though sight had been snatched from my eyes at the break of dawn. I was left stranded in a storm of “what ifs.” What if we had had the whole night to bask in the moonlight and whisper into each other’s ears? What if we had had a few more minutes to hold on to one another before parting? What truths might we have conjured in the warmth of such an embrace?

And, yes, you are right: I too am new to this experience. (Dare I confess that my mother is the only other female I have loved, and obviously in a different way.) Perhaps there is a book that reveals the

secrets of love, but something tells me that I, like you, must speak the truth as it stirs in my heart—naked, unrestrained, and sincere truth. I crave the touch of your palm, the breeze in your whisper, and, yes, the wonder of your smile. I struggle to speak as I feel, for I find myself gathering these words from a mind ablaze in an inferno of overpowering passions and hopes and desires. When will I see you again? It is true that where there is a will there must be a way. We can find a way, even if it involves scaling the school fence. Let me know if you are willing.

I have a great deal more to tell you. Recently I have learned some things I think you might find interesting. Unfortunately they are things I cannot commit to ink and paper, but let me ask whether you have ever heard of Gnosticism.

My dear Rose, I must now say goodbye. Your sweet memory blooms in my heart like an orchard in the middle of a desert. I hope that you will like the necklace. Think of it as my fingers stroking your neck gently through the dark night of our separation.

Missing you always, Yusuf

As soon as the evening prep ended, he walked to the mailroom and slipped his letter accompanying the necklace into the narrow slot on the wall. He craved the opportunity to eavesdrop on Rose's thoughts after she read his letter. Even as the letter lay not yet posted in the mailroom, his heart throbbed with impatience for her reply. This crisis would recur often in the course of their passionate relationship.

Given the difficulties that besieged every *mono*, Yusuf was constantly pressed for time. Coursework became increasingly challenging throughout the semester. The grinding pressure in the classroom was interrupted only by the welcome reprieve of Literature and History. Yusuf might have loved Mathematics as well, but his short-tempered teacher created a precarious environment for learning. On the sidelines of this academic theater his relationship with Rose flourished in the many letters they regularly exchanged.

"Students," said Mr. Raban, Yusuf's class master, "the first term in secondary school presents unique challenges. For some of you this was your first time away from home for an extended period. The need to balance schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and assigned chores also poses a new challenge for most students. As we now come to the end of the term, I am glad to announce that in spite of these challenges most of you performed remarkably well on your examinations. The class average is the highest we have seen in recent years. There were some notable surprises in the results, as you will see. As you head homeward tomorrow, I advise you to keep your books open. Remember: if you don't, someone else will!"

The students cheered at the end of Mr. Raban's speech. Nervously they each pressed forward to the front of the hall to collect their report forms. Because Yusuf had entered Shimo la Tewa High as the highest-ranked student, he was expected to take the top position in the end-of-term examinations. But before he had even looked at his report form, Mr. Raban's disapproving look informed him that all was not well.

"Elsewhere we are told that the first shall be last," declared Mr. Raban as he handed Yusuf his card.

Yusuf did not dare look at his report form until he was alone in the restroom. Under the dim light he reached into his pocket with a tremulous hand. He directed his gaze immediately to the bottom of the card to see his ranking in the class. Scribbled in faint blue ink were the words, "Number 7 out of 135. Shame on you."

"Hurray! I am not the last!" Yusuf shouted with joy. He dashed out to join his friends, who were still chatting about the results in the hall.

"I'm sorry Yusuf. I heard you didn't do well," Kent said consolingly.

"Actually I'm happy with my performance. Seven out of 135 is not bad at all," he said.

"No, you're right. Mr. Raban had us thinking that you came out last," replied Kent.

"I think he assumes that my only aim in school is to become number one," Yusuf answered.

The last night at school before holidays was a treacherous occasion for Form One students. It was widely referred to as the "night of terror." Only the most reckless returned to their dormitories after supper. In preparation for the occasion, the upperclassmen from early evening onward drowned their consciences with alcohol. The most brutal among them pulled out whips from their trunks, eager to unleash terror at nightfall when they roamed the compound like gangs of marauding predators. For Yusuf and his fellow Gnostics, however, this night would hold a greater terror than they could have imagined.

Given the solidarity among members of the Gnostic Society, Sister O'Neal had again offered her home as a refuge to her disciples on the "night of terror." Not only was she sympathetic to the boys' plight, but the occasion also provided a unique opportunity to reinforce the principles she had so devotedly taught them. At sundown the three boys arrived at their mentor's doorstep eager to embark on a special journey.

"Friends, come right in," Sister O'Neal announced when she answered the door. "O'Koth, do you need some help carrying your luggage?"

"No thanks. I can manage," he answered.

"He is afraid of being seen as less than a man," Kent jibed. "Come on, O'Koth. Anyone can see that your trunk is larger than you."

"I'd never doubt your manliness, O'Koth," Sister O'Neal said reassuringly.

"I cannot resist the inviting aroma," Yusuf interjected. "What did you cook, Eunice? It smells so good?"

"Alas, a guy who wears his stomach on his sleeve!" Kent exclaimed.

"I have to confess I did not entirely make our meal tonight. I bought the *chapati* and stew from a restaurant in town," Sister O'Neal explained.

"I'll still give you credit for it," Yusuf stated.

"Thank you, Yusuf. I'll make sure you get one more *chapati* than everyone else," she said in jest.

"But I am the little one," O'Koth joked. "I should be encouraged to eat more."

"You are right; you should eat more when you get home," Kent quipped, causing an outburst of laughter.

After their bags were safely stored in Sister O'Neal's guest bedroom, the boys joined their hostess in the kitchen where they went to work setting the table for their

supper. Over dinner Sister O'Neal took charge of the conversation, reminding her students of the occasion's importance.

"It gives me great pleasure—and a pinch of sorrow—that we can all be here for our last supper this term," she said in an emotional voice. "It has been a great privilege for me to take this journey with you. I could not have found a more devoted group anywhere. I have watched each of you grow spiritually, and I have faith that you will attain the fulfilment and liberation that comes from gnosis. That is our destiny, and to attain it you must delve further into the human condition. You must sink into the depths of man's despair and rise to the peak of his joy. Our project tonight will take us there."

Sister O'Neal's speech was followed by a contemplative silence. Each boy tried to imagine what lay ahead in the awful world of condemned souls. Sister O'Neal had informed them earlier that the prison authorities had agreed to allow them to visit and participate in the final service before the execution of one of her parishioners. In the preceding days the boys had rehearsed the hymns with which they hoped to console the man on death row.

The execution was scheduled to take place at 11:00 p.m. Sister O'Neal had been allowed an hour for counseling the convict beforehand. To avoid possible objections, she had not informed the authorities that her companions were students from the nearby high school. Instead, she had described the boys as parishioners from the local diocese. Accordingly, she had gone into town and bought street clothes for the boys.

After enjoying a warm shower, the boys removed their school uniforms and happily donned their new clothes. A few minutes before 10:00 p.m. Sister O'Neal loaded her companions into her old Peugeot 404 and drove off toward the prison. After passing through its tight security screening, the four made their way into the block that housed death-row inmates. They were led by a security guard to a dark, musty cell.

The emaciated prisoner sat on the dirty floor with his back to the wall. Years of solitary confinement had wreaked havoc on his mind. He appeared terrified and fearful of human contact, weeping openly as he retreated to the farthest corner like a frightened animal at the sight of his guests. Sister O'Neal entered the cell first and cautiously made her way toward the trembling man. When he turned his back to her and dropped his head between his knees, she squatted behind him and began to speak in a soft voice.

"Batian, my friend, we are here for you. Come on. No one will hurt you," she pleaded.

"They are going to kill me. Tonight they will finish me off," Batian cried. "I am innocent. I only stole to feed my starving children. Why won't they forgive?"

"God knows your heart, Batian. He will judge you more graciously than mankind has," she consoled him while gently rubbing his back.

"They won't even let them come here to see me before they put me into the grave," he replied.

The three boys stood speechless at the entrance to the cell. The heart-wrenching scene had left them incapacitated and mentally paralyzed. Standing in the shadow of death, they were afraid to draw nearer and unaware of any avenue for escape.

"I brought my friends here to see you," continued Sister O'Neal. "Look, three of them, as old as your boys. We will stay with you until the final moment. We have come to give your mind the rest it needs. You love to sing, don't you Batian?"

“I have no voice for music. I just want to see my sons. Why won’t they allow them to say goodbye to me?” the broken man protested bitterly.

“*Pumbavu, nyamasa kamwe!*” the security guard scolded Batian as he passed by the cell. His shrill voice terrified Yusuf, who recognized the ominous figure as the bully that had mercilessly battered his frail grandfather.

When Sister O’Neal looked back, she was met by the frightened stares of her students. She beckoned them to join her. They approached cautiously and, after some encouragement, knelt in a circle around the broken prisoner. In a magnificent voice she led her youthful companions in singing hymns of consolation. Their voices rose and fell in unison like the gentle waves of the sea at sunset.

“*There is a green hill far away.*” Sister O’Neal’s melodious voice pierced the gloom of the prison cell. The boys joined in and sang fervently while Batian hummed the cadences. He wept with joy when they came to the third stanza:

*He died that we might be forgiv’n,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to Heav’n,
Saved by His precious blood.*

These hymns managed to thaw Batian’s icy heart. He listened as the Gnostics shared with him the powerful lessons they had discovered in their communion. Empowered by hope, the condemned man hugged and embraced his new friends with gratitude. The Gnostics recited the words of the Old Testament psalmist: “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*”

“Time is up!” declared a menacing guard as he prepared to take Batian to the execution chamber.

“Do not be afraid. God and his angels are waiting to receive you home,” Sister O’Neal urged Batian.

“God bless you, and thank you dearly,” Batian said as he was whisked away by three guards.

“*God be with you till we meet again,*” the visitors sang with conviction as they watched Batian being led away from the cell. The boys wept at the thought of his imminent death.

After the commotion, Sister O’Neal and her students were left unattended in Batian’s cell. The large door at the end of the dark hallway slammed shut, followed by an unbroken silence. The Gnostics stared into each other’s eyes for answers; the gravity of their loss was tangible and inescapable. In the silence they heard a terrified scream followed by a thud. None dared to voice his suspicion of what had happened. Then came the sounds of a flurry of activity in the execution chamber. Sister O’Neal seized the occasion to dash from the cell on a personal errand.

“Boys, wait for me here,” she whispered as she rushed out of the cell.

The boys waited with bated breath for deliverance or destruction, whichever came first. They heard sobs and whispers a short distance away. Wrapped in confusion, they huddled together motionlessly. As rapidly as she had disappeared, Sister O’Neal returned

to the cell, and shortly thereafter the guard returned to escort them out. He accompanied them to the gate and watched them vigilantly until they were beyond the prison grounds.

On their journey home the boys gazed into the moonless night and avoided Sister O'Neal's attempts to start a conversation. It was as if they had stared into death's ghastly eyes and surrendered their voices in terror.

"I went to the dead in search of life," Sister O'Neal's soft voice broke the gravid silence as she drove homeward. "From a distance I heard the helpless plea of life where it lay grieving the callous destruction of her offspring. Then my heart was caught up in the song of the saints, and I joined them in their bold anthem: *"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thy captives shall escape thy shackles and rise to a brilliant dawn."*

CHAPTER 14

On their way home from school, Yusuf and Kent sat quietly in the bus. It was a warm, sunny morning, and there were only a few passengers. The tranquil environment invited relaxation and reflection. Nearly three months had passed since Yusuf's jubilant journey to enroll at Shimo la Tewa High, but now he was no longer certain that the prize was worth the sacrifice. He was confident that Kajiwe would welcome the company of a devout assistant. After all, hadn't he invited him to return to the *Kaya* as soon as possible? He could join the profession of mystical healers and serve as a revered guardian of the sacred balance between life and death.

On second thought, however, there was something undeniably empowering about his studies at Shimo la Tewa. Intellectual stimulation under the guidance of such accomplished teachers as Ms. Apollo and Mrs. Shabaan constituted a feast that he could no longer do without. In addition, Sister O'Neal's understanding of Gnosticism combined with her capacity to instill profound lessons in the heart had stirred in him a longing for the grand awakening that was every Gnostic's aspiration. In a world fraught with peril, she had accompanied him in cathartic rituals of renewal. He reveled at the thought of what lay ahead in his spiritual journey.

To divert his mind from this conflict between these disparate worlds, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a letter he had recently received from Rose. He smiled as her words resonated in his mind:

My dear Yusuf,

As I get ready to return home to Nairobi for the holidays, there is only one other place I'd rather be, and that is out to sea with you in your grandfather's boat. Ever since you told me about your holiday plans, I have had dreams of us at sea, cuddling under the starry night far from shore while surrounded by the vast sea and living in a world without time or boundaries. And when I wake up I realize that my dream was about love. I will miss you, dear friend. Please don't write to me at home because my father would not take it kindly. In his view, school and homework are the only interests his girls ought to entertain.

As we discussed, I am planning to return to Mombasa two days before school starts. Do not forget to meet me at the bus terminal. I am

impatiently looking forward to our reunion. I will plant a thousand fantasies and reap in return a harvest of sweet dreams about being with you again.

Love, Rose

PS: I've been trying to find your friend a "soul-mate," but the girls I know think that he comes across as dangerously hungry for a woman. It would take several women to quench his astonishing thirst for love. Someone suggested that he is a budding polygamist!

"Is she still trying to find me a girlfriend?" asked Kent, interrupting Yusuf's daydream.

"She said that she is still working on it. I even sent her your photograph," Yusuf replied.

"Any prospects?" Kent asked excitedly.

"Yes, a few, but none was entirely qualified," Yusuf answered diplomatically.

"Tell her to relax the qualifications, man. Right now I just want someone to practice being in love with," Kent explained. "She will understand that, don't you think?"

"She may, but her friends might be scared away if you come across as . . . uh . . . too hungry for love," Yusuf said.

"But I thought that love is about being sincere regarding one's feelings. Can't I be honestly *hungry*?" Kent asked, visibly bewildered.

"This boy-girl thing is like a great novel," Yusuf explained. "Deep down you know that the author sat down and made the whole thing up from thin air. He invented the characters and their city, but as long as you are absorbed by the fiction you sympathize with those characters, and when the dam in the city breaks you almost reach into your pocket to donate your pennies to assist with reconstruction. And why do you buy into it? Because in that vicarious world you are powerful. You gain privileged access to the mysterious vault of the author's mind. After all, he is the creator of the world that stares back at you when you open the novel. It is the same idea when it comes to love."

"Now I am even more confused," Kent replied.

"With love all things are possible!" Yusuf exclaimed. "Only lovers and artists possess such power."

Yusuf and Kent carried on their discussion until they arrived at their destination. They parted ways with the promise of meeting up early the following week to start their fishing expedition.

On his first evening home Yusuf found himself sitting outside his mother's hut before a congregation of curious neighbors. From every side they ambushed him with questions about life at the renowned boarding school.

"Is it true the school has a shaman who employs powerful spells to guarantee success in the national examinations?" an elderly woman inquired, causing everyone to hold his tongue in anticipation of Yusuf's answer.

"There are secrets that I am sworn never to divulge," Yusuf declared, playing to the villagers' false suspicions.

"It is clear to me why the students of that school are so bright," interjected a balding middle-aged man, "and it has something to do with electricity. I've been there at

night, and I saw them reading with big lights over their heads. This must illuminate their minds.”

“Now we know why you went bald so early in life,” quipped the elderly woman. “You must have set your head on fire trying to become bright.”

It was late at night when the last group of villagers left Amina’s homestead. She was delighted to have her son home at last. She had a schedule full of fun activities to offset the rigorous demands of schoolwork.

“Just as I promised, I have the boat in great condition,” Amina informed Yusuf over a delicious dinner. “In fact, if you feel up to it we can go fishing in the morning.”

“That sounds wonderful,” replied Yusuf, “so long as I don’t have to wake up at the crack of dawn.”

“We don’t have to leave until mid-morning. I am sure that the fish are not going anywhere,” responded Amina. “You look awfully tired. You should go to bed.”

“You’re right. I feel as though I haven’t slept for months,” Yusuf said before retiring for the night.

Alone in his room Yusuf had the privacy he needed to venture into the contents of the note he had found in his bag that morning when he left Sister O’Neal’s house. He dimmed the lantern to give his mother the impression that he had gone to sleep. With immense curiosity, he ventured into the content of the nun’s note. It read:

Darling dearthair,

I feel as though we have attained a degree of confidence whereby I can trust you to be your “sister’s keeper.” I sought the Gnostic Communion because my heart was craving a tangible connection with my Maker. The farther I traveled on this path, the clearer it became that my redemption would be impossible in solitude and that my life of celibacy was an impediment to divine fulfilment and joy. I initially resisted this epiphany, but gradually I came to embrace it.

Over the past few years I have been laboring to extricate myself from my barren isolation, and it has been painful because this is all I have known. I went to the convent for its promise of peace and solace, having lost my family when I was a little girl in a senseless religious conflict in Ireland. It was the right path then, and it preserved my life. But I believe that it was only a step in the right direction toward this higher path.

I have been most blessed by our fellowship and holy labors. I hope we will continue to pursue the path until we attain the light of gnosis and that we will remain constant in our quest for spiritual awakening and rebirth.

I was deeply moved when you revealed to the Communion that you had encountered a special love. I too have basked in the sweet radiance of love. I hinted of it when I spoke of my truth being reflected back to me through an iron veil. My love sleeps in a cage like a beast, forced into submission because he allowed his tongue to utter terrible truths to the merchants of death. But I have been busy making plans, and the nature of things is such that when a path of escape opens up, I will be forced to move rapidly and without hesitation. I wanted you to know this, and do not be

discouraged but rejoice in the assurance that love has delivered me from the dungeon of sorrows. I was hoping to remain and watch our society mature, but under the present circumstances my stay here comes at a terrible cost. I hope you will understand. Whatever happens, I will keep my promise to reach out to you always.

Love, Eunice

In the weeks that followed, Amina's plan to make up for her difficult separation from Yusuf worked flawlessly. Although the month-long holiday passed quickly, both mother and son treasured their time together. Countless hours were spent at sea in heart-to-heart conversations, all under the guise of fishing. On most days the two would fish in the afternoon and only long enough for the evening meal. Kent would join them on occasion, but his knack for dangerous stunts made his company far offshore nerve-racking. On weekdays Amina left home early in the morning to work as a housemaid for a wealthy family that lived in a seaside mansion. The stress of maintaining her employer's palatial home drained her energy, but in spite of her exhaustion she never turned down an opportunity to accompany her son out to sea before sundown.

During his mother's absence while at work, Yusuf kept company with Kent. Most of their time was spent on dismantling and reassembling an old motorcycle that had belonged to Kent's father before he abandoned both it and his family. When they managed to get the rusty engine running, the two rode it along the beach because they dared not take to the road for fear of being apprehended by the police. The allure of the forbidden cemented their bond as they dared to venture where childhood had previously kept them from going.

Immersed in these activities, Yusuf did not pay a visit to Kajiwe until two weeks after his return home. He awoke at daybreak to embark on the long trek. The eerie silence of the *Kaya* forest prompted him to walk hurriedly while maintaining a sharp vigilance. When a commotion broke out a short distance away from the trail deep in the forest, he nearly collapsed in terror, but he acted quickly as he had been taught by seasoned travelers from his clan. He had heard that notoriously vicious Cape buffalo roamed the forest, but he had no desire to confirm the rumor. He sprinted to the nearest tree and climbed to a sturdy branch, where he scanned the nearby area. He was immensely relieved when he spotted a herd of startled warthogs on the run.

For the rest of his journey Yusuf jogged nervously through the deserted forest. After a joyful reception at Kajiwe's homestead, he accompanied his host to a nearby grove where they wandered from bush to bush in search of medicinal herbs. Along the way they conversed and got reacquainted. Kajiwe seized the brief occasion afforded him by the school holiday to further his goal of nurturing the next custodian of his ancient craft. He wasted no time in declaring his intentions.

"I must soon gather my comrades," Kajiwe announced before they parted, "and together we shall introduce you to the guarded world of our craft. Come back in a week and be prepared to spend the night with us."

Yusuf's lack of patience combined with the allure of mystery to make the seven days that followed seem like an eternity. His mind was engulfed by enormous curiosity when he returned to Kajiwe's homestead at dusk on the seventh day. There he found a gathering of nine jubilant men, each of whom wore colorful regalia that included

ceremonial masks and elaborate skin decorations. The holy celebrants donned elegant leopard-skin costumes and magnificent headdresses made of ostrich feathers.

Shortly after Yusuf's arrival they arranged themselves in a single file with Kajiwe at the head. Each man placed his hands on the shoulders of the person in front of him. Yusuf was invited to join the back of the line where he could only manage to grasp the tail on the costume of the tall man in front of him. The group sang and danced as they wended down the hill toward the healer's grove. They made their way to the nine memorial huts and danced around the fire nine times before proceeding to the sea. Just before sunset the procession arrived at a secluded cave close to the shore.

"This is the first shrine of our craft," Kajiwe declared as they approached the cave's entrance. "The silence here symbolizes the contemplative mind of revered healers. *Tabibu*, our forefather, made his way here by boat from a distant land. He arrived here on a moonlit night, as we have, and found a place to rest in the recesses of this ageless rock. His inscriptions upon these walls divulge a potent truth: our guardians were shepherds of the sun."

The symbols on the cave's walls stirred a sense of awe in Yusuf. On one wall was depicted an imposing vulture with outstretched wings, while on another a jackal-headed creature led a procession of ankh-clutching followers. Hieroglyphic engravings filled every space around the drawings. At the center of the cave was a magnificent marble coffin in which lay the remains of *Tabibu*. Using dry sticks, Kajiwe kindled a ritual fire that he used to burn incense made from special herbs. The ecstatic celebrants danced around the fire under the euphoria arising from its psychedelic smoke.

Kajiwe's teachings and their accompanying rituals occupied most of the night. To Yusuf the surreal experience in the cave bore equal potency with his exposure to Gnosticism. The fellowship of mystical healers carried him back to his roots with promises of reclaiming an ancient birthright; the Gnostic Communion had persuaded his heart to enter into a perpetual dialogue with the Divine, promising a liberating self-knowledge as the reward. Accompanying these powerful forces in Yusuf's heart was the spell of romantic love. During his short nap in the cave that night, he dreamed that he saw Rose etched beautifully on the wall. In another vignette she was marching fearlessly behind the jackal-headed guide toward a long wooden boat. Even in his sleep he longed to touch her face.

It was almost dawn when the exhausted men returned to Kajiwe's hut. After a heavy breakfast of cornmeal and meat stew, the weary mystics fell soundly asleep beside the fireplace.

Two days before the end of the school holiday, Amina had the pleasure of meeting her son's first love. After many days of debate and persuasion, she had agreed to host Rose in their home on the condition that she would spend the nights at their neighbor's house. The morning after Rose arrived, they took her for a picnic on the water in their boat. They spent the day visiting various coastal attractions, beginning at Fort Jesus and ending at the beach near their home.

In spite of his mother's watchful eye, Yusuf and Rose managed to snatch private moments together. On her last night they snuck off to the beach at night and swam under the glow of the full moon. Enraptured by love, they chased each other and wrestled playfully on the sand.

“This is the happiest time of my life,” Rose whispered to Yusuf as they cuddled on the beach.

“I feel the same way,” Yusuf replied.

“Let’s elope and do this every day. What do you say?” Rose suggested jokingly.

“You are forgetting that your father works for the Ministry of Internal Security. As they say in that world, I’d be summarily liquidated.”

“He doesn’t own me. I am all yours,” Rose answered, stroking Yusuf’s cheeks tenderly.

“And I give you our boat, which is not much to look at, but it’s a boat nevertheless,” he replied teasingly.

“I’ll take it, and your heart too,” she said with a kiss.

They stayed up late that night; they lay on a blanket and counted stars while chatting. Even in their silence they held hands firmly as though they feared someone would tear them apart if they let go. When sleep finally overtook them, they dozed off in each other’s arms. They awoke late at night when the rising tide soaked their bodies with cold seawater.

The next day, in the early afternoon, Yusuf escorted Rose to the bus terminal. She sobbed as they parted and pleaded with him to accompany her to school. Although he desperately wished to extend their time together, his lack of money for bus fare prevented it. He hugged her tightly and buried his face in her hair when he could no longer fight back his tears. After promising to write soon, she boarded the bus, leaving him in a world that held little pleasure in her absence.

CHAPTER 15

The school holiday had passed disappointingly fast for Yusuf. Although he could not wait to gather in the hideout with his friends to hear their tales of holiday escapades, he found it difficult to leave his mother alone once more. Amina had been unable to secure leave from work to see her son off to school, but she had stayed up late the previous night preparing special treats for him to take back to school. Before she left the house at dawn, she woke him up to say goodbye and to offer him a portion of her hard-earned cash as pocket money. Late that afternoon Kent and Yusuf boarded a bus to return to the gulag which held their promise of a bright future.

From the moment they stepped down from the bus at the school’s gate, it was evident that something was awry. They were met by a troop of policemen in full gear patrolling the compound. Yusuf and Kent walked briskly to avoid agitating the testy officers, although they could not walk fast enough to avoid an insult from a gray-haired captain.

“Hurry up, bloody fools! *Leo mtajuta!*” he yelled.

Near the dormitories they found groups of students engaged in intense discussion. After stowing their belongings they spotted Rafiq and immediately joined him for a briefing.

“What’s going on? What are the policemen doing here?” Yusuf inquired.

“You mean you haven’t heard? Don’t you read newspapers or listen to the radio?” Rafiq asked.

“Obviously we don’t read the same ones you do. What is the matter?”

“It’s about Sister O’Neal. Here is a newspaper clipping from two weeks ago. I had to see it to believe it,” Rafiq said, handing a piece of paper to Yusuf.

The newspaper story titled “A Virgin Shares Her Oil” was a spuriously written piece by one of Mombasa’s journalists for *The Kenya Times*. Yusuf read the excerpt attentively while Kent continued to probe Rafiq for details. The clipping read:

It goes without saying that she was lonely, but it is the degree of her loneliness that has left the Mombasa police chief tossing sleeplessly at night. A nun’s life is unarguably lonely if not utterly depressing. One nun could not take it anymore and has thrown in not only the proverbial towel but also her religious costume. The latter was found hanging upside down in front of her residence. The beneficiary of her sacrifice, a prisoner on death row at Shimo la Tewa Maximum Security Prison, is at large and considered highly dangerous.

The man, who has been in prison for nine years in connection with seditious acts and undisclosed threats to national security, may now be committing all kinds of treachery against heavenly government with his accomplice. It is suspected the two used deceit and bribery to get the prisoner through an otherwise impenetrable security barrier.

The manhunt has been fruitless in spite of multiple sightings of the couple by members of the public in various parts of the city. At times they have been sighted in several different places at the same time, which has prompted the police to suspect the use of witchcraft in their escape plot. Among the items seized from the nun’s residence is a library of seditious and illegal books, the man’s torn underwear, and other classified material. The manhunt, and especially the woman-hunt, continues.

After reading the article, Yusuf and Kent ran toward the classrooms in search of O’Koth. They needed to come up with a plan to clear themselves in case they were summoned before the authorities. Before they could find him, however, they were forced to gather with the rest of the student body in the Assembly Hall.

“Students,” the headmaster began, “as you may already know a scandalous event occurred here during the holidays. Where virtue was expected, vice was found; where integrity should have been, corruption existed. I am committed to removing this stain from our school once and for all. It is now clear that Ms. O’Neal was running an illegal organization from her residence and that at least three students were members of her underground society.”

At this point the headmaster’s diatribe was drowned out by the cacophony of students’ exclamations. Nearly everyone seemed overwhelmed by the news and the need to discover the culprits in the unfolding drama. A sense of dread ran through Yusuf’s body, leaving him feeling restless and despondent.

“Students, be quiet!” the headmaster demanded. “The guilty students were careless enough to enlist in prohibited extracurricular activities held in Ms. O’Neal’s house and even visited the maximum-security prison in her company at the end of last term. Unfortunately, their mentor has abandoned them to bear the full consequences of

their poor choices. I am now inviting these students to come forward before I call them out. The punishment will be doubled if I have to summon you.”

A deathly silence followed the headmaster’s remarks. Kent and Yusuf stood nervously next to one another. O’Koth had not yet returned from the shores of Lake Victoria, the bus he was traveling on having broken down in the Great Rift Valley. Overcome by fear, Yusuf shook like a reed in the wind. He looked at Kent and met a rebellious stare.

“Don’t be foolish. Be a man!” Kent whispered. “If he knew our names, he would not waste time waiting for us to come forward.”

“What shall we do?” Yusuf asked despairingly.

“Nothing. Look around you. As far as they are concerned, you are as innocent as the guy standing next to you. He knows nothing about it, and you know nothing about it too,” Kent declared.

Yusuf studied the faces of nearby classmates and consciously tried to imitate their look of undisturbed composure.

“Alright,” the headmaster continued, “if you want to play cat and mouse, you will regret it! Fortunately the three of you were spotted by security officers when you accompanied your comrade in crime to the prison. The officers will now go around the hall and identify you. Officers, please proceed.”

At this point there was a commotion. Kent took advantage of the disturbance to move three lines away from Yusuf. He took up a position next to a group of Indian students who matched his complexion. *Camouflage veils the eye*, he thought with a smile. After the officers made their rounds, they had singled out nine students, but neither Kent nor Yusuf was among them. The “guilty” students were taken for further questioning in the staffroom, but before the end of evening they had all been released for lack of evidence. Although the irate policemen had promised to “leave no stone unturned,” in the end there were far too many stones to turn. Detectives then turned their attention to meticulously combing through Sister O’Neal’s documents. It was only a matter of time, the headmaster declared, before the names of the three culprits were discovered.

In the weeks that followed, the apprentice Gnostics quietly held on to their secret. Congregating in the dark to discuss their plight, they expected to be apprehended in a matter of days. What, they wondered, would they tell their parents if they were expelled from the prestigious school? Where would life take them after forfeiting such a precious opportunity? Long after the lights were off in the dormitory, they stayed awake thinking about the calamity. They longed to hear from Sister O’Neal in their hour of need. Every day before lunch they huddled by the notice board in anticipation of her letter. When days turned into weeks and none came, their fear of being caught diminished, but their attitudes toward their mentor changed.

“Let’s face it: she has forgotten about us. She was only using us to attain her own ends,” O’Koth announced one Saturday night as the three friends lay on the grass reminiscing.

Even Yusuf, who had demonstrated the most faith in Sister O’Neal, could not utter a word in her defense. Life had to move on without her.

One night the three decided to break into the former nun’s vacant house. Inside the formerly immaculate home everything lay in disarray. Heaps of papers littered the floor; clothes were strewn everywhere; the bookshelves in her library had been

vandalized. They searched in vain for the books she had used to teach them moving lessons. Nothing of any value had been left behind by the secret police.

“I feel as though I have been orphaned,” Yusuf declared as they left the house. He had voiced the shared sentiment of the group as a whole.

Midway through the school term Yusuf received a letter without its sender’s name or address. The short note read:

Dearhair,

I am still on the move in search of a home. I pray often for our group. Keep the faith, and let your light still shine. Gather together as sons of Light to supplicate and meditate. I long for the day we can once more break bread and rejoice together.

So long, from your loving sister

They would receive only one more communication from their former mentor during the remainder of their time at Shimo la Tewa High.

The final one came at the end of the school year in the form of a package containing Gnostic literature. She had mailed the books in three batches over a period of several months, each addressed to a different member of the Gnostic society. Using their newly acquired library, the budding Gnostics reconstituted and tried to rekindle the dying fire of devotion. They duplicated the rituals and ceremonies Sister O’Neal had taught them in anticipation of a grand reunion with their teacher. In the end, however, the long-awaited day of reunion never came. Their lack of experience compounded by despair ultimately spelled doom for the fledgling society. Gnosticism gradually faded into a concept without substance.

Meanwhile life at Shimo la Tewa High changed remarkably as the *monos* ascended the ladder of academic seniority. No longer victims of cruel hazing, they found new ways to gratify their unquenchable thirst for adventure. During their final years Yusuf and his friends formed a gang of weekend explorers. On Friday and Saturday nights they escaped from school through secret tunnels under the compound’s fence to visit various nocturnal attractions in the surrounding towns. These forays were not without hazard. On one frightening occasion the gang found itself in dire straits when it was waylaid by vicious thugs on the way back to school. After a merciless beating the boys were robbed of all their belongings, including the clothes on their backs. This experience forced an unscheduled break from exploration, at least until an irresistible offer surfaced.

As the bond between Yusuf and Rose grew stronger, their physical separation became an agonizing injustice. Impelled by this sentiment, the couple hatched a plan for a romantic rendezvous at the beach. Rose enlisted four of her schoolmates who would meet with Yusuf and his cohorts on a Saturday night. The plot involved combining their limited resources to purchase food and drinks for the unlawful party.

When the designated night finally came, Yusuf’s gang found itself ahead of schedule. At the agreed-upon site they waited impatiently for the girls’ arrival. Much to their delight a full moon spread its soft beams across the sky. As evening turned into night, however, the moon’s brilliance faded, and their mood became

more subdued. Long after midnight the streets were deserted as they dragged their heavy feet back to school.

As he lay on his bed in the dormitory that night, Yusuf was unable to sleep. He hoped that the girls were safe, but he could not resist feeling disappointed and angry. Before he fell asleep, he wrote a brief note to Rose soliciting her explanation. As days turned into weeks without a response, dread replaced impatience. In rapid succession he wrote several letters pleading with Rose to write. He just needed to know whether she was well, he explained, even if her feelings for him had changed. More than eight weeks passed before a long-awaited response finally arrived. The handwriting was unfamiliar, but the brief letter read as follows:

Dear Yusuf,

I was hoping that you would stop writing after your letters went unanswered. Your persistence in spite of Rose's inability to reply speaks to the profound love she had for you. Unfortunately, it is my sorrowful duty as her best friend to break the grave news to you. I struggle for words to speak the unspeakable, but for the sake of closure they must be spoken. While Rose was trying to sneak out of school at night to meet with you, she accidentally stepped on a rusty nail. She struggled to nurse her injury privately, but her condition deteriorated quickly. Doctors think that she developed tetanus and blood poisoning. After a brief struggle she passed away at school three weeks ago.

During the time she was fighting for her life while bedridden in the dormitory, she attempted on several occasions to write to you. I am enclosing her incomplete letters to you. As her confidante I can tell you what you likely already know: she loved you as a hummingbird loves her songs and only lived to love you more. Rose's funeral was held last week in Nairobi. Please feel free to write me back with any questions or requests.

Sincerely, Angela

Immobilized by grief, Yusuf's mind turned inward and ransacked its stock of memories in a desperate search for solace. The partially completed missives that Angela had forwarded helped him to trace Rose's decline into the vales of death.

Dear Yusuf,

I am sorry that you waited for me in vain. I stepped on a nail en route and had a flat foot (Get it? Flat tire, flat foot!). Silly me. I didn't bring a spare. I thought that it would be unwise of me to ruin your night with my squealing. I missed you, though, and I was more upset about our failed rendezvous than with my injury. My foot is swollen, but I can't go to the school infirmary for fear of causing suspicion. I can't wait to get well soon because I want to return to our unfinished business.

Dear Yusuf,

I am getting a bit sicker than I anticipated. I have fevers, and my entire body hurts. Even worse, I cannot endure this terrible idleness and isolation. I try to respond to the call of life outside my cubicle, but my body no longer pursues the interests of my heart. My friends continue to nurse me with undeserved generosity, but I wish I could escape into your gentle arms. Such thoughts keep me from slipping into the pit of despair.

Dear Yusuf,

I am afraid of what is happening to me. I think I should go home. Please love, come rescue me.

Dear Yusuf,

I woke up this morning with an unusual feeling of wellness. The illness appears to have passed. I can now tell you that the thought of you kept me strong through the darkest hour. In the last two days a mysterious and beautiful presence has surrounded me. I awoke from a dreamy world expecting to find you sitting next to me on my bed. I can't explain the feeling; it is as magical as our first kiss, and almost as delightful.

I dreamt that we were frolicking like lambs together on a meadow under a moonlit sky. Then I wanted to go swimming in a nearby pond, but you were afraid the water would be too cold. I started running toward the pond, and you tried to stop me from jumping in. I managed to outrun you, but you stopped on the banks. In my dream I taunted you to dive in, yet you wouldn't.

I cannot wait to see you again. Maybe we should find a pond next to a meadow and go swimming under a moonlit sky. I will miss you always.

So long my love, Rose.

The last letter was accompanied by Angela's commentary at the bottom: *she died within hours after this letter. It was in her hands when I discovered her cold and rigid body that fateful night. I hid her letter in my pocket before calling for help.*

In the absence of his confidante, Sister O'Neal, Yusuf knew only a dreadful grief for weeks on end. Regularly, on Saturday nights, he abandoned his friends' company to lie alone under the starry sky in deep meditation. In silent pleas he begged Rose to return, but it was all in vain, and he knew it.

"We must make peace with the sea," he remembered Kajiwe saying in response to Ali's death. "The sea is greater than any of us. It feeds us, and when it takes away one of ours, we must think him lucky that he has become one with the infinite."

"So be it," a mournful Yusuf whispered long after Rose's death. With deep emotion he placed everything he had received from her in a bag and stored it in his trunk.

Life at Shimo la Tewa High ended on this bittersweet note, but even in his shattering loss there was hope. The seedling of a precious rose had germinated in his awakening mind, and it would be watered by the dew of a knowing heart.

CHAPTER 16

The Government had instituted a two-year break between completion of secondary education and enrollment at the university. This hiatus existed because of an inability to accommodate all the qualified candidates in the three national universities. Yusuf had been fortunate to obtain admission, although he had not made the grades needed to secure a spot in the medical college at University of Nairobi as he desired. Instead, the Government had offered him a position in the field of political science.

“What does a political scientist do?” Yusuf asked the headmaster when he received the news.

“Well, they are the schemers and plotters who keep politicians and secret services constantly on their toes,” he was informed.

“I did not ask for consideration in that field. How can they make such a random selection for me?” he protested.

“These decisions are reached by distinguished university professors. Maybe there was something in your background or academic record that left the impression that you are politically inclined. They must have read something that gave them the inkling,” the headmaster informed him.

It was true that Yusuf had chosen a political topic when he wrote his English composition. Had he known better, he would have written about sick people and the medicines they could hardly afford. In the weeks that followed he reflected on the headmaster’s remarks. To be one of the “schemers and plotters,” he thought, was neither a dignified nor an enviable profession. When he became gloomy over his university prospects, Amina intervened to counsel her son.

“You should be grateful that the Government has offered to give you further training,” Amina chided as they sat by the fire one evening.

“They are offering to put my conscience on a path to permanent subordination or criminality,” Yusuf explained. “Do you know what political scientists do?”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t, but I am sure I’d know if they were roaming about aimlessly in our village without work,” Amina rebutted. “Whatever they do, I am sure they can afford to move to the big city and work in a plush office.”

“Their job is to help the Government design efficient ways of silencing disgruntled people like grandpa,” Yusuf asserted firmly. “They leave no middle ground. As a political scientist you either scheme for the Government or against it!”

“It is the supreme folly of youth to assume that one must know how the journey will end before even the first step is taken,” Amina advised. “The wise sojourner must sometimes embark on crucial journeys in life equipped only with the dignity of his purpose.”

“Do you hear strange noises outside?” Yusuf inquired as he rose to go out and investigate.

“What is it?” Amina called out to Yusuf, who was engaged in a struggle outside.

“It’s the village lunatic playing his usual tricks,” Yusuf answered.

“Is that you, Kent?” Amina asked, laughing. “Come in for a cup of tea, my boy.”

“Sorry, *mama*. I’ve taken it upon myself to make a man out of this coward, but I’m afraid it isn’t working,” Kent said teasingly.

“I received the news about your imminent departure. I was afraid you’d leave without stopping by to say goodbye,” Amina exclaimed.

“I didn’t know anything about a departure,” Yusuf protested.

“The whole thing descended upon us without warning. I am full of misgivings,” Kent declared.

“Where are you going?” Yusuf asked.

“Someone loaned my father a conscience, and now he wants his family to join him in France,” Kent announced indifferently. “If you have a few minutes, I need your help filling out some paperwork.”

“Yes, he has time,” replied Amina. “Yusuf, go help your friend.”

Yusuf accompanied Kent back to his house. Alone in Kent’s bedroom they entered into an animated discussion. After years of inexplicable silence, Kent’s father had begged the family he had ignored for a decade to join him in Paris. He had sent plane tickets and the necessary travel documents in addition to money for all their relocation expenses. While the news had been received with great jubilation by Kent’s mother and sister, he harbored deep suspicion about the situation.

“Do you understand my dilemma?” Kent asked. “People don’t just wake up one day and out of the blue become honorable! The old fool has a trick up his sleeve, and my task is to discover what it is.”

“But what can he possibly gain, materially speaking, from having his family at his side?” Yusuf rebutted. “He is your father, and, as they must say in France, blood is thicker than wine.”

“I’ll keep my blood, and he can drink his wine!” Kent sneered. “You really believe that simply because some guy made love to your mother it qualifies him to be your father?”

“But he didn’t just make love to your mother. He made you in the process,” Yusuf countered.

“The problem with most reproduction mythologies is that they give to humans much more credit than they deserve,” Kent argued. “We pretend that two people came together, rolled out a detailed blueprint, and delved into the task of creating life—that they calculated where to place each amino acid and designed the function of each organ. In reality the truth is far different.”

“You obviously have some issues to work out with your old man, but it doesn’t help to be cynical about life,” Yusuf replied.

“Let’s face it: man’s life is an assortment of accidents, and our purpose here is to give meaning and purposed to them,” Kent argued. “At best we are the products of impulsive thrill-seeking behavior, and at worst we exist because two people angry at or bored with each other were trying to make amends or kill their boredom. And think about it: you once were in the company of more than twenty million sperms, but fortunately you managed to outrun and escape the stampede, and that is why we’re here talking. While you deserve to be congratulated for your swimming prowess, it is a blatant skewing of reality to claim that you came about because of intention or volition. I hate to burst your bubble, but you are here simply because you’re a good swimmer.”

“All that may be true,” replied Yusuf, “but once you are formed, you owe your existence to your father as much as to your mother.”

“Scripture directs us to honor our fathers, not our sperm-donors,” Kent rebutted. “On a serious note, do you think your mother would allow me to join your family?”

“*Bwana*, you don’t even have to ask,” Yusuf answered. “She already thinks of you as her own son. But I think she would expect you at least to meet with your father before considering such an arrangement.”

“Well, I don’t mind going on a safari to Paris. I just know that the experiment won’t last long,” Kent said adamantly.

Kent and his family left within days, dramatically altering Yusuf’s world. In the absence of his best friend, and away from schoolwork, Yusuf’s life became joyless. Each day he roamed about in search of some worthwhile distraction from boredom. He spent many hours with Kajiwe, who was glad to have his company, but secretly Yusuf’s veneration for the ancient craft had waned. He had invested his passion elsewhere—high up in a world beyond visible horizons and sunsets, a world far removed from mystical healers and fishermen. He was like a bird perched to rest prior to a long flight. In the meantime he learned the healer’s craft and assisted in calling forth ancestral spirits, albeit with fear and trembling lest they should hear and respond to his half-hearted invocations.

The opening he longed for finally came early in April. Four months had passed since his graduation from high school, and boredom was beginning to take its toll. The letter came as a complete surprise. Her handwriting had not changed over the years.

Dear Yusuf,

I hope this letter finds you in cheerful spirits. I have felt restrained from communicating with you for fear that it might do more harm than good. By my calculations you have now been freed from that enclosure where we met. More than ever I hunger for the fellowship of my dear Gnostics—to break bread and recite sacred psalms in worship.

Now that the storm has settled, I feel obliged to explain the mystery of my departure. As I mentioned earlier, things moved very fast. When a door opened, we had to move quickly (unfortunately I cannot be more specific here). We boarded a frail boat, and off to sea we went, eluding the Government’s manhunt. We headed north to Mogadishu and from there traveled overland to North Africa, whence we sailed to Spain. Once in Spain we applied for asylum as political refugees at the American embassy. To make a long story short, we have made our home here in the United States. My husband John is a professor at a local university, and I settled down as a homemaker (and part-time student).

Please write me back and update me on your whereabouts. I assume you are waiting to enter a university. In what subject will you major? I am eagerly waiting to hear from you.

Love, Eunice.

Within hours of receiving the letter Yusuf had composed a reply and mailed it. He described their group’s struggles in her absence and especially their return to her former residence and the chaos that greeted them. He strove mightily for words to express his grief at the death of his darling Rose, and he wept as he relived the agony. Finally, he

conveyed his dismay with the Government's arbitrary decree of a career path in his university studies. As he walked to the post office, he breathed more easily, revived by the renewed dawn of hope.

Sister O'Neal's reply was fast and direct: "*I am looking into what we can do to assist you. Do not be discouraged. Rest assured there are many colleges here in the U.S. that would be honored to have a dedicated student like you on their campuses.*"

Although months would pass before he heard from her again, Yusuf no longer mourned his hard luck. He felt reassured by her tone, which was all he needed to carry on. Gradually he broke free from his cocoon of self-imposed isolation to engage the world that surrounded him.

One particular evening Yusuf had an experience that would throw him back into the arms of humor. After an unproductive day of fishing, Yusuf was resting on the beach when he noticed a commotion a short distance away. When he approached the small gathering, his eyes came to rest on a young preacher surrounded by a band of followers. His long beard and flowing white robe set him apart from the rest of the group. He was standing in the water underneath a large tree to baptize new converts. While immersing the first, the young pastor declared, "Descend, holy dove."

Shortly after his invocation, and much to his followers' astonishment, a large white cockerel descended from the branches of a nearby tree and landed squarely on the preacher's face, knocking him and his convert into the water. Perhaps shocked by his stunt's outcome, the boy who had released the cockerel followed the rooster into the water, landing with a big splash. A fierce-looking man caught up with the boy and was about to give him a severe thrashing when the boy divulged the scheme.

"He told me to do it!" the boy pleaded.

"Who told you?" the man demanded.

"The preacher, Pastor Majuta, told me. He handed me the rooster and instructed me to release it when he gave the sign. Here is the money he paid me."

"Let the boy go!" demanded Pastor Majuta when he recovered from his traumatic encounter with the cockerel. "It is true that I directed the boy to perform this service. When our Lord was baptized, the spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove."

"But this is a cockerel!" interjected the angry man.

"It is in the same family of feathered creatures," explained Pastor Majuta. "Brothers and sisters, religion loses its power when divorced from symbolism. When the white dove descended from the heavens, it signified a union of the heavenly with the earthly, bridging the gulf between man and his Creator. In that instance, the distance between heaven and earth was no longer untraveled. Think of that!"

As Yusuf subsequently learned, Pastor Majuta's entry into the world of theology had been as accidental as its end was tragicomic. He was a recent graduate from the University of Nairobi, where he had spent four years in pursuit of a degree in Sociology. It had come as a surprise to no one when he graduated at the top of his class. In view of his stellar academic performance, he had entered the job market with burning optimism and an ambition to match. After months of futile searching, however, it dawned on him that all his relentless toils would only be rewarded with ridicule and insults.

"You are a sociologist?" a disdainful company manager had asked him. "People go to a university to learn *that* sort of thing? Son, I am sorry to break the news to you, but

the only job you will get with that kind of education is babysitting, or you may get lucky to find a European who will let you walk his dog for him.”

“Thank you, sir. Sorry for wasting your time,” Majuta had muttered, eager to escape the office.

When he exited the imposing building, he was met by a torrential rainfall. Within minutes, his hungry body was drenched in the downpour. In a way he was glad; under the guise of the rain, he allowed his tears to flow freely down his cheeks. Since his childhood, he had embraced a binding faith in the promise of education. He had come to believe that only deity and education could deliver the wretched from the grip of inner darkness. But in this hour crisis, his mind returned to the long nights he had spent glued to his books and his poor parents’ enormous sacrifices for his education. All of it felt like piousness to a sadistic god who derived his pleasure from cruelty.

On his way home he encountered an urchin begging on the street. Out of deep frustration he slapped the boy’s hand when he stretched it in front of him. In retaliation the boy snatched his briefcase and ran away toward a nearby slum, but Majuta was determined to recover his stolen property. He chased the boy down into the slum until he came to a structure made from scrap metal and cardboard. The boy dashed into the makeshift house, but Majuta followed him inside, and to his dismay he came face to face with the boy’s family. The hardened bunch expressed their displeasure for his intrusion with fists and kicks. As if stealing his briefcase were not enough, they stripped him down to his underwear before throwing him out into the street.

As soon as he broke free from his assailants, Majuta ran to his one-room apartment. “I refuse to die!” he screamed as he slammed shut the door behind him.

After a long warm bath, he went to the kitchen and prepared himself a sumptuous dinner. He needed to celebrate the end of a brutal cycle of life with a memorable last supper. He savored each bite with the pleasure of a famished man who had been rescued from the threshold of starvation. After feasting to his fill, he reached to a bottle of wine he had received from a favorite professor as a graduation present. Although he had intended to save it for a festive occasion, he emptied the contents of the expensive bottle in his long glass.

“Goodbye sorrows,” he whispered as he slumped back peacefully on his worn-out rocking chair. The renowned Congolese musician, *Papa Wemba*, filled the room with delightful *Lingala* melodies through the medium of a small radio set on the window ledge. After he had satisfied his cravings, he felt prepared for the final crossing. He reached for his pen and began writing his final note in his diary.

Dear Diary,

Sorry for my gloomy mood lately. I had closed my eyes to the victory that had been delivered into my hands. I have been out and about, searching for life in magnificent cemeteries. When my quest finally failed I wept in ignorance, not knowing that even the most pristine cemeteries are built to shelter death. I had forgotten that life only attained its bloom when the organism emerged from the sea.

On my way home I was confronted by punitive torrents from darkened skies. I ran as I did in my village when I was a boy herding my father’s cattle. I ran as though I had expected to find him eagerly waiting for me with open arms as he always did whenever I returned home. When the distance proved longer and more precarious than I had imagined, I kept chasing the receding echoes of his bold voice. And then just before I collapsed on my bed of despair, I heard his resonant voice cheering: “Keep running, my boy, and if you run out of roads, do

not be afraid to leave footprints on the grass.” Now I must return to the pastures; for my sake and for the flock I must. Tonight I board the train and head back to the sea!

This is how Majuta reinvented himself as a preacher among the Mijikenda. One evening Yusuf spotted the eccentric preacher strolling along the beach alone. “Hello, Brother Jeroboam,” Yusuf jibed.

“Ha-ha. I enjoy Soyinka’s wit. He is a gifted playwright,” Pastor Majuta responded without taking offence.

“I am surprised that you are familiar with Soyinka,” Yusuf replied.

“Why? You thought that every preacher is an ignorant fool? *Jamani*, don’t forget that some of us walk in the garb of a hermit only to answer to life’s greater call.”

“You may not be a fool, but you are a fraud. I watched the boy tossing the rooster from the tree. Why the tricks if you are a messenger of truth and light as you claim?” Yusuf asked mockingly.

“You speak of truth and light, the central elements of any moral argument,” Majuta answered. “It is evident that you have come for an intellectual duel, and I have never been one to pass on that opportunity.”

“A duel with a hoaxer? What purpose does your religion serve besides lining your pocket?” Yusuf asked disdainfully.

“Religion in its most basic form was designed to serve as a shield against difficult realities. We could say that it served as a mediator between man and his insufferable ignorance.”

Although Yusuf could never wholly dismiss his distrust of Majuta, he left the door open for occasional debate. There was something tragic in the pious man’s life. As the first of nine children born to rural peasants, he had drained his family’s meager resources in a fruitless quest for professional success.

“I worked very hard throughout high school and university,” Majuta confided in Yusuf as their friendship grew. “I falsely believed that hard work automatically led to success. I am chronically haunted by my failure.”

“It sounds as though you did everything you could,” Yusuf said consolingly. “But why Sociology?”

“And why will you study Political Science? You know the answer to that question!” Majuta answered impatiently.

For reasons that were more emotional than logical, Yusuf habitually dropped off a few fish at Majuta’s shack on his way home. Every now and then he would accept Majuta’s invitation to join him for a cup of tea. On such occasions he listened to Majuta’s grim analysis of the state of affairs in the nation at large. It was evident that he relished Yusuf’s inquisitiveness as much as he craved the intellectually stimulating environment he had left behind in academia.

“I am the face of education they won’t paint for you: broken, desperate, and unfulfilled. They show you the affluent, well dressed professional in the high-rise office. That is what they want you to see and believe. But I think it is important for you to see this other image before you enter the university. Contrary to common belief, education is not alchemy!”

“What would you suggest I should do with a major in Political Science?” Yusuf asked Majuta one evening.

“If you are strong-willed and disciplined, you can use the weapons they put in your hands to defeat them,” Majuta explained. “I am widely read in political theories, and one thing clear is that we have a golden opportunity to rise much higher than the horde of tyrants that now governs us. Their power is detached from the people. They have been elevated, more or less, by clumsy opportunism and miscarriages of justice to their present positions. But if you are deliberate and methodical you will not need any person to lift you to success. Study Political Science if that is what is offered to you, but tailor your education to self-empowerment. I should have learned that sooner.”

“Speaking of power, I saw something the other day that continues to perplex me. I overheard a group of people claiming that you had healed them. Excuse my honesty, but you obviously don’t possess divine power. I just can’t understand . . . ,” Yusuf stammered in confusion.

“My friend, you obviously don’t understand your own species very well. One plus one equals six when everybody around you insists it is so. It is called mass psychology. If everyone around you is getting healed, you’d better get healed or else. Why? Because failure to be healed is to confess publicly that you are in league with the Devil. We humans are social creatures, and only the dead can resist peer pressure.”

“But this lady whom I had seen hunched over in agony for months walked upright and without pain after your healing crusade,” Yusuf said. “Maybe you have a gift in spite of yourself!”

“Physicians call it the placebo effect,” Majuta explained.

“Religion sets the stage for some strange drama,” Yusuf observed. “I would not have expected seemingly intelligent people to participate in your rituals.”

“No one is above the allure of ritual, not even you. In essence, ritual appeals to our primal self,” Majuta replied. “There is a reason why people drop money into donation bags each Sunday despite knowing that God does not send his angels to collect it after the service. Why don’t they protest and burn the church when they see their donations used by the pastor to purchase a new Mercedes? It is because in matters of faith man parts with logic and becomes unquestioning. The religious person leads a dual life: beyond the realm of his devotion he demands proof, supporting evidence, and accountability; before the altar, however, he mistrusts even his own sight and begs to be led by the hand like a blind man. My task as a preacher is to intensify this connection with the primal self.”

Unfortunately, fate caught up with Majuta. He had been out of town preaching in an area that had lost many of its residents in a mudslide. His five days of preaching on the subject of life after death had calmed the survivors and won him much coveted public commendation from the community. Yusuf had accompanied his friend on the trip for want of stimulating conversation.

On their way home they encountered a tropical rainstorm. After wading through a muddy stretch of unpaved road, they were fortunate to get a ride in the back of a pickup truck. At the center of the vehicle’s bed lay a polished wooden coffin. The two young men sat side by side with their legs on top of the coffin. In spite of his many earlier struggles, Majuta beamed with optimism. He had collected enough money to buy a car, which would enable him to venture farther afield in search of followers and income. As he contemplated this prospect, the torrential rain began to subside. Just then something bizarre happened.

“Did you feel that?” Majuta asked Yusuf nervously.

“Yes. What is going on?” Yusuf replied. “Something is moving inside the coffin.”
“We must sit on it. Don’t let it open!” Majuta implored as he jumped on top of the coffin. “Hold on to my bag.”

The mysterious force inside the coffin pushed even harder. The confrontation between life and death had taken an unnerving turn.

“What could it be? Is this resurrection?” Yusuf asked nervously.

“No, it is too soon. It is witchcraft!” Majuta answered. “If you had grown up where I did, you would know the ominous meaning behind this.”

When it dawned on Majuta that he could not contain the force within the coffin, he took the only path of escape left to him. He dove out of the moving truck and landed head first on the gravel. No sooner had he jumped than the coffin lid flung open to reveal the head of an irate man.

“What do you think you are doing? I nearly suffocated in there!” the man yelled.

“Who are you, and what are you doing inside a coffin if you are not dead?” Yusuf was as furious as the man.

“It’s a brand new coffin. Why should I have sat in a rainstorm when there was an unoccupied shelter in front of me?”

“At least you could have warned us,” Yusuf said. “Didn’t you hear us when we boarded?”

“I didn’t want someone asking me to share the space,” the man explained.

“You mean that you were afraid someone would want to jump inside a coffin with you?” Yusuf was puzzled. “Wait a minute...he is not getting up. We must stop. My friend is badly injured.”

When the pickup finally stopped, they returned to where Majuta had fallen. He was bleeding through his ears and nose. They tried to arouse him, but he was pulseless and unresponsive. Ironically, the illusion of life after death had killed him. They picked up his limp muddy body and placed it in the coffin on the back of the truck.

Majuta’s death dealt Yusuf a severe blow, not because he cared for his friend’s line of work but because in his stubborn tenacity he had guided Yusuf to a hope that ignored life’s adversity. When Majuta’s grieving mother arrived to collect his body, Yusuf presented her son’s purse and sought to reassure her that he had not lived or died in vain; with tender emotions, he attempted to console her broken heart with the news that her son had delivered scores of despairing souls from spiritual darkness. The fact that she appeared to believe him so effortlessly confirmed to Yusuf that even death reserved a sense of humor.

CHAPTER 17

After three months of waiting, Yusuf finally received Sister O’Neal’s letter. He could hardly believe his eyes when he read the spellbinding letter. With her husband’s help she had managed to secure a scholarship for him in the United States. The former nun had taken odd jobs to raise the money for his airline ticket. The loose ends had finally been tied up in the nick of time, and she was eager to get him enrolled in school. The date of departure on his ticket indicated he would be out of the country in just a matter of weeks.

Yusuf delivered the momentous news to his mother as soon as she arrived home that evening. He kept a lid on his excitement because he did not know how she would react.

“For how long will you be gone?” Amina asked thoughtfully.

“It could be eight years or more. It takes many years of training to become a doctor,” Yusuf answered.

“My son, Allah has once more come to our aid,” Amina declared. “He has set your table among kings and princes. You cannot turn Him down.”

“But you’ll be lonely. There will be no one here to help you,” Yusuf sought to remind his mother.

“I resent loneliness as much as you do, and goodness knows I delight in your company. Our bond will survive the distance...we must not impede Allah’s purposes,”

“I have four weeks to think it over,” Yusuf replied.

“No, you have four weeks to prepare and say goodbye to your friends,” Amina said.

The day before Yusuf left home for his long journey overseas, he made a final trek to Kajiwe’s homestead. He had spent countless hours in the company of the mystic after his high school graduation. Their friendship had grown to the point that he had been ushered into the deeper mysteries of the ancient craft. In some ways he felt remorseful to be leaving everything behind. In Kajiwe’s world the ladder of mysteries seemed to stretch into infinity.

As he traversed the *Kaya* forest again, he recalled the stories that the healer had told him regarding mysticism. One in particular had stayed with him, perhaps because it dispelled some of his misconceptions about the ancient craft. To his great surprise he had learned how the healers of antiquity invented and refined delicate surgical procedures such as opening their patients’ skulls to remove tumors. Every time Kajiwe began these stories, however, he would come to a certain point and then stop. There were secrets, he would say, that could only be divulged to the initiated and those bound by oath to guard them. In the preceding weeks Kajiwe had been feverishly making arrangements for Yusuf’s initiation into the mystic fellowship. Now, as Yusuf walked toward the ancient homestead, he wondered how his mentor would receive the news of his imminent departure.

When he finally made it to Kajiwe’s homestead, it was mid-afternoon. The compound looked empty and deserted. Several large bags lay outside Kajiwe’s hut as though a crowd had dispersed hastily. When he came close to the door, he heard subdued voices engaged in chants inside the hut. He entered cautiously and saw a gathering of healers dressed in ritualistic regalia. Their attire reminded him of the day he had been introduced to the cave of healers. The gathering broke into loud applause as soon as they saw him.

“My son, welcome home!” Kajiwe announced triumphantly, holding Yusuf in a tight embrace. “For four hours we’ve been engaged in a ritual of beckoning. Its purpose is to use the medium of spirits to invite a prospective initiate to the *Kaya*. Only the chosen respond to the call, but none in history has responded this fast.”

“*Eee-heee!*” the other healers agreed in unison.

“But we must get going before sunset. We now invite you to pay reverent attention to our proceedings,” Kajiwe instructed.

Unwilling to insult the generosity of his host, Yusuf went along with the arrangements. He anticipated that there would be time before dusk to break the news of his departure. After all, his bus to Nairobi would not be leaving until early the next morning. There was time for one more ceremony, he rationalized.

“Put on this regalia. We have a journey ahead of us,” Kajiwe directed. He then proceeded to paint Yusuf’s face and torso before leading the procession into the healers’ grove. They danced and ululated as they descended to the valley.

By the hearth outside the nine huts they feasted and danced to the enchanting rhythm of a drum. Overcome by the festive mood, Yusuf danced and sang to the beat ecstatically. At sunset Kajiwe led the group away from the hearth. It appeared as though the ceremony had concluded on time for Yusuf’s long trek home, but when they came to the main trail, Kajiwe turned away from the homeward direction and headed toward the sea. Had Yusuf been at the back of the procession he might have tiptoed his way back alone, but this time he was positioned just behind Kajiwe and trailed by the rest of the group. In spite of his rising anxiety, he marched along without protest.

“At the beginning of every mystical cycle, the sons of *Tabibu* welcome a new member into their ranks,” Kajiwe declared when they arrived at the healer’s cave. “This boy has earned my confidence over many years of dedicated apprenticeship. Now he must assume his rightful place as one of the shepherds of the sun!”

“*Eee-heee*,” the healers ululated jubilantly.

“After you partake of this gourd’s potent concoction, you are bound to embrace him as your own son, to protect him as you would your own life, and to nurture his mind as you do your own. At the break of dawn that which we have kept concealed may be freely divulged to him,” Kajiwe instructed his peers.

As the gourd was passed around the solemn gathering, each healer pressed his lips against its opening and swallowed the strong brew. After they had all drunk, Kajiwe turned to Yusuf and offered him a sip.

“As for you, like the rest of us, the quest must continue until we who are by night guarded by flickering stars may arise at dawn to shepherd the lustrous sun,” Kajiwe declared to Yusuf.

After Yusuf drank from the gourd, Kajiwe proceeded to disclose the mysteries of his craft. He handed Yusuf a faded papyrus containing drawings and inscriptions similar to those on the walls of the cave.

“This is the master text of our centuries-old lore,” Kajiwe continued. “*Tabibu* brought it here from his distant homeland. The writings, which require great skill to understand, were handed down from the first healer of that land. His name was Imhotep, and his wisdom continues to illuminate the ardent healer’s mind.”

After these remarks Kajiwe opened *Tabibu*’s sarcophagus to acquaint the initiate with the guardian and protector of all healers. Although taken aback at first, Yusuf paused to examine *Tabibu*’s desiccated remains. Even in death the figure before his eyes projected an unyielding fierceness. His hands were crossed over his chest. In his left hand he held an ankh and in his right a golden staff.

“What is he holding?” Yusuf asked.

“The ankh is a symbol of the infinite quest for excellence,” answered Kajiwe, “while the staff symbolizes his role as a shepherd of the sun.”

Although he had no way of telling time in the fire-lit cave, Yusuf knew that it was getting late. He had an early morning bus to catch, and his mother would be growing worried in his absence.

“I am sorry to interrupt,” Yusuf mustered the courage to say, “but I have to be on my way.”

His words were sternly dismissed. “You have entered onto a path that yields to no other errand or obligation. You are bound by oath and duty to keep vigil with us until you can decipher the ancient words of the great shepherds,” Kajiwe said boldly.

“I am so sorry, but I have a long journey in the morning. I did not want to leave without saying goodbye,” Yusuf pleaded.

“If you keep interrupting this ceremony, my sword will surely send you on a final journey. This, my son, is a point of no return. You cannot turn back without dying.”

A grave silence followed Kajiwe’s remarks. There was no doubt he and his companions were capable of carrying out his threat. Yusuf felt the proximity of death as he stared into the healer’s intense eyes.

“We will now enter the healer’s ritual of passage. Its purpose is to break all the ties the initiate has with the mundane world. It is the most difficult and painful step the apprentice has to endure,” Kajiwe announced.

At Kajiwe’s nod one of the healers tied Yusuf’s wrists and ankles to a post. His regalia was carefully removed and put aside. The gathered men then pulled out leather whips and began the beatings. Yusuf’s terrified screams went unanswered. Twice he lost consciousness but was revived by cold saltwater on his body. For the healers there was nothing personal in the ritual beating; they were only replicating a crucial step in the confirmation of a healer. They too had endured the agony.

Yusuf awoke in the middle of the night, his body shivering and sore. When he regained his bearings, he found himself lying on a soft bed dressed in the full gear of a mystical healer. His companions were soundly asleep in the cave around him. At the center of the cave a struggling fire kept the men from freezing in the cold night. Quietly slipping out from the cave, Yusuf made his way down the hill until he came to the water’s edge, where Kajiwe’s canoe danced lazily in the waves. He untied it from the tree and started his journey into the dark sea.

I cannot miss the bus, he mumbled to himself as he paddled the canoe toward his village. The sea was suspiciously calm, causing him to fear that his progress across its surface would arouse the attention of vicious sea predators. After what seemed like forever he beached the canoe next to his village and abandoned it as he headed home. When he finally made it to his mother’s hut, he tried to sneak inside, but his mother had stayed up all night waiting for him.

“Where have you been?” Amina asked in a distraught voice.

“I am sorry, but I fell asleep at Kajiwe’s place,” he said.

“You nearly missed the bus. It will be leaving in two hours. Hurry up and get ready! I have warmed some water for you to bathe. I will prepare breakfast for you while you get ready,” she said, springing into action.

“Thank you,” he said as he hurried away.

Before the break of dawn Amina hugged her son as they parted. He wept freely, not knowing when he would see her again. There was a feeling of irrevocability in the

farewell. They held their embrace for a long time and only let go when the bus driver signaled that it was time to depart.

“Do not worry about me,” she whispered as they parted. “Allah will watch over you.”

As he boarded the bus, Yusuf dared not look back at his mother. He felt cruel for leaving her so lonely and helpless after all she had endured for his sake. Once on the bus he deliberately chose to sit in the back. He needed some space to confront his fears and doubts. Although he was aware of his decision’s expediency, his conscience stirred uneasily.

The journey to Nairobi, where the nation’s only international airport was located, proved to be anything but dull. After he attained some composure, he visually explored the writings and drawings which hung on the interior walls of the bus. He found one sketch particularly memorable and humorous, notwithstanding its crudeness. In the sketch a female rat was caught by the neck in a snap trap. The rat appeared to be engaged in a hopeless struggle to free herself, but behind her a robust male rat had seized the opportunity by the tail to rape the unfortunate she-rat. As if the picture did not tell it all, the bold writings below the sketch underscored the moral of the story: *BEWARE OF OPPORTUNISTS!*

His glance was interrupted by the image of an emaciated woman who sat silently next to the window. She appeared dejected and lost in a wilderness of sorrow. Occasionally she emerged above the haze of her misery to attempt to nurse the wretched toddler on her lap. The boy’s futile interaction with her dry breasts left him only more desperate and aggravated. When he screamed in protest, his chapped lips turned a dusky blue, and he gasped for air like a fish thrown onto hot sand. The scene repeated itself several times during the long trip. Even when the bus stopped to allow passengers to stretch their limbs and answer nature’s call, the pitiful woman remained glued to her seat.

“What’s the matter with him?” Yusuf asked in a concerned tone.

“He does not like traveling,” she answered absentmindedly.

“With this heat who can blame him?” Yusuf replied, trying to put her at ease. “I should have taken the train, except that it takes too long to get to Nairobi from Mombasa.”

“I considered it too, but everything these days has become prohibitively expensive,” she said despondently. “Soon enough the earth will be left to the enjoyment of the rich while the meek inherit the cemetery.”

In her statement Yusuf heard the anguish of the destitute and oppressed. The woman’s eyes turned blank again as her mind plunged back into her inner misery.

“I have a bad habit of packing too much. Here, have this,” he said, offering the bowl of food his mother had prepared for him.

Without hesitation or protest, the woman reached for the bowl and began to devour its contents hungrily. Her son greedily scooped the food into his mouth with his thin fingers. When only a morsel remained, he shoved his mother’s hand away from the bowl aggressively. In the vicious struggle for survival, it was obvious that he had mastered the skills necessary to compete for the few crumbs of life that fell within his reach. His mother appeared as oblivious to his struggle as he was to hers.

“The city has become a virtual hell,” the emaciated woman declared in a voice full of disgust. “I’ve lived in Mombasa for seven years, but I had to leave it or die in it.”

“It is indeed becoming so,” Yusuf said, unable to come up with anything more meaningful to say.

“It pains me that I’m going home empty-handed. In fact, I am now much worse off than when I left,” she continued. “My son has an unusual liver disease, and nothing can be done to fix it. They said that his time is past due. I know he’ll be better off with his Maker, but I almost pray I never live to see the day.”

“I can only imagine how difficult it is to receive such news,” Yusuf replied consolingly. “I am also certain that there is a place where the laughter of children never dies, where the sun never sets, and where the fire of a beating heart is never extinguished.”

“You are a preacher?” she asked, although it seemed more a declaration than a question.

“No, I only aspire to belief,” he replied.

“You could have fooled me,” she said almost shyly. “I was raised in a religious home, but, as they say, the ways of the city are crooked.”

After the rest of the passengers returned to the bus, Yusuf remained seated next to the woman. Their conversation continued, ranging from her life in the city to his anticipated life overseas away from his coastal village. On occasion he managed to draw laughter from her, although he could not dispel her underlying sorrow. Eventually her stricken boy warmed up to him and even fell asleep in his arms.

“We’ve been on the road for a long time,” Yusuf announced when the bus made its final rest stop at a place called *Mtitu wa Ndei*. “I have not seen you go out to stretch. If you don’t mind, I’ll stay here and watch your son.”

After a brief hesitation the woman accepted his offer and hastily left the bus, disappearing into the crowd of travelers while Yusuf engaged the boy in play. Harsh laughter had replaced his pitiful cry, and unlike his mother it seemed as though all his misery had vanished with his hunger. He clung to Yusuf and with his dusky lips planted kisses on his cheeks while they played.

When the driver honked for the passengers to board the bus again, Yusuf was not alarmed when the boy’s mother failed to return immediately. When the conductor alerted the driver concerning the missing passenger, the driver gave three loud honks and waited. When she did not return, the conductor jumped off the bus and ran to a nearby market in search of the woman. He soon came back with the news that the woman was nowhere to be seen. A nearby vendor of bananas stated that she had seen a woman hurrying away from the town.

“She has forgotten her son on the bus,” the bus driver informed the merchant. “I am sure she’ll come back for him. Do you mind watching him until she returns?”

“You are a fool if you believe she forgot the child,” responded the vendor. “If she left the child in your hands, count him among your possessions.”

It was getting late, and the driver could no longer delay the other travelers to look for the missing woman. “Young man,” he said to Yusuf, “the only thing left to do is to take the boy to the Central Police Station in Nairobi so that they can find him a new home.”

When they arrived in Nairobi, the bus driver took a detour to drop Yusuf and the boy at the police station. In an act of sympathy and concern, he dug into his pocket and gave Yusuf enough money to pay for a taxi to the airport.

“Sir, I’ve come to drop off an abandoned child,” Yusuf informed the policeman at the front desk.

“An abandoned what? Drop him off where?” The sleepy policeman had been caught completely off-guard by Yusuf’s remarks.

Yusuf explained the child’s plight to a gathering of amused officers.

“*Bwana*, it sounds like today is your lucky day,” declared a stout policeman. “Since his mother didn’t want him, you have our permission to keep him.”

“Thank you, but . . .,” Yusuf began to say before being rudely interrupted.

“You are welcome. Now goodbye.”

“No, listen. I have neither the means to provide for him nor the ability to meet his unique needs. I cannot keep him.”

“Well, I guess we can give him shelter in jail, but that would require him to break the law first,” one policeman said derisively.

“Sir, I am on my way to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, and I am afraid I cannot take this boy with me to America. You’ll have to find someone to take care of him,” Yusuf said, visibly irritated.

“They love children in America. They even adopt monkeys there,” another policeman jibed.

“Oh, I get it,” interjected a third officer. “This boy made his girlfriend pregnant, and when she heard he was leaving the country, she dropped his son on his doorstep and left. Now he wants the State to bear the consequences of his debauchery. The boy looks exactly like his father, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he does,” agreed the police chief. “*Bwana*, do you know it is a crime to file a false report? If you don’t walk away right now, you and your son will be spending a few nights behind those doors.”

It became clear to Yusuf that there was no help to be had from these men. He left the station with his luggage and the boy, overwhelmed by a mixture of frustration and despair. It was getting dark, and his heart was racing at the thought of missing his flight. The helpless boy sat on his shoulders and clung tightly to his forehead with his cold fingers, crying inconsolably every time Yusuf attempted to put him down.

They came to an open landfill where a gang of street urchins was rummaging through the rubbish for discarded food. Lowering the boy from his shoulders, Yusuf examined his face closely and nearly wept in anguish. He thought of his own mother, full of grace and fortitude. If only he could reach her in his current crisis!

“Why now?” he mumbled in helpless protest.

“Uncle, food. Am hungry, uncle,” the boy begged.

“I’ll get you food,” he replied impatiently, “but I am not uncle. Call me Yusuf.”

He stopped by a roadside cafe and bought a bowl of *mandazi* for the boy. Although Yusuf had not eaten anything for almost a whole day, he had no appetite. He drank a glass of cold water as the boy once more gulped down his meal. Even in the face of death the child’s ravenous appetite defied his inevitable fate.

Yusuf knew that the hour of his scheduled departure was fast approaching. He walked briskly toward a taxi stand, the weight of his luggage nearly exhausting him. When he came within sight of the taxis, he approached a well groomed older lady and begged her to watch his son for a moment.

The woman looked at him with deep contempt before offering a swift response. “Young man, I may look old, but I’ve lived in this city long enough to understand its cunning ways.”

Yusuf quickly moved on and found a blind man begging next to the long queue of taxis. When no one was watching, he pleaded with the reluctant boy to sit next to the blind man. Unable to persuade him, he resorted to brute force. After a spirited struggle he managed to free himself from the boy and dashed off to the nearest taxi with his luggage. Just as the taxi was pulling out, however, an athletic woman ran after them carrying the boy and caught the attention of the taxi driver. In spite of Yusuf’s insistence to keep going, he pulled over for the woman.

“Sorry,” she said, handing the boy to Yusuf, “but you have to watch out for these taxi drivers. You almost lost your son.”

“Aren’t you glad I stopped, brother?” the driver asked Yusuf. “If I hadn’t, you’d have had to make another trip here to get him. Then you’d have surely missed your flight.”

Yusuf had only one option left, and he was determined not to squander it. “This is very embarrassing. I didn’t know that it would be this difficult traveling with a child,” he dissembled. “My brother, I’d hate to lose him. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve had to do to get him back.”

“I take it that you are divorced,” the taxi driver remarked.

“Actually I’m widowed, and my in-laws were not taking good care of him. I had to pay them a lot of money to get him back, but what is money when a life is at stake?” Yusuf replied cunningly.

“You’ve a good heart, friend. Some people abandon their children and never look back,” the taxi driver said admiringly. “So where are you taking him?”

“We are heading to Zimbabwe. I found a great job in Harare where the economy is booming. But even success is hard to swallow without my son.”

“I know what you mean,” the taxi driver answered. “Until recently my wife and two daughters lived in my village, but after six years the situation became intolerable. As they say, blood is thicker than water.”

“Praise the Lord!” Yusuf declared.

“Amen,” replied the cab driver.

“My son has fallen asleep, and I don’t want to wake him. Do you mind if I carry my luggage inside and then come back for him?” Yusuf asked when they arrived at the airport.

“Not at all,” the taxi driver replied. “You are my last customer of the day, so take your time.”

“Thank you sir,” Yusuf said in gratitude. “I should pay you now before I forget, and here is ten shillings for tip. You’ve been very kind to us.”

“You’re quite welcome. Check in your luggage, and don’t worry about your son. He’ll be warm and safe here.”

Yusuf gave the sleeping boy one last look before he walked away. He was careful not to linger too long lest the taxi driver should change his mind or suspect his motive. As he disappeared around a corner, his walk turned into a frantic jog toward the terminal.

“This is the last call for Yusuf Ibrahim at the International Terminal,” a female voice announced over the public-address system.

He arrived at the gate just in the nick of time. No sooner had he boarded the plane than the attendant closed the cabin door in preparation for takeoff.

CHAPTER 18

Only when he was seated did Yasuf feel secure from the forces that had conspired to keep him from his overseas journey. The lengthy bus trip from Mombasa had left him physically exhausted, while his heart-wrenching encounter with the dying boy weighed heavily on his conscience. In the silence he pondered the child's plight and the rectitude of his recent actions.

On the British Airways plane he had a middle seat, but the anxious middle-aged man in the adjacent window seat pleaded with him to trade places. The passenger, named Jim O'Kello, was a short stocky man who was keen to explain to Yusuf that he was traveling overseas to undergo heart surgery. Incurably fearful of heights, he dared not look out his window. After briefly getting acquainted with his talkative seatmate, Yusuf dozed off but was awakened by a gentle nudge from Mr. O'Kello to listen to the flight attendant's instructions.

"In case of an emergency," the hostess said, "oxygen masks will drop down in front of you. You should first secure your own face mask before attempting to assist anyone else. Emergency exits are located on each side of the plane, as indicated by the lighted signs."

"Does she expect us to jump out in case of emergency?" Mr. O'Kello whispered nervously to Yusuf.

"Your seat cushions may serve as floating devices in case of a water landing," the attendant continued.

"O Lord!" Mr. O'Kello mumbled, wiping thick beads of sweat from his face.

"In case of a fire in the cabin . . .," the hostess continued.

"Do you have to tell us all these things now?" Mr. O'Kello blurted in protest.

"If not now, when else?" she asked rhetorically before returning to her memorized script.

After the lengthy presentation on safety precautions, the plane rolled slowly toward the runway. Following a brief pause while its engines revved for takeoff, the aircraft sped down the tarmac before defying the pull of gravity and ascending into the clouds above.

As he gazed down at the fading city lights, Yusuf pictured the defenseless boy deserted in the taxi cab. He was no longer sure that he had done the right thing. Yusuf wondered whether he had allowed his selfishness to usurp basic human empathy. He had withheld mercy from the helpless, denied benevolence to the desperate. He tossed back and forth in his seat, unable to free himself from the anguish of these accusatory thoughts.

As the plane soared higher, Yusuf peered through the window in search of the proverbial paradise above the clouds, hoping that his proximity to it would release his soul from remorse. Occasionally the British pilot announced their location over the intercom. When they crossed the Ethiopian highlands, he bid his passengers goodnight with the promise to wake them up when they arrived at Heathrow Airport.

Yusuf fell asleep again, this time for several hours. He awoke to find Mr. O’Kello wide awake and as nervous as ever. He engaged Yusuf in conversation in an attempt to assuage his anxiety.

“I take it that the surgical treatment you need is not available in Kenya,” Yusuf said.

“They offer it at Kenyatta National Hospital, but, as we all know, anything an African doctor can do a European can do much better. That is why I insist on having the procedure done in the UK,” Mr. O’Kello stated.

“You’re probably right,” Yusuf replied. “They have had a lot more practice than any of us.”

“Absolutely correct. The British surgeon takes his job seriously.”

For the next three hours Yusuf listened to a wide-ranging critique of African statehood. Mr. O’Kello, who happened to be a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Health, had serious misgivings about the ability of Africans to govern themselves. On the basis of objective data in his possession, he informed Yusuf, most of the African nations would become failed states within a few years after their independence from European colonialism. He indicted his fellow Africans as ignoble savages doomed at best to linger at the crossroad between civility and anarchy.

“I hate to be the one to tell you,” Mr. O’Kello declared, “but Africans are not born to run nations. Before the white man came, the black man’s place was in a thatched hut with his feet buried in the ash of ignorance, and now that the white man has left us, we are returning to that condition.”

They parted at Heathrow where Mr. O’Kello was picked up by his British daughter-in-law. He flashed a radiant grin in her company and laughed uproariously at the slightest hint of a joke from her.

The connecting flight from London to Boston took nearly as long as the one from Nairobi to London. The daylight allowed him to scrutinize the monotonous expanse of the Atlantic Ocean below, which only periodically was dotted by ships and boats. The sight for some reason reminded Yusuf of Kajiwe, and in his mind he heard the mystical healer’s resonant voice cursing him for his missing canoe. Yusuf’s graceless departure had no doubt vexed his mentor. The only question that remained was how and when Kajiwe would exact his revenge.

When they finally arrived in Boston, the plane circled the city for a long time before regaining altitude. The Italian man who sat next to Yusuf joked that the pilot could not locate the airport and had finally given up. After a brief period, however, the plane descended back toward the airport. It turned out that the pilot was waiting for clearance to land because of heavy air traffic. Shortly before dark the plane touched down, ending a very long journey for Yusuf.

Sister O’Neal, who insisted on being called Eunice, came to pick up her protégé from the airport accompanied by her husband John. The moment she laid eyes on Yusuf she recognized him in spite of the fact that he was older and much taller. Yusuf did not recognize her at first, but Eunice’s effervescent cheerfulness soon identified her as she approached. Her husband was more reserved and deliberate. On their drive home the couple was eager to learn everything that had transpired after their momentous escape to freedom.

“Welcome to our humble home,” Eunice said upon their arrival. “This area is called Quincy, and it is very quiet. For people of a certain disposition it is paradise.”

After a tour of the three-bedroom house, she led him to what would be Yusuf’s bedroom and left him alone to unpack and take a shower. She then joined her husband, who was busy warming up the special African dish they had prepared for their guest.

“He had better like this meal after all the work I’ve put into it!” John joked as he cut the meat.

“I have no doubt he will, but pray his appetite has shrunk since his days at Shimo la Tewa High School,” Eunice replied in a whisper.

After his refreshing shower Yusuf joined Eunice and her husband for supper. As his hostess had predicted, his appetite had survived the transatlantic voyage. They dined and chatted for a long time until Yusuf began to doze off. Eunice escorted him to his room, where she restated her delight in having him join the family. He fell soundly asleep as soon as he covered himself under the warm blankets.

The following day Yusuf woke up eager to explore his new world. Wonders met him at every turn. The manicured lawns and clean streets were a stark contrast to the rutted thoroughfares of Mombasa, where stray dogs staked their territorial claims. Enormous trucks roared along smooth, wide highways, but unlike their African counterparts these trucks did not leave plumes of toxic smoke behind them. Yusuf also noted that Americans were afflicted with widespread gigantism. This condition affected humans and machinery alike. For the first time in his life Yusuf crossed paths with people who matched his grandfather’s depictions of giants and monsters.

“Back in Africa only prominent chiefs are that big!” Yusuf marveled after seeing a rather stout man.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” John exclaimed. “If size were the sole determinant, I have met people who would qualify to be the chief of several tribes at once.”

“You ought to show some sympathy,” Eunice interjected. “Obesity is a genetic disease; some of these people are not able to process food normally.”

“Yes, it is one of those *genetic* diseases you’ll never encounter in the Sahara desert,” John quipped. “You’ll notice how generous America is towards the unfortunate. In fact, I think she is too generous at times.”

“Is it possible to be too generous?” Yusuf asked.

“I speak of a noxious form of generosity which coats reality like a sticky molasses,” John explained. “Here the obese are viewed as innocent victims of hamburger assault while the indolent become men of honor who refuse to breach their contractual agreements with the couch. The kidnapper, on the other hand, is described as someone with unresolved separation anxiety...it never ends.”

The perplexities of America for Yusuf, however, went deeper than appearances. It took months for him to peel back the nation’s layers of complexity, under which lay treacherous cracks and hidden dichotomies.

These fissures began to open before his eyes during his first semester in college. A discussion in his creative writing course had rapidly turned sour when the professor asked the students to share their views on an essay by Malcolm X that criticized America’s hypocrisy in setting herself up as a beacon of freedom and justice while practicing vicious brutality against a segment of its citizens. Almost immediately the

class discussion escalated into heated arguments, which spilled over into a social arena unfamiliar to Yusuf. His classmates took up their parts in the exchange along clearly demarcated battle lines.

“If Malcolm X did not like being an American, why couldn’t he jump back onto the boat and go back to Africa? We all know how rosy life is in the Motherland!” a fervid white student declared.

“Why should he have to move to Africa or anywhere else for that matter?” a petite black woman contended angrily. “He was born in this country and had a right to be treated with dignity just like any other American citizen. It irks me deeply when I hear some inbred *hillbilly* telling people to go back where they came from. The only person who has an ancestral claim on America is a native American.”

“I hate to inform you, but the only activities the son of Sitting Bull engages in begin and end with casinos and liquor stores!” the fervid student rejoined, provoking laughter in the class.

“On a more serious note,” said a red-haired student, “my problem with the author’s whining is that too many people today have bought into this victim mentality and use it to hide their own laziness and to justify their parasitical status in society. How on earth does the fact of your great-great-grandfather’s slavery prevent you from getting off your ass and finding a job? Even if a cruel master might have chopped off your ancestor’s hands, you did not inherit that disability. The sooner we accept this reality, the sooner the government will stop taking my hard-earned cash to feed porch monkeys and hookers.”

“I am really sorry to hear that your mother is a hooker,” a muscular black male responded, “but for the sake of accuracy you should know there is more white trash on welfare than. . . .”

“Perhaps you will trust an outsider to make sense out of this childish argument,” interjected a light brown female student who spoke with an English accent. “I do not believe in the inheritance of guilt, or even of virtue for that matter. The descendant of the slave owner, as long as he is not guided by the same sadistic principles as his ancestors, is morally as innocent of the crime of slavery as the descendant of the slave. But we must not stop there because at another level, at an economic level, some descendants of the slave master are accomplices in a different crime.”

“What a load of crap! Tell me how exactly I’m an accomplice in a ‘crime’ that was committed more than a hundred years before I was even born,” demanded the red-haired student.

“Let’s pretend you stole fifty dollars from me. Are you guilty of a crime?” the same female student asked.

“Of course. What is your point?”

“What if, instead of giving me back my money, you handed it over to your son? Is he justified in keeping it?” she asked.

“I see where this is going, but the master did not promise his slaves a portion of his estate. Does a horse inherit the farm after the farmer dies? According to the law of the time, the slave was equal to a farm animal, and therefore he had no claim to inheritance. The master’s son who inherits his estate consequently has no obligation to divide his fortune with the slave’s son. That makes your analogy absolutely false.”

“But just as the son of the master has the right to inherit his father’s property, so also does the son of the slave have the right to inherit the value of his father’s uncompensated labor. Labor is an asset. It has value. The master’s son not only inherits property but also a debt to the unpaid laborer who developed the land. The son of the slave has the right to demand payment of his forbearer’s unremitted wages. That is the essence of America’s economic injustice—the robbery of one person’s inheritance to hand it over to another,” the English student stated emphatically.

“In that case you should consider welfare checks a form of reparation and stop bitching!” retorted the red-haired student. “I refuse to accept that slavery, however grotesque a crime it might have been, is remotely to blame for the current crisis in black America. A culture that initiates its boys into manhood with a snort of cocaine and a lesson in armed robbery—not to mention its affinity for making mothers out of twelve-year-olds—has only itself to blame for its problems.”

“Black America,” rejoined the petite female, “is not waiting for some white knight to rescue it from any crisis. We have raised ourselves resiliently from the cesspool of the white man’s hell—and all this when we were greatly outnumbered.”

“All this anger and hatred is based on an unhealthy dose of ignorance,” declared a tall white female student. “We cannot pretend that all whites are malicious any more than we can presume that all blacks are their innocent victims. Marching side by side with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were compassionate whites who were no less determined to end an era of injustice. Some even gave their lives to that cause. On the other hand, freed American slaves who emigrated to Liberia created a repressive economic and political system that marginalized and disenfranchised native Africans for more than a century. They assumed their cultural and intellectual superiority to native Africans and reproduced the same oppressive system they had run away from, except this time they were the masters! Simply stated, good and evil are not distributed along color lines. In fact, race as it is usually portrayed is a myth.”

“And with that we’ll conclude this steamy debate,” the professor announced. “Students, I love the passion you have injected into this class, but do not expend it all on this one topic. Other issues await our attention. By way of brief summation, I chose this essay by Malcolm X because, as you have just seen, there are no passive spectators in matters of social justice and identity. The essence of transformative creativity, and therefore of creative writing, is that deep connection with the topic at hand. You have to feel it, breathe it, and live it in order to communicate it convincingly to your audience.”

“Yusuf was pretty quiet,” observed the black female student.

“In my country,” he replied shyly, “we believe in respecting all mankind and even some animals.”

“Brace yo’self, nigga!” exclaimed the muscular black student, causing an explosion of laughter.

As Yusuf would learn, America was a country rife with illusions and contradictions. The conservative shunned the liberal as a morally decadent activist bent on recreating Sodom and Gomorrah; the liberal loathed the conservative as the reincarnated Grand Inquisitor eager to sacrifice anyone who deviated from his theology. There were white supremacists who viewed every black male as a perpetual threat to entrenched privileges and white womanhood. There were black gangsters who murdered and plundered for mindless self-aggrandizement. Even among the feminists there were

radicals driven by an agenda of neutering, if not altogether annihilating, the male gender. As these disparate views wrestled for dominance in the public arena, they created a truly restless society.

Yusuf was also quick to learn that America had assigned him a label long before he crossed its borders. His skin preceded him through every doorway. In a land where the enchanting melodies of Mijikenda drums did not pierce the air, his only option was to embrace his assigned identity. He was now a Negro in America. But what did it mean to be a Negro? He read assiduously and widely from its most prominent defenders and philosophers. In Dr. King's writings he heard the words of a man who had attempted to repel death in order to accompany his children to the mountaintop of justice. In the poems of Langston Hughes he found reprieve from the pangs of his own nostalgia—nostalgia for all things deep and moving like ancient rivers in which ancestral spirits hid beyond sight to guard a reverent posterity. In Malcolm X he came across the phenomenon of an indomitable mind devoted to an uncompromising quest for untainted dignity and self-determination. And, of course, rising above the ignominy of slavery was old Frederick Douglass, a self-made man who had broken the devil's jaw to salvage his freedom.

Yusuf's new identity in America compelled him to feed his voracious mind constantly. During the humid summer months he devoted most of his waking hours to study in the public library. With its ubiquitous repositories and enormous book collections, the American library was a Mecca to the inquisitive mind. Through this telescope he peered far and near. On the pages of an incisive biography, he revisited the vindictive figure who had unleashed untold terror on his grandfather. To Yusuf's utter surprise he felt pity for the now deceased dictator. In her desire to make gods out of mere mortals, Africa had created the monsters that devoured her offspring. He also discovered other largely unsung heroes—Patrice Lumumba, Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Stephen Biko—whom he adored as deeply as a child venerates a gracious parent.

In this sphere of ideas, challenging questions cropped up constantly. What was it about America's founding fathers that empowered them to create an enduring revolution, while Africa's founders dragged their homelands into intractable quagmires? What in elitist Jefferson was amiss in the tenacious Nkrumah? Why did an assassin's bullet impart eternal glory to Honest Abe, while it silenced the memory of martyred Lumumba? Why did Washington's boldness transform a nation into the "home of the free and the land of the brave," while Mobutu's iron-fist converted a lush nation into the home of fleas and the land of the brute? He grappled with these questions as he sought for meaning and purpose in Boston's humid summer.

As he delved deeper into America's soul, one thing became clear: there was in America a relentless impulse for exposure. America had no veil to guard her secrets. This quality kept the nation's spirit free and unmarred by her riotous past; it allowed her to triumph over her countless blemishes and transgressions. Secrecy and cover-up, he learned, were more toxic to societies and individuals than the shame of exposed vice. America had found a way to harness the cathartic power of public humiliation and confession, willingly or otherwise.

CHAPTER 19

While a year in Africa dragged through twelve long and tedious months, in America it seemed as though the planet rotated more hastily around the sun. This impression dawned on Yusuf near the end of his second semester in college. Nine months had vanished all too quickly.

To celebrate the end of the academic year, the African students threw a party on the weekend after final examinations. Yusuf learned about the event from one of his classmates, Kaye Phillip, the outspoken English girl who had dared to engage one of America's native sons in a heated debate about social justice in their creative writing course. He found her comically pessimistic, and, strange as it seemed, it was this attribute that attracted him to her. A bond of friendship developed between them, and she had invited him to accompany her to the party. She picked him up from Quincy on a beautiful spring evening. As they approached downtown Boston, they found themselves stuck in a traffic jam. After Kaye's customary expression of disgust and exasperation, their conversation turned personal.

"How many siblings do you have?" she inquired politely.

"None. What about you?" Yusuf replied.

"My parents were together only long enough for one mishap," she responded. "Back then my mother was a naïve cockney chick who sought to repair the ills of British Imperialism abroad by giving herself to a cunning West African subject."

"Don't be so cynical. Maybe they loved each other," he replied.

"She might have, but he loved his immigration papers more. As soon as they arrived in the mailbox, he disappeared. She was abandoned in London, pregnant and heartbroken."

"Do you hate him?" Yusuf asked.

"He is a stranger I never met. He lives only in the stories my mother told me about him," Kaye said dispassionately. "Some of the stories were rather bizarre. They still make me laugh."

"I'm ready for a laugh," he said.

"I'll tell you the one I find the funniest. My father loved bush-meat, rabbit being his favorite, but in London there is no such thing. As fate would have it, my mother insisted on getting a pet to keep her company during his frequent absences. Since they were too broke to afford a critter, they walked to the animal shelter to adopt one. There my father learned that there were not only dogs available for adoption but also rabbits." Kaye broke into laughter at this point.

"Don't tell me! The animal shelter was soon without rabbits, thanks to the conservationist down the street," Yusuf guessed correctly, and the two shared a hearty laugh. "But didn't your mother object?"

"I asked her the same question. Well, at first she didn't know where the rabbits were coming from, and she felt she had to be flexible and allow his 'authenticity' to express itself. One by one the rabbits became dinner, although she claims she never ate any of them. She found out when a couple of journalists knocked on her door eager to meet the dedicated Rabbitologist who was sharing his small apartment with seven rabbits," she continued.

"What did she tell them?" he asked, still chuckling.

“She slammed the door in their faces and waited impatiently for my father to return. She grew tired of waiting, though, when days turned into months. He had moved on after procuring his immigration papers,” Kaye said with visible resentment.

He reached for her hand and pressed it gently. She fought back tears while he gently stroked her hand. No words were needed or spoken.

It was dark when they finally arrived in Lowell. Before stepping out of the car, she embraced Yusuf in an expression of gratitude for his understanding. They found a house full of lively celebrants. After picking up some refreshment, they wandered into the living room where a boisterous multinational argument was in progress. To his great relief Yusuf realized that most of those in attendance were friends he had met in the African Club on campus. He took a seat next to a burly Nigerian who was proudly extolling the virtues of his country.

“I’ll give it to you straight, boys: Nigeria is the gem of Africa! Our great writers have beaten Englishmen at their own game. Soyinka is undoubtedly the greatest playwright living today. Achebe is on a par with Orwell. The list goes on and on,” Okwu, the speaker, declared.

“You are expected to discard the propaganda pamphlets handed out by the military junta once you arrive on American soil and get your news from credible sources,” rejoined Eduardo, an Angolan student.

“What rubbish!” replied Okwu. “This is no laughing matter. You must see in this man how the endless civil war in Angola is reaping havoc, even in the senses of its expatriates!”

“Yusuf should be given a chance to speak for the East Africans,” interjected Xolani, a South African student.

“Yes, Yusuf. We have an ongoing argument that remains unresolved,” declared Bako from Senegal. “What is the best predictor of the cost of living anywhere?”

“That is a no-brainer,” Yusuf answered. “It is the cost of bread, of course.”

“Cost of bread? How can anyone make such a claim?” Ahmed from Libya asked.

“Well,” argued Yusuf, “bread is a universal commodity. The ease or difficulty with which people have access to it determines how inexpensive or exorbitant it is to live in a given place. It’s that simple.”

“Yusuf should be forgiven for his simple-mindedness,” said Lunde from Uganda said. “Everyone here knows that if you visit the store you will find many different kinds of bread. Some are very cheap and stale, others quite sweet and expensive. In Kenya, of course, there is only one type of bread called *kenblest*, which I understand is baked by the country’s undercover policemen, and its ingredients are a State secret. As a matter of fact, it is the only worthwhile secret in the files of the Kenyan intelligence services.”

These comments ignited another round of laughter from the crowd. The girls laughed the loudest, and perhaps they were the reason why the boys went to extreme lengths to come up with punchy rejoinders. Throwing one’s opponent off his feet by exposing the infirmity of his reason had replaced the arena where village wrestlers contended for admiration and respect. In this setting no one took offence even after excoriating verbal exchanges. There was something in the relaxed atmosphere of Okwu’s apartment which ignited and fanned intellectual sparring.

While their counterparts back in Africa were content with being cheerful spectators, the expatriate African women dove readily into these traditionally male

contests. Most noticeable was a graceful but tough Tanzanian student named Tuma, who took everyone by surprise with her strong views on the “root” of Africa’s problems.

“The African man is the root of the continent’s endless troubles,” she declared during a brief intermission in the merriment.

“Oh America, America, what have you done to my sister?” Okwu exclaimed to everyone’s laughter.

“I’ll tell you what America has done to your sister,” Kaye responded. “She has allowed her to speak her mind. Silent no more . . . and she demands your attention.”

“Let me explain my point,” Tuma continued. “A nation prospers when its women are empowered. While the man is absorbed with other things, which usually center on himself, the woman keeps vigil day in and day out on the basic unit of the nation—the family. With untiring devotion she stirs from her bed in the treacherous hours of the night to feed her children, and all this while the man is in a half-dead state he calls sleep.”

“She will return tomorrow to announce that she is a lesbian,” jeered Okwu. “My brothers, no one speaks this way unless she has something sinister up her sleeve.”

“If I am wrong, show me a single prosperous nation where the woman is still in chains,” Tuma argued. “Africa from north to south is governed by male dictators, and that is precisely our problem. With his iron fist the dictator has choked the life out of the feminine, and thus the progressive, side of the motherland. And things must inevitably fall apart until the African woman takes her rightful place in the cockpit.”

“You will probably agree,” said Lunde, “that the U.S. is a prosperous nation. It has fifty state governors, and none of them is a woman. Almost forty presidents to date, none of them female. And how many in Congress are female? I rest my case.”

“But look at the American woman,” Kaye interjected. “Is she bent over under the yoke of having to eke out a living for her family single-handedly while her husband squanders their meager resources on cheap beer and prostitutes? Does she face the discrimination of being unable to inherit property simply because of her gender? Is she confronted by scornful policemen and bigoted judges when she takes her petition for equality to the law? I think that is what Tuma is saying.”

“It is worse in England than I had imagined!” Okwu retorted, and the boys laughed.

“There is no doubt,” observed Yusuf, “that in any society gross social injustice puts the whole nation at risk. Female empowerment is a valid approach in most societies for escaping economic stagnation. We agree that a woman’s heart is fixed on her family, which, I hate to say, is not always the case with men. But my question is this: whom has she appointed to wage her battles? Her liberation, like that of all others, comes at a price. The American woman could not vote until a few decades ago, and as long as we are using her material condition as the gold standard in this argument, we must also consider the path by which she has arrived where she is.”

Keenly interested in Yusuf’s comment, Tuma responded: “Through bloodshed we evicted the Europeans from Africa and thereby liberated ourselves. Are you suggesting that this liberation was intended only for men?”

“Liberation comes in degrees,” answered Yusuf. “The American liberty first came to the white man, but it left the slave in chains toiling under a cruel master for another century. It left the woman, black and white alike, as a subordinate to the man. Each of

them had to dismantle their unique shackles of bondage through struggle. The deeper the roots of domination, the harsher the struggle must be.”

“You speak the painful truth,” Tuma agreed. “Unfortunately, liberation is impossible among the destitute. It is impossible to achieve genuine liberation while one is dependent on the benevolence of the unjust. I fear that the liberation of the African woman will have to wait until the day when she can control her economy.”

“If you read Greek comedies,” interjected Xolani, “you will learn that female liberation is easy. In *Lysistrata* they forced bloodthirsty battalions to sign a peace treaty by withholding sexual favors from men. There is your solution, Tuma!”

“If sexual deprivation makes people free,” clowned Okwu, “my situation would free South Africa from the Boer menace.”

“As a child of the infamous Soweto ghetto,” Xolani said, “I was born in a country where my parents could not even share a bed to appease the apartheid regime. Even then, however, I viewed theories of helpless victimization with disdain. My position is that very few are innocently victimized. Unless one is a child or mentally retarded, a person who rejects bondage wholeheartedly can never be enslaved. One must buy into that identity of weakness, whether through intellectual laziness or servility, in order for the chains to fit him. In most cases the oppressed and his oppressor collaborate in the dynamic of victimization.”

“I find your comments surprising, even shocking,” Kaye responded. “The apartheid regime is second to none in its ruthlessness and malevolence. Are you suggesting that its outmatched victims have brought their sufferings upon themselves?”

“Perhaps they did nothing to bring the abuse upon themselves,” Xolani declared, “but our failure to face the beast with equal ruthlessness neither tamed nor appeased it. When villagers are confronted with a deadly predator, they do not go to church to pray for it or seek a truce with it. They do whatever is necessary to exterminate it. Oppression is minimally physical and overwhelmingly mental. In other words, you cannot be oppressed for a long time by those who are intellectually inferior to you.”

“That is the spirit of the Mau Mau!” Yusuf exclaimed.

“The Mau Mau,” quipped Lunde, “were better at outrunning their opponents than fighting them. That is why Kenya has the world’s best marathon runners.”

“Xolani makes a good point,” Okwu added in a more serious vein, “one that I’ve come to appreciate more fully in the context of American history. We must resist the urge to accept a narrative that casts us as the perennial victim or the vanquished. To hold to such a belief is to condemn oneself to an unfulfilled life. I subscribe to Malcolm X’s militant stance but recoil when Martin Luther King invites me to turn the other cheek.”

As the night progressed, the discussions became more casual. Perhaps tamed by alcohol, former opponents laid down their weapons and danced together to traditional melodies. Yusuf sat next to Okwu, whom he found entertaining and thoroughly versed in all things American, while Kaye stood by a window engaged in conversation with Tuma. Eventually the DJ played slower and more sentimental songs. Yusuf looked toward the window where Kaye was standing. When their eyes met, she smiled shyly, and his heart trembled. Could he dance, he wondered, without stepping on her toes? He had to try.

“Would you like to dance?” Yusuf asked Kaye.

“I’d love to,” she replied, taking his hand.

“I have to warn you . . . ,” Yusuf began to say, but he stopped in mid-sentence when she placed her warm cheek against his.

“You dance very gracefully,” Kaye whispered into his ear.

Her voice reawakened powerful emotions as he recalled another voice equally delicate and charming. As he swayed to the music, he took slow breaths and savored the scent that arose from her hair. The end of the dry season had come; he felt a gentle drizzle of powerful sensations quenching the thirst of the parched sod of his heart. An overpowering ripple spread slowly from his core to the periphery. The hairs on the back of his neck rose to meet the new dawn. Just then the unthinkable happened. He felt it stirring in its secluded cage below. With each new drop of blood, it gained more strength and vigor. He tried to divert his thoughts to keep it in its pacified state, but the more he fought it, the more rebellious it became. With the boldness of a spitting cobra, it stood on its boneless spine ready to strike. What would she think of him if she noticed it? The rebellion had to be put down and quickly. *I’ll chop your head off if you don’t retreat immediately*, he threatened silently, but it was all in vain.

“Yusuf, are you alright? Suddenly you seem so tense,” Kaye inquired, catching him off-guard.

“It’s my shoes. They are a bit too tight for dancing,” he lied as he bent over, apparently to inspect them.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be insensitive,” she apologized.

“It’s not your fault. I should have worn my other pair.”

“It is getting quite late anyway. We should call it a night,” Kaye said.

On their way home they chatted freely and were disappointed when they finally arrived in Quincy. Just before she dropped him off, Yusuf mustered enough courage to ask her out on a date. To his consternation he learned that in the morning she would be flying back to London for summer vacation.

“If you’re not too busy in the morning, feel free to see me off at Logan International. Okwu can pick you up,” she suggested.

“I’d love to,” he said.

Okwu and Kaye stopped by Eunice’s house the following morning. The short trip to the airport was filled with entertaining arguments between Okwu and Kaye. Like close but competitive siblings, they carried on incessant debates on the pettiest issues. Within no time the threesome were standing in the terminal saying goodbye.

“I hate saying goodbye,” Kaye said as she prepared to leave.

“Don’t worry, Kaye. I’ll dream of you every night until you return,” Okwu teased.

“I’ll miss you too,” she said, giving him a quick hug before turning to Yusuf. She pressed a note into his hand as she hugged him and disappeared into the waiting plane.

Yusuf wanted to keep his budding relationship a secret, but Okwu had decoded the couple’s body language. Even before they left the airport, he jokingly accused Yusuf of stealing from his harem. Before long their discussion turned from jovial to serious.

“Yusuf, I think you’re a bright guy, and I must share an important secret of survival in America,” Okwu said in a matter-of-fact voice as they drove away from the airport.

“I welcome any advice you can give me,” Yusuf replied.

“I know you’ve been raised a certain way—we all were—but in America you have to make some essential compromises.”

“What sort of compromises?” Yusuf asked.

“A strict morality does not stand you in good stead here,” Okwu advised. “Scientifically speaking, the struggle for survival in America permits only the survival of the morally un-fittest.”

“You don’t strike me as the criminal type. What do you mean?” Yusuf inquired.

“Look, if you plan to pursue any worthwhile dreams in America, you’ll need papers,” Okwu declared. “You need to become a naturalized citizen, and the sooner the better. I hate to break your heart, but that sweet English girl is simply a liability—unless, of course, you’re planning to move to England.”

“Wow, you don’t mince words!” Yusuf said while trying to recover from the surprise. “She is very attractive and a genuinely remarkable person. Doesn’t that count?”

Okwu replied, “You’ll soon learn that, when you don’t have papers in America, nothing counts. You’ll have to choose between mindless love and the dreams that brought you here. You can either break her heart now or wait to do it later when she has fallen head over heels for you. I am giving you a bird’s eye view of what is ahead on this road. You can take it or leave it, but you can’t change it.”

“I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but there must be another way,” Yusuf said.

“Did you look around the room at the party last night?” Okwu asked. “When you saw all your African brothers with those chubby chicks, did you think they were in love with them? No, but they are all experts in realism. At the price of a little attention such girls will hand you the keys to your American dream. It’s that simple!”

“It sounds like exploitation . . . and a bit immoral,” Yusuf stated.

“I agree, but survival demands it. Think of it as outside the realm of ordinary morality. God left you no other choice when he made you a poor African who has to pay exorbitant out-of-state tuition, while rich Americans pay half the amount.”

“This is heavy stuff. I’ll need some time to digest it,” Yusuf replied.

“If you’re free on Saturday, I’ll take you to a wedding,” Okwu said. “You’ll have a chance to see an application of this principle.”

“I should be free. Please stop by and pick me up,” Yusuf answered as he stepped out of the car.

CHAPTER 20

When Yusuf returned home, he found a note on the table from Eunice indicating that they would be gone until later that afternoon. This was the perfect occasion for him to give undivided attention to the note that Kaye had slipped into his hand. Perhaps because of the disheartening things he had heard from Okwu, he hoped to find reassurance in her words. After gulping down a glass of cold water, he sat on the couch with the note, which he read slowly and thoughtfully.

Dear Yusuf,

I wanted you to know that I had a great time last night. It also meant a lot to me that you were willing to drop everything to come see me off this morning. I am still new to this country and haven’t been out much.

*I guess I now have a reason to look forward to my return. Please do take care of yourself, and tread carefully around Okwu (tell him I said this).
See you soon, Kaye*

Although he found her words restrained, he appreciated the fact that he now had something he could hold onto in her absence. In the face of Okwu's warning, he was unsure about the future of their relationship. He was old enough to know that, while lovers sometimes fell out of love, no one ever stopped dreaming. As Okwu had once put it, "A man's peace of mind lies in the cottage of his dreams." For the next several days Yusuf wrestled with these thoughts. Although his heart repelled Okwu's gloomy predictions concerning his relationship with Kaye, he was happy to see him the following Saturday when he stopped by to take him to the wedding.

"Do you like my new car?" Okwu asked with immense pride.

"It's magnificent. I like BMWs," Yusuf replied. "Man, the inside feels like an airbus."

"Do you know what BMW stands for? Black Man's Wife!" Okwu said with a laugh.

"It must have cost you an arm and a leg," Yusuf replied.

"To appear rich without truly owning anything is the essence of the American dream," Okwu declared. "You shouldn't be perplexed when you see people living in grand mansions or driving dazzling cars. It just means they are that much deeper in debt than you."

"It doesn't sound like a prudent thing to do," Yusuf observed.

"Well, then it is an imprudent necessity. It shows progress, and that is respectable," Okwu explained. "Have you noticed how most Africans here take great pains to dilute their Africanness? They try to speak English through their noses like Americans. They discard those ridiculously oversized and flowery costumes they wear in the village and dress like the white man. The motto is simple: if it doesn't take you nearer to the American dream, toss it in the dumpster!"

"That sounds a bit weak," Yusuf countered.

"Well, you won't seem very convincing to a potential employer if you dress like Shaka Zulu while lying to him that you're from here," Okwu replied.

"So where do you draw the line?" Yusuf inquired.

"Funny you should ask," said Okwu. "I know a guy who went as far as applying skin lightener to lessen his blackness. The only problem was that his face became lighter while his ears remained pitch black. He looked like a wild rabbit!"

"I imagine that is what they call culture shock," Yusuf remarked amid laughter.

"Speaking of which, when I came here I learned the hard way never to hold hands with men."

"Holding your friends' hand is a very normal thing to do," said Yusuf. "You mean you can't do that here?"

"Let me just say that one guy took it a bit too personally. By the time I realized what was going on, he was licking my ear," Okwu declared, throwing Yusuf into another fit of laughter.

"To a village person such things are inconceivable," he said.

“Here’s the place. We’ve arrived. You’ll be surprised by how different weddings are here as compared to Africa,” Okwu explained to Yusuf as they entered the rented hall. “First, the whole village does not show up uninvited, and, second, you are expected to bring a gift.”

“What did you bring?” Yusuf inquired.

“A pair of handcuffs and a whip,” Okwu whispered with a smile. “They are into that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing requires a married couple to own a pair of handcuffs and a whip? You mean he is a wife-beater?”

“America is a long way from your innocent village, bro. Look at the dazzling bride,” Okwu directed as they sat down.

“What a transformation! Did you say the groom is from Benin, and is that the same girl he brought to the party the other night?”

“Burial in a dazzling casket does not guarantee eternal life,” Okwu answered after a thoughtful pause. “Well, I just hope that the groom has overcome his fear of soap and water. On a good day the guy smells as though he lives on a diet of skunks and mongoose.”

“Everyone looks so happy,” Yusuf observed. “This is truly a marriage of two cultures.”

“It takes x-ray vision to see behind the façade,” Okwu explained. “The two sides of the room represent two battle camps. Each side harbors its grievances. Look at that old man by the window. I think he’s the bride’s grandfather. He is definitely not here to celebrate the occasion, but he has been summoned by the same call that drags tearful mourners to a funeral. What went wrong, he silently asks himself.”

“Man, you’ve perfected the art of looking inside other people’s heads. You must be a descendant of some serious witch in Biafra,” Yusuf said half-jokingly.

“If she hasn’t already told you, Kaye thinks I’m heartless, and for a very petty reason,” Okwu said dismissively.

“You two have a shared past?”

“I guess you could call it that,” Okwu replied. “Last fall we were driving, or rather I was driving, to Dartmouth along a beautiful country road. Kaye was going there for an interview, and I graciously agreed to be her chauffeur. While we were enjoying the scenery, out of nowhere a beautiful bird walked into the middle of the road. All the other cars were swerving every which way to avoid hitting the suicidal bird. It became more emboldened as drivers took great risks to spare its life. When it was my turn, I decided to stay in my lane. By the time Kaye realized what was going on, the whole thing had ended in a swirl of feathers.”

“Why didn’t you swerve?” Yusuf inquired as their laughter waned. “You may be the son of the best hunter in Nigeria, but you weren’t planning to eat the bird, or were you?”

“No, quite to the contrary. Look, if you have ever tried to catch a bird, you know it’s a nearly impossible task. Almost always the bird flies away long before you even start moving. But here was a bird walking thoughtlessly into traffic. If that is not a death wish, I don’t know what is. I’ve no doubt the reckless bird was pleading for euthanasia. I only provided it with the means. Who knows? Maybe it had just learned that it was suffering from an incurable form of gizzard cancer.”

“Gentlemen, would you like a piece of cake?” a pretty lady from the bride’s entourage inquired.

“Sure. Thank you kindly,” Okwu answered with a bright smile. “You look magnificent!”

“Oh thank you. You may have another piece,” she said, clearly flattered. “You are very handsome yourself.”

After the lady strolled away, Yusuf exclaimed, “My brother, you are shameless! But tell me, what do these people think of us?”

“With my vast experience and a degree in psychology, I can answer that question accurately,” Okwu declared. “When we laugh so loudly and freely, they think that the space between our ears is filled with cobwebs. In general, they think that we are harmless simpletons incapable of serious harm or notable accomplishment.”

“But why would anyone allow his daughter to marry so poorly?” Yusuf asked.

“They know that we Africans are hard-working. Therein lies potential happiness for their daughter. Although she will be denied the privilege of social esteem, she will be supported and worshipped as a goddess by a perennial fool.”

“And what are their fears?” Yusuf inquired.

“Well,” Okwu replied, “they imagine that the groom has been running around the jungle naked for most of his life, which means that parts of his body might have grown unnaturally long. This is perceived as a potential hazard. Generally speaking, most people are opposed to interracial marriages.”

“And who can blame them?” Yusuf replied.

“Let’s go and congratulate the blissful couple,” suggested Okwu. “I have to go to work soon.”

As his culture shock waned, Yusuf’s attention began to drift back to the life he had temporarily set aside. It disturbed him immensely that his many letters to his mother had gone unanswered. His only recourse was to keep writing, for he dared not indulge his fears or suspicions concerning her protracted silence. He wrote about his studies and the friends he had made. When his apprehensions got the better of him, he pleaded for a reply from her and invoked both deities and spirits to watch over her through their separation.

Meanwhile there was unfinished business between him and Eunice pertaining to Gnosticism. Although they had on occasion revisited the wondrous experiences in their shared past, they had deliberately put off the idea of reconstituting the Communion while Yusuf was still adjusting to his new life in America. But while he was busy doing so, Eunice had kept up her restless spiritual quest, which would lead to a dramatic change of course in their relationship.

It all started on a hot and humid evening at the end of the summer. Eunice’s march to gnosis had become an insufferable trudge in the mud of uncertainty. She was on the verge of giving up when she heard a knock at the door. When she answered it, she was met by two well-groomed young men who greeted her cheerfully and asked whether they could come in to share an important religious message. The sweat on their brows drove her to pity, and against her natural inclination she invited them inside.

“Aren’t you a little young to be called ‘elders’? What is the life expectancy of members of your church?” she asked humorously as they sat on the couch sipping cold lemonade.

“On average about ninety-five,” answered the tall white missionary who went by the name of Elder McConkie.

“Wow! You will be an elder for a long time. I guess you need the practice,” she replied.

“For us ‘elder’ is a title. It means that we have been ordained to preach the Gospel,” explained the black missionary, whose name was Elder Freedman.

“There is a church every few blocks here in Quincy. Don’t you think you would be more useful preaching the Gospel in China or the Amazon valley where many have never heard of Jesus?”

“That is a fair question,” responded Elder Freedman. “With so many churches around us, however, one has to wonder whether they all represent Christ. And if there are variations in their messages, where can one find pure, divine truth? We come to you with the fullness of the Gospel as it was preached by Peter, Paul and all the other followers of Christ two thousand years ago.”

“Let me guess,” responded Eunice sarcastically. “You preach the pure and complete Gospel, and no one else does.”

This was the beginning of what would be a life-changing experience for the former nun. Contrary to her expectations, the missionaries’ approach was neither confrontational nor theological. They instead were direct and personal, which gradually disarmed her acquired aversion to organized religion. Over the weeks that followed the two elders returned to her house several times for discussion. She read the Book of Mormon from cover to cover and, against her wishes, fell in love with its colloquial yet moving message. There was an element of humanity in its prophets; they were mostly ordinary people who woke up each day to confront their weaknesses and to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

It was around Easter when Eunice and John accepted the elders’ invitation to accompany them to church. Yusuf went along from a desire to be polite. The music was beautiful, but he found three hours of church almost insufferable. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was unique in its lack of professional clergy. Ordinary members—nannies, plumbers, lawyers, and even a mortician—stood at the podium to give lessons and share personal experiences with the divine. They were unpaid and untrained, like fishermen made disciples.

“The Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts through a gentle small voice,” Elder McConkie had once told her. “By this means God guides us to His eternal truths. And as we embrace them we obtain greater understanding until the moment comes when we see ourselves as He sees us. Our mortal purpose and eternal destinies unfold before our eyes. Then, and only then, can we claim that Truth has set us free.”

“How may I become a latter-day saint?” Eunice asked eagerly one evening. The following Sunday she was baptized and confirmed as a member of the church. Her lengthy quest had found its answer. She became a Mormon.

For his part Yusuf resisted his friends’ invitations to follow in their steps. At the public library he unearthed some unsettling discoveries about Mormonism. Most prominently, he found personally distasteful, if not insulting, the views of the sect’s adherents on race. After reading several articles on the matter, he had had enough. He returned home one evening ready to confront his friends and their preachers.

“I can understand why a cowboy from the Wild West can maintain his composure in the face of such insults,” Yusuf declared during a heated argument with his hosts and the missionaries, “but how can you, Mr. Freedman, ignore the attack on your ancestry—no, the very essence of what makes you human? Do you embrace this eternal second-class status they’ve assigned to you? I mean, they don’t just say that you are repugnant; it is much worse than that. Your alleged inferiority begins and ends in the presence of your Creator. So what is your answer?”

“The things of God are spiritually discerned. Arguments do not lead to divine revelation,” replied Elder Freedman. “I am not suggesting that our church has walked a perfect path throughout history, but its wavering and spiritual struggles do not dim the power of Christ’s Gospel. You will find the same struggles recorded in the New Testament between Jewish believers and those they viewed as impure Gentiles. It is the nature of all men to extol their virtues and entitlement, even while they plead for redemption and sanctification from a perfect Savior.”

“Perhaps then you can explain to me why until the late 1970s black men in your church could not become priests and were viewed as ignoble souls doomed to eternal servitude. Not even the *goddamned* slave master preached that gospel to appease his deformed conscience!” Yusuf was livid.

“As I have already mentioned, people do not obtain divine light through argument or debate. I can never convince you empirically that the Gospel is true; you must find out for yourself through mindful study and prayer,” Elder Freedman replied calmly.

“Let us assume that I am not trying to join your church, and that am only interested in understanding your psyche. Answer from that position. How do you reconcile yourself to such degradation and contempt?” Yusuf inquired.

“Honestly, Yusuf, there are some questions I cannot answer. As a matter of fact, I’ve struggled with these very same issues. But this much I *can* tell you: I believe in the innocence of all humankind at birth. I don’t believe that anyone is born with a curse. That was true in 1830, in 1930, today, and forever. I do not believe in inherited stigmas or proscriptions—all this is unfortunate distractions from the Gospel’s central message. I have felt the love of God, have experienced the grace of Christ, and have been cleansed by the sanctifying flame of the Holy Spirit—and not to any lesser degree than Elder McConkie. Though the Gospel is perfect, Christ calls upon imperfect men, such as me, Brigham Young, and others to disseminate it.”

“I am afraid you’ve been led into an embarrassing impasse,” Yusuf replied. “Your place is merely to escort others who are supposedly more valiant than you as they ascend to their eternal glory where servitude awaits you. Mormonism offers you a place in paradise, but only as an afterthought and, evidently, as a subordinate. If that gives you joy, the Devil’s work is done!”

“These claims are categorically false and offensive,” countered an upset Elder McConkie, “and I question your sources for this information. Some people are determined to destroy this church, but they will never succeed. You need to stop dwelling on what this or that man said and start focusing on the will of God.”

“The problem with all apologetics and revisionists,” declared Yusuf, “is their refusal to deal honestly with inconvenient facts. Your integrity escapes unscathed when you acknowledge flaws in your heroes and the narratives they weave, but to mask an unpleasant truth behind the veil of invented mystery is an insult to basic logic. A casual

glance at American history makes it clear that the underpinning of your ban on priesthood for blacks was neither mysterious nor divine.”

This confrontation was the death knell of the Gnostic Communion. Eunice O’Neal and her husband had found their truth where Yusuf could not venture. Although they were cordial and even more polite to one another than before, the die had been cast against their spiritual bond. The interaction between Yusuf and the missionaries concluded via correspondence initiated by Elder McConkie shortly after the fallout.

Dear Yusuf,

Since our last discussion I have felt compelled to write to you in order to dispel your confusion. Your argument revealed a gross lack of understanding of Mormon doctrine and a tragic misinterpretation of the motives and principles behind some of our practices. Your contention centered on the grievance of priesthood restrictions that were imposed upon the Negro by the Lord himself. As I did not then have a chance, I will now take a minute to explain this matter in detail.

It is true that from the establishment of our church and extending until 1978 we did not actively proselytize people with known African blood and that once these individuals joined the church they could not be ordained to the priesthood. The reasons behind this ban are not clear. Anyone who has delved into the basis of the ban has arrived at only pure speculation. That said, there are scriptural basis for the practice. For example, we know that Cain killed his brother Abel and was thus cursed by God. His curse entailed banishment from congregations of the faithful, including the ban against officiating in the priesthood. We have learned through latter-day prophets that the African is a descendant of Cain and therefore subject to this curse.

It is also noteworthy that those who were born into the Negro lineage were fair-weather defenders of the faith in the pre-mortal existence. In the conflict between God and Lucifer, they were uncommitted fence-sitters. It therefore comes as no surprise that they should find themselves in a disadvantaged state during their earthly existence.

This does not mean, of course, that we have advocated for mistreatment of the Negro. The decrees of the Almighty as to retributions upon Cain’s descendants, generation upon generation, did not require man’s intervention to unfold. In fact, you would be gratified to know that Joseph Smith, the founder of our church, lived with at least two Negro women in his household and treated them very generously and humanely. They were so thankful that ultimately one of these women asked to be sealed as the prophet’s servant in the next life. This sealing of a grateful servant to a dear master was performed in one of our holy temples.

You’ll be delighted to know that in June 1978 a revelation was received through our prophet allowing Negroes to receive the priesthood if they prove worthy of it. It came after strenuous prayers and pleadings with the Lord. Gratitude, not contention and discontent, is the proper response for this divine favor. We can now affirm that the curse has been

lifted and that the offspring of Cain may partake of the Lord's cup freely. This change of heart by the Lord came as a total surprise to some of us, but the Lord has His own timetable and does not need to consult man on any matter. We are therefore fully determined to reform our minds and attitudes in compliance with every precept that comes from His mouth.

*It was unfair of you to claim that our doctrine is grounded on white supremacy. We believe in Divine supremacy; all men will someday bow before the Almighty. We also believe in a living church, which means that we believe in ongoing revelation. As long as the work of building the Lord's kingdom carries on, new truths and guidance will continue to be shed upon the earth. The Lord is not concerned with "political correctness"; He only cares about eternal correctness. Those who follow His living prophets will never go wrong, even when the path forward is difficult and uncharted. The opportunity for repentance is still open to you and to everyone else, and it will remain so until you exhaust the grace of a loving Savior. These are the plain truths of our doctrine.
Sincerely, Elder McConkie*

It took Yusuf several attempts before he could manage to read through the letter. The arrogance with which Elder McConkie had constructed his demeaning argument left him infuriated and itching for a fight. At the very least he owed him a thorough, if not excoriating, exposé of the fallacies upon which his case was grounded. In spite of his seething anger, he took several days to conduct his research and contemplate his rebuttal. When he finally sat down to write, his words cascaded in a fierce torrent. He was composed but animated by a surge of cold energy.

Mr. McConkie,

Your unsolicited letter raised some very disturbing points, and I owe you an honest response. After careful consideration of the matter, I must state my case as frankly as possible. I'll start with a declaration of my core values: I can never subscribe to, nor do I believe God to be the author of, racial supremacy. I thus cannot condone, let alone fathom, the delusional logic expressed in your letter. I do not believe in a salvation that is extended to any group of people by a just God only as an afterthought or as a strategy to quell the tide of social pressure (civil rights in this case). It is also painfully ironic that you, a descendant of the race that historically has the greatest amount of innocent blood upon its hands, have the audacity to link my ancestry with an individual who best approximates your murderous disposition. And if Cain had to pay through countless generations for killing his brother, as you claim, how much more severe should the punishment be upon your ancestors for exterminating whole nations of innocent people around the world?

Next, I am deeply resentful of how your church, particularly its leaders, spoke of the abolitionist movements and the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. It flies in the face of everything we know about Christ to imagine him sanctioning or justifying the diabolical behavior of enslavers

and ruthless murderers. He who fed the destitute and clothed the naked, he who blessed the outcast and embraced the downtrodden, would not tolerate the savage exploitation of other human beings. It is also a desecration of any holy altar to bind a person as a servant to another human in the afterlife! All this shenanigan arises from the mistaken belief that our injustices on earth endow us with privileges that God is bound to respect or perpetuate in the hereafter.

Finally, I have greater respect for people who, after attaining some degree of enlightenment, acknowledge their shift of paradigm instead of suggesting that God somehow has wised up. If He were capable of making mistakes, God in His infinite humility would insist on total disclosure instead of obfuscation or hoodwinking. This is perhaps the reason why Scripture is replete with accounts of faltering disciples and backsliding believers. Why? you may ask. Because that depth of sincerity is necessary to free the soul from the bondage of self-righteousness.

Scientifically speaking, we know that African lineages predate all other racial groups on this earth. It is therefore factually inaccurate to portray us as products of an after-creation event. If indeed there were an Adam and Eve, they had to be African. But regardless of whatever I say, I understand that dogma and fanaticism resist reason. For my part, I cannot embrace a theology that pretends to advance the ideal of universal redemption while subtly promoting racial supremacy. This is where I stand.

Yusuf bin Ibrahim

CHAPTER 21

“Yusuf, you haven’t quite lived in America until the day you graduate from the ‘Nursing Home University,’” Okwu said jovially as he drove Yusuf to his first job as an assistant at a nursing home.

“I’m looking forward to it. I promise to give it my best.”

“It’ll definitely be an eye-opener. Just don’t take anything personally. Keep your eyes focused on the paycheck,” Okwu advised.

The integration of most foreign students into the American economy occurred largely in the nursing home. In this setting there was nothing unusual in the meeting between Yusuf and the resident in Room 15. Mrs. Elsie Compton was a shy, if not clinically anxious, elderly woman who preferred the privacy of her room to the clamor outside her door. Unlike most of the other residents, she was in full control of her mind and only lost her composure when invited to take a bath. She had been brought to the nursing home against her wishes by her middle-aged son, and time had not cured the emotional trauma of the experience. Day in and day out she sat on a rocking chair by the window knitting while listening to classical music on the radio. When provoked, her otherwise relaxed demeanor transformed rapidly into its extreme opposite.

“Elsie, I don’t find any pleasure in giving you a bath,” Yusuf informed her as she hurled insults at him for “such indecency.”

“Why then do you do it?” she protested. “Time and time again I’ve told you that I am not the type to strip naked in front of strangers. I am old enough to be your mother, young man!”

“I have bills to pay. That’s all there is to it,” Yusuf answered somewhat glibly.

“I am not paying you for this. I didn’t ask you for a bath. Ask whomever put you up to this to pay you. No sir!” she replied furiously.

“Don’t worry about it, Elsie. My payment is guaranteed, as long as you cooperate with me,” Yusuf reassured her.

“Really, someone is paying you to do this?” Elsie asked, appearing surprised.

“Elsie, did you think. . . . Never mind.”

“What if I don’t want a bath?” Elsie inquired angrily.

“I go hungry. Is that what you want?” Yusuf retorted.

“No, I don’t want you to go hungry,” Elsie said in a motherly voice.

Confronted with the possibility of Yusuf’s starvation, Elsie abandoned her rancor and resistance. Her penetrating eyes, now expressing sympathy, focused on his face. Yusuf unwittingly had put an end to her semi-comical insurrection, which he found more tolerable than her misplaced sympathy.

“Don’t worry about me, Elsie. I’ll be fine,” he said to allay her anxiety.

“I’ve a boy your age. He lives in Charlotte,” Elsie replied softly.

“I am sure that your son is a good boy,” Yusuf answered, resisting the impulse to inform her that her youngest son had to be a man well past his prime.

This was the beginning of a revealing yet tragic relationship. Elsie, moved by an inexplicable fear of hunger, opened herself up to Yusuf and ushered him into the world of her upbringing and the dark forces that had shaped it. Over the next several weeks her bathroom became both a confessional and a battlefield where two very different minds sparred privately.

“When I was growing up, Charlotte was in the grip of Jim Crow. It was just the way things were then,” Elsie explained while Yusuf washed her feet. “We didn’t create the world. We were just born into it. In North Carolina there were two worlds, the white and the black, and the two rarely overlapped. We walked our line, and *they* walked theirs. I know you’re not from around here, but don’t believe it when they say we were mean or ruthless. No one who walked the line was ever hurt.”

“I am greatly reassured,” Yusuf said with concealed sarcasm. “Of course, we’ve every reason to assume that those who drew the line had the interests of both communities at heart.”

“Separate but equal was the law! Anyone who worked hard succeeded. We even hired them in our homes,” she continued. “I was raised by a black maid, and I can say the same for most of my friends. The bond between the white child and her Negro maid was nearly as strong as the one between the child and her mother.”

“How precious!” Yusuf replied. “They don’t write such things in the history books.”

“Of course they don’t. They have their agenda,” Elsie said with disdain.

“Fortunately witnesses like you remain to tell us the truth,” Yusuf continued.

“I can see it in your eyes. You are a good nigger, sweetheart.” As Elsie spoke, she tenderly stroked Yusuf’s cheeks with her gnarled fingers.

“Thank you, Elsie. That is the kindest compliment I’ve received in a long while,” he replied with a forced smile.

“Your folks raised you well,” she added, “and they gave you a strong name, Joseph. Do you have children? My heart longs for the laughter of children. I’d give anything to see them frolic.”

“Sorry, I’ve no children, just a girlfriend,” he replied with his mind on the task at hand.

“A girlfriend is the place to start!” she said excitedly. “Are you in love? I was once in love. Oh, it is the best of feelings! Is she pretty?”

“In fact she is gorgeous.”

“Then you must hurry up, Joseph, before she is snatched from you.” The old woman’s voice carried a sense of urgency. “I don’t mind putting in a good word for you. You should bring her over for a cup of tea one of these days.”

“I’m sure she would love to, but she hardly has time for anything other than work and school,” he informed her.

“Is she from around here?”

“No, she is English,” Yusuf answered casually.

“Now Joseph, you might be good enough for a white woman, but race-mixing leads to all sorts of troubles,” Elsie said disapprovingly.

“She actually is not white. She is a black woman,” he replied.

“I didn’t know there were niggers in England!” Elsie appeared stunned.

“Believe it or not, there are some beautiful *niggers* in England,” he retorted.

“Now I am even more excited to meet her! Does she speak like a proper English woman, or does she have the Negro dialect?”

“Elsie, let’s drop the charade.” Yusuf had had enough. “You cannot tell me you’ve lived for nearly a century and don’t recognize the arrogance of your attitude. You use the term *nigger* as casually as you call this soap. Look, the world has changed. No longer is the earth populated by masses of wretched savages prostrating themselves at the feet of some white master. I am not your childhood maid. Neither adoration nor concern has brought me to your bath. Our relationship is purely economic. And I’ll bet you that your black maid did not give a *damn* about you either. She was only striving to stay afloat in the brutal hell your forefathers had created for her. Now close your eyes, and I’ll wash your head.”

Yusuf’s diatribe caught Elsie entirely by surprise. Could it be, she wondered, after all these years that her judgments, especially when it came to the human soul, had failed her? She felt like an actress alone on a stage, and the audience was heckling. In some devastating way she had misread the script; the performance had gone terribly awry. Naked and wet, she felt shamefully betrayed and vulnerable. An unusual weight pressed down on her chest. However hard she tried to breathe, she came out short-winded. The earth had run out of air.

“Help! I can’t breathe,” she cried frantically, collapsing into Yusuf’s arms.

“Somebody, help! Come quickly!” Yusuf yelled as he struggled to keep Elsie from drowning in the bathtub. Other staff members soon rushed to his aid.

Elsie was immediately transported to the hospital by ambulance. She was gasping for air like a fish out of water. As she was carried off on a gurney, Elsie pointed at Yusuf accusingly. Suspicious stares trained on him from every side.

“Why is she pointing at you? Did you do something to her?” Ms. LuJean, the charge nurse, asked.

“No, I did nothing,” Yusuf answered in a trembling voice.

“I’ll get to the bottom of it. I hope you understand that elder abuse is a felony,” Ms. LuJean declared as she returned to her office.

Elsie’s rapid deterioration left Yusuf shaken. For the remainder of his shift he could barely function. He was relieved when at its end Okwu came to pick him up. On their way home he described the whole scene, but nothing that Okwu said could set Yusuf’s mind at ease. He tossed in his bed throughout the night, wondering what surprises the next day would bring.

When he made it to work the following morning, he was met at the door by Ms. LuJean in the company of a tall grey-haired gentleman. She asked Yusuf to wait in her office while she ran a quick errand. He knew that things had gone terribly wrong. He recalled all the stories he had heard from Okwu about foreign students who had ended up in prison before their deportation under similar circumstances. He should have ignored Elsie and kept his mouth shut. Now it was a lifetime too late. He fully expected Ms. LuJean to be accompanied by a detective or policeman.

“Yusuf,” said the charge nurse upon her return, “we need to discuss a few things concerning Elsie. She passed away shortly after arriving at the hospital.”

He closed his eyes and for the first time shed tears in front of strangers. Wiping them away, he turned toward the man who sat quietly beside Ms. LuJean. Yusuf wondered whether this person was waiting for a confession before whisking him away to jail.

“My name is Bill Compton,” said the stranger, “and Elsie was my mother. I am very thankful that she had a caring person at her side before she passed away. In her dying wish she asked me to find you and assist with your school expenses.”

“How did she die?” The words seemed to escape Yusuf’s lips without his volition.

“She died peacefully,” Mr. Compton answered.

“I mean, what killed her?” Yusuf inquired.

“I am not a medical person, but I understand you are so inclined,” Mr. Compton continued. “They called it stress-induced heart failure. I have the doctor’s notes if you care to read them.”

“Please, may I?” Yusuf asked eagerly.

“Absolutely. I am sure that my mother would want you to know. And here is my telephone number. Call me if you need anything, and I mean it,” Mr. Compton stated as he handed Yusuf an envelope. “You can return the notes to me later,” he added.

“You should take the day off to unwind,” Ms. LuJean said to Yusuf, who gladly accepted the offer.

Yusuf was convinced that he had something to do with Elsie’s death. It did not matter what her son said; he had to inspect the evidence for himself. As soon as he found a seat on the subway, he immersed himself in the doctor’s notes. He plowed through several pages of dreadful handwriting before he found a typed document.

Discharge Summary

Date of Admission: August 24, 1980

Date of Discharge: August 25, 1980

Discharge Diagnoses:

- 1. Severe tako-tsubo cardiomyopathy*
- 2. Non-obstructive coronary artery disease*
- 3. Essential hypertension*
- 4. Depression and anxiety*

Hospital Course:

Mrs. Compton was an 89-year-old white female who was admitted to the hospital from a local nursing home after suffering acute cardiorespiratory decompensation. Initial assessment by EMS described her as dyspneic, mottled, and diaphoretic in extremis. In the ER her oxygen saturation was in the low 80's on a non-rebreather face mask. Systolic blood pressure was in the 70's accompanied by sustained sinus tachycardia. The patient was intubated and mechanically ventilated. Appropriate vasopressor therapy was initiated followed by a battery of tests. An EKG showed ST-elevation in all precordial leads. The patient was rushed to the cardiac catheterization lab under the presumed diagnosis of acute coronary syndrome. She was found to have clinically insignificant coronary artery disease but a critically low cardiac output. Further investigation revealed apical ballooning of the left ventricle and other evidence of acute stress-induced heart failure, also known as broken-heart syndrome or tako-tsubo cardiomyopathy. An intra-aortic balloon pump was inserted before the patient was transferred to the cardiac ICU for further management. Unfortunately she deteriorated over the next few hours, and her family opted to de-escalate her care. The patient was sedated for comfort, and all interventions were terminated. She expired shortly thereafter. The patient's body was released to the medical college for teaching purposes consistent with her end-of-life directives.

Behind the clinical detachment and exactitude of the synopsis, Yusuf realized, was something as familiar to human experience as “broken-heart syndrome.” Without a doubt the sword of his tongue had unintentionally pierced Elsie’s unarmored heart. As he grappled with the tragedy, the thought of a dying boy gasping for life crept into his mind; like Elsie, he too had fallen victim to his ruthless self-centeredness. How many more had traveled the same path unnoticed and un-mourned? He wept inwardly under the weight of his guilt. In search of deliverance, his mind returned to the rebellious words of the poem he had inherited from his indomitable grandfather: “*Under the bludgeoning of chance, my head is bloody but unbowed.*” Life had to go on.

As autumn’s enchantment succumbed to winter’s gloom, Yusuf now understood there were hazards all around him. He had stepped out too carelessly and paid a heavy price for his recklessness. He counted himself lucky that at the edge of the grave Elsie had chosen mercy over vengeance. As mercy could not always be expected, he realized that he had to reorganize his life in a way that would make it unnecessary.

The wintry chill of the Northeast was eclipsed by an event of enormous magnitude and importance. “This being your first season of general elections in America,” Okwu informed Yusuf, “you’ll be exposed to something you never saw in Africa”

“The presidential election in Kenya is a simple choice between a president-for-life and his reprisal,” Yusuf remarked. “And to add insult to injury, the voter is expected to make this choice cheerfully.”

“You’ve likely noticed,” replied Okwu, “how unflatteringly the media treats presidential candidates here. They go so far as to undress each aspirant and sniff his underwear. Their audacity would send them to the grave anywhere in Africa.”

“And all this is done in the name of freedom of speech?” a perplexed Yusuf asked.

“Yes, and none of the contestants dares to complain lest he be accused of attacking free speech,” Okwu declared. “To be a journalist in the West is to feign misunderstanding of the difference between investigation and voyeurism.”

“I suppose this kind of journalism is preferable to its muzzled counterpart back home,” Yusuf said thoughtfully. “So do you consider yourself politically conservative or liberal?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer for outsiders like us,” Okwu replied. “The conservatives’ moral position aligns with my core beliefs, while the liberals’ view on social responsibility fits the tribal mantra that a child is born to a village. That said, I have major reservations about both sides and cannot give my full allegiance to either.”

“What are your hang-ups with the American conservative?” inquired Yusuf.

“As I see it, the roots of American conservatism lie deep in the master’s plantation,” Okwu declared.

“You mean the slave master?”

“Yes,” answered Okwu. “Conservatism anywhere is defined by its nostalgia for the ‘good old days.’ Its objective is to restore society to a presumed lost order. Unfortunately the society its adherents long for in America would make them your masters and lead to an imbalance of opportunity tilted in the white man’s favor.”

“You probably would agree,” argued Yusuf, “that historically America has been the most powerful voice on behalf of universal liberty and self-determination. Thomas Jefferson urged every man to rise to his rightful place on the pedestal of liberty. Isn’t that a past worth reviving?”

“One has to look beyond mere rhetoric and examine the fruits of a man’s labor,” Okwu rebutted. “Upon doing so, you’ll realize that those who vociferate most loudly about the sanctity of life and liberty happen to be the most passionate defenders of the mechanisms that deprive others of those selfsame opportunities. What you are left with is a veneer of compassion that masks a lust for power and dominance.”

“Let’s then leave aside historical figures. I have to confess that I was moved by Mr. Reagan’s speech on freedom as every man’s destiny,” Yusuf declared. “He spoke to me. It felt real and tangible.”

“I have learned to be wary of any form of freedom that is offered to me as a gift,” stated Okwu. “For freedom to be real, it must germinate and spring from within. The American conservatives’ gift of freedom is one that at best would allow you only to make those choices they approve. They have invented a fictitious moral dichotomy in which a

person has to choose between their ‘righteous’ dictatorship and the decadence of ‘excessive’ freedoms. If it comes down to a choice between these two alternatives, I’ll take ‘excessive’ freedom over the morality of a ‘righteous’ dictatorship any day.”

“I can hardly wait to hear what you have to say about the liberals,” Yusuf said.

“My contention with the American liberal,” Okwu declared, “is that he demands the freedom to make bad choices while insisting that society must shoulder the consequences.”

“It’s obvious that the role of the government constitutes a major rift between conservatives and liberals. What are your views on this?”

“I believe the government can play a constructive role so long as its powers are limited to protecting the rights of its citizens, but it must never intrude to divorce a person’s choices from their natural consequences,” Okwu replied. “Its place is to facilitate the people’s progress, and without undue prejudice, but not to protect or perpetuate mediocrity.”

“I never imagined that Utopia was a real place,” replied Yusuf.

“Sooner or later every man must come to the realization that freedom is inescapable,” Okwu declared. “The wise person is the one who refuses to outsource his moral and economic liberties to others. This is why I am a libertarian.”

“Anarchy is the natural offspring of the libertarian ideology,” Yusuf declared. “Its proponents hoodwink the naïve with promises of unfettered freedom. In my view their Utopia involves a regression to a chaotic and lawless jungle. Common sense tells us that man will either have a civil government of his own choosing or an uncivil one controlled by the mightiest brute. Reorganizing and streamlining government may be necessary from time to time, but the dissolution of civil institutions will take us a step behind cavemen—except this time the outcome will be devastating due to man’s refined capacity for self-extermination. Simply put, the ultimate end of libertarianism is the survival of the shrewdest and annihilation of the rest of us.”

“Whatever the outcome, man does not do himself a favor by preserving that which nature would otherwise dispose of,” Okwu replied.

“But we must not model our polity on principles of predation,” Yusuf countered. “As humans our purpose goes beyond mere survival and self-preservation. It requires us to develop our higher sensibilities: empathy, selflessness, compassion—qualities that are hardly envied or encouraged by wolves!”

The general elections in America came and went, and the skies remained above the earth in spite of the pundits predictions to the contrary. Meanwhile Yusuf’s heart was undergoing a momentous change.

When Kaye returned from London, she and Yusuf spent most of their free time together. This in combination with the demands of school and work kept Yusuf away from his hosts’ home. After two years of resisting the inclination, Eunice and John had decided to relocate to Salt Lake City. Their repeated trips there had not cured their longing for proximity to the epicenter of their new faith. In spite of emotional appeals, Yusuf had turned down their invitation to accompany them. His love was in Boston, and there he would remain.

On the eve of their departure, Eunice and John invited Kaye and Yusuf to a farewell dinner in their home. It was an evening of warm and engaging conversation. As

always, Eunice was nostalgic for the bond she and Yusuf had shared in the past. She expressed her hope that her former disciple would one day awaken to the dawn at which she had arrived.

“There is something magical about love’s blooming,” Eunice said while admiring Kaye and Yusuf.

“Professor, there she goes again!” Yusuf replied with pretended exasperation.

“You know she is right,” replied John.

“I was actually quite envious when Yusuf told me about your experiences in Africa,” Kaye interjected.

“We had some very intense and unique moments, wouldn’t you agree, Yusuf?” reminisced Eunice. “They brought me both serenity and discontentment, and I stumbled on love as a bonus.”

“We were all transformed,” John said, stroking his wife’s back.

“And we were moved by an insatiable hunger for something magical,” Yusuf added.

“It was liberating,” declared John meditatively. “Even though I was chained like a beast for the better part of each day, I felt free—freer than I had ever been before. I learned that once the spirit is free, no chain is strong enough to imprison the body.”

“John, I think you should write a memoir,” Kaye suggested. “Your remarkable experiences as an activist and as a political prisoner would inspire countless others to rise above their oppressors.”

“Actually I’ve thought about it, but it takes a huge commitment of time and energy, two things clearly deficient in men of my age,” John replied.

“I speak as a true friend when I say that I wish Yusuf would rekindle the inquisitive spirit he once had,” Eunice remarked. “Why won’t you open up your heart? We have found the Truth we sought. You too can drink from this pure fountain.”

“I’ve never abandoned the quest,” Yusuf answered politely.

“You should read the Book of Mormon. You can even have my copy,” Eunice urged. “Everyone who reads it comes to know it is true through inspiration.”

“How can anyone guarantee that?” a thoughtful Kaye inquired.

Yusuf struggled to find the right words for a response. “I only pose it as a question,” he said. “When does devotion become fanaticism? If I ignore glaring flaws, can divine spirit guide me to deeper truths? It seems to me that the earnest seeker must start by engaging reason and common sense. Am I wrong?”

“Reason alone will never lift you above doubt, or into the sphere of eternal truth and light that transcends human comprehension,” Eunice explained. “When the story is told of Christ ascending to heaven, there is a glaring flaw in that the laws of gravity are being defied, but no sincere believer would wish that the story ended differently.”

“It is a simple test of faith, Yusuf,” added John. “Christ stands with open arms to receive you. We fail the test of faith when we shift our focus from a perfect deity to fallible mortals.”

“John is right,” Eunice agreed. “God uses imperfect men to advance His work here on Earth. Only the Holy Spirit can guide us back to God’s presence.”

“Excuse my ignorance, but how does the Holy Spirit speak to an ordinary person? The idea seems so far-fetched.” Kaye was getting drawn into the discussion.

“Through a soft, gentle feeling in the heart,” John answered. “The Spirit conveys peace and reassurance to the sincere seeker of truth as he takes the steps that lead him closer to God.”

“It seems to me that feelings are quite subjective and should not be entirely relied upon,” Kaye observed. “Pessimistic people are prone to gloomy feelings, while the optimist is inclined to sweet and warm emotions.”

“Guys, you don’t have to believe us,” declared Eunice. “You and everyone else can know for yourself if you take the necessary first steps. Read the book thoughtfully and then ask a loving Savior if it is true. The answer is assured.”

Shortly after this discussion Kaye and Yusuf bid farewell to their friends. In spite of their divergent views, Yusuf maintained a deep respect and admiration for Eunice and John. They, in return, loved him as if he were their own offspring. The occasion was especially difficult because the couple was moving away without a guarantee of future reunion.

“I’ll miss them deeply,” Yusuf confided to Kaye as they left.

“Eunice adores you. It shows in her eyes,” Kaye replied.

“Do you think I was unfair when I disagreed with her? Was I disrespectful?” he asked.

“I don’t think they expect you to embrace every position they take without raising questions,” she said reassuringly.

“In spite of our differences, they appear happy and renewed by their new faith,” Yusuf observed. “At least, unlike the overwhelming majority of humanity, theirs is not simply a *geographical* devotion.”

“Geographical devotion? What does that mean?” Kaye inquired.

“Most people believe in what is widely accepted within their immediate environment,” Yusuf explained. “Ahmed fasts during the month of Ramadan because he lives in Tehran; John Paul lives in celibacy as a Catholic priest because he is from Dublin; and Patel must bow reverently to a cow because everyone else around him does so. There are no epiphanies here, no burning desire to interact genuinely with the Divine, only mindless deference to familiarity and conformity. Such geographical devotion masquerades as faith and spirituality.”

“So from your point of view it is not enough to be a devout follower,” Kaye said. “The true disciple must become an apostle, the prophet, the Buddha, or whatever. Is that what you are suggesting?”

“Unexamined conformity to any practice or dogma produces a restless hypocrite at best or, worse, a mindless puppet. It hardly stirs spiritual enlightenment or rebirth,” Yusuf declared. “The attainment of *gnosis* requires a dedicated, introspective, and prayerful search. And while scriptures open a conduit of communication with the Divine, this interaction must rise above historical narratives and into the sphere of vivid dialogue with deity. The fire of rebirth is only lit when man achieves this palpable spiritual connection with his Creator. Nothing can be more delightful!”

“You speak as if you have achieved it,” Kaye observed.

“I speak from a knowing heart,” Yusuf stated.

“At least I can now tell my friends that I know someone who reached Nirvana without smoking pot,” Kaye said in jest.

“Now you are putting words in my mouth,” Yusuf protested jokingly.

“Frankly I did not find anything unusual or disagreeable in any of Eunice’s or John’s remarks,” Kaye declared.

“They are happy, and it is not my place to tear down their delusions,” Yusuf declared. “But most importantly, I don’t appreciate anyone who selects the villains in his religious narrative and assigns them to be my forebears while keeping all heroes in his pedigree.”

“The delusion is in all of us,” Kaye stated with a smile, “for times and tides have ensured that the blood of both heroes and villains, of oppressors and oppressed, of victors and vanquished, flows in one undivided stream in everyone’s veins.”

CHAPTER 22

Eunice’s departure from Boston opened the door to Yusuf’s final passage into adulthood. Now more than ever he was free to think his own thoughts, to live as he wished and where he chose, and to face the consequences of his choices without looking over his shoulder for an approving glance. Kaye remained loyally at his side while he broke his attachments with boyhood. By the time they noticed it, Yusuf and Kaye’s lives had merged without conscious effort or design.

“We could save precious cash if you moved in with me,” Kaye said one day. “In case you don’t realize it, you already live here!”

“Where I come from,” replied Yusuf, “men do not move into women’s huts. And if they do, they forfeit their right to be respected.”

“Where you come from, men get mauled by lions in the process of proving their manhood! When you go to Rome, you must become romantic for love’s sake,” she said.

“It is evident that you are exploiting my weaknesses to your advantage,” he said in lighthearted protest.

“Now let’s go pick up your clothes. We both know they will appreciate a new life outside the pigsty, not to mention my place is a lot closer to the beach.”

“Let’s go to the beach first. We can pick up my things later,” Yusuf suggested.

“Great idea! Heaven knows I need a break,” Kaye replied.

Within minutes they lay on Wollaston Beach sunbathing and relaxing. Yusuf’s love of the sea was a contagion to which Kaye had succumbed shortly after they met. As they lay side by side on the warm sand, lulled by the lapping waves, she wrote on the sand with her finger, “I’m afraid I’m falling in love.” Yusuf inscribed his facetious response next to her sentence: “Does he know you’re here with me?”

“I’ve never been the anxious type,” Kaye said almost in a whisper, “but I fear everything is so perfect that it can’t last forever. You are the best thing that ever happened to me!”

“When you speak that way, it feels as though you are snatching words from my heart,” Yusuf replied while tenderly stroking her cheek. “I love you. My heart craves your grace and beauty more than anything else.”

“If I came home with you, would I be accepted there?” she asked nervously.

“Probably not,” he said.

“Really? Why not?” she inquired almost in protest.

“They would be afraid of incurring divine wrath for harboring an angel in their midst,” he teased.

“You say the sweetest things. Such adoration makes a woman free to be a girl once more, but I’d hate to be seen as an intruder by your tribesmen,” Kaye replied.

“The Mijikenda people are very hospitable. My mother in particular would adore you,” he answered.

“What about your father?” she asked.

“What about him?” he responded.

“You’ve never told me anything about your father,” she continued. “I can understand if you resent him, but you can’t erase him from existence.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but you are in love with a bastard.”

“Even a bastard is a product of a man and a woman. Didn’t your mother ever talk to you about him?” Kaye asked.

“In my culture it is considered a serious indiscretion to question your unmarried mother about the details of your paternity,” he explained.

“Why is that?” Kaye asked.

“It’s just too risky,” Yusuf continued. “It is nearly impossible to make that inquiry without challenging your mother’s morality.”

“But there had to be rumors or gossip in your village. People everywhere gossip about such things,” she pointed out.

“Yes, there were rumors but they only contributed to the haze of mystery surrounding my birth,” he explained. “You see, every few years laypeople in my village come together with reclusive mystics in a ritual of renewal. During these encounters the villagers shower the mystics with gifts. Whatever the mystics desire is given to them because they are the guardians of life. It is believed they venture to the shores of darkness to keep evil at bay. Sometimes the only offering they’ll accept is a virgin.”

“You mean human sacrifice?” an appalled Kaye asked. “What do they do to the virgin?”

“The cycle of healers has to be maintained,” Yusuf explained. “These virgins become surrogate mothers and give life to the next generation of mystics. This is how I came to be. As such, I am doomed to only knowing my father as a community and never as an individual.”

“That is truly amazing . . . and special, although in a surreal way!” Kaye marveled.

“It is the Mijikenda twist on immaculate conception,” Yusuf said in jest.

“My lord, thee I love!” Kaye responded teasingly with a kiss.

“You’re welcome, mere mortal,” he kidded.

In love, Yusuf found himself deeply contented. But as he had learned on the African savannah, every period of bounty had its end with the coming of the dry season. The beginning of the school year brought with it unique challenges. Now in his senior year of college, Yusuf was busy applying and interviewing for admission to medical school, while Kaye was preparing for law school.

It was in late in March when Yusuf finally received an embossed letter from a reputable college of medicine. Kaye accompanied him to the seashore where he planned to open the letter. The words leapt from the page: “We hereby extend to you the honor of

joining our medical school. . . .” Yusuf could hardly contain himself. He and Kaye frolicked like children on the beach until finally resting on each other’s arms in a long embrace. In the silence that followed their celebration, a daunting truth dawned on Yusuf: this would be the beginning of a long dry season.

The steep cost of a medical education came home to Yusuf as he pored through the enclosures in the admission packet. The problem was compounded by the fact that as a foreign student he had to pay twice the amount of regular tuition. As if this were not enough, he learned that no one was willing to offer him a loan without an American co-signer. Whom could he convince to take such a financial risk? The campaign to persuade wary acquaintances and suspicious strangers began in earnest that summer. Although he resented importuning others, life left him no choice in the matter.

Late in July only two weeks remained before classes commenced. After trying his luck at persuasion, Yusuf had run out of options. His frequent discussions with Okwu had forced him to consider last-ditch remedies to his crisis.

“A wise man once said that difficult times call for difficult choices,” Okwu observed. “How do you think I became an American citizen? I am an Igbo son who was born in a hut and raised on the African savannah. When fate leaves you no other option, you marry an American and get your papers. You cannot think too much about it. We are fortunate they don’t require you to pay a dowry.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” answered Yusuf. “I am desperate and would do almost anything, but the remedy you are proposing is worse than the disease. I would have to abandon my conscience before I could do something like that.”

“What do you mean?” rejoined Okwu. “Puritan morality is the luxury of the privileged. If I had no reason to break the law, I would never do so, but I’ve learned the bitter truth that laws are not adapted to every situation or to every person. American laws are written with the interests of Americans at heart, not Kenyans or Nigerians. You’ve got to be flexible, my man, or you may kiss medical school goodbye.”

“I think I may have come up with a novel solution,” Yusuf replied cautiously.

“Novel solutions are rare in this arena, brother. Foreigners like us have been battling U.S. immigration laws for centuries, and I doubt there is anything out there that has never been tried,” Okwu said.

“Did you know that Native Americans live in sovereign nations within the U.S.?” Yusuf continued.

“I see where this is going,” Okwu answered, “but who is going to believe that you are a Native American? I suppose you could tell them that you’re a Blackfoot Indian and hope they only look at your feet!”

“So what did you have in mind?” Yusuf asked reluctantly.

“Look, I couldn’t watch you suffer and do nothing. I have an American woman lined up for you, and all she wants is \$2,000 paid over a two-year period. I realize that you don’t have the money right now, but I’ll help you with the down payment. Just think of it as dowry.”

“But what about Kaye?”

“Call your mother and ask her whether you came to America to flirt with a British woman or to obtain an education. Without a doubt she will give you a better answer than I can,” Okwu answered.

“I appreciate everything you have done for me, but I am not there yet. I must hold out for something more agreeable,” Yusuf answered resolutely.

“Have it your own way!” Okwu answered while walking away.

That evening Yusuf went home and found Kaye preparing their supper. His mind was still turning in the whirlwind of his anguished thoughts. Without uttering a word, he disappeared into the bedroom, leaving Kaye confused in the kitchen. The burden of his struggles was beginning to take a toll on her.

“Yusuf, you know I am here for you,” Kaye said consolingly. “Whatever you decide, I am 100% behind you. I only want you to be happy.”

On the eve of the first day of medical school, Yusuf took Kaye to an Ethiopian café in downtown Boston. He was unusually cheerful throughout the evening, joking and laughing in a manner she had not seen since the beginning of his struggle to fund his training. It appeared as if he had found a solution to his crisis.

“I can’t help but notice a change in your demeanor,” Kaye said while they waited for their dinner. “What’s the good news?”

“I have reclaimed my life, and we are here to celebrate it,” Yusuf announced joyfully. “Life for life’s sake—not for wealth attained, beauty presumed, or fame anticipated.”

“I find it hard to believe. Are you sure there is nothing more? Come on. We both have been through a lot lately,” Kaye begged him.

“I thank you for being at my side throughout these past months. That which ought to have brought me immeasurable joy turned out to be a curse in disguise,” Yusuf stated, “but this morning I took a long walk on the beach at daybreak to sort out my life. I felt my grandfather at my side and remembered the stories he used to tell me. One in particular forced me out of my cocoon of self-pitying misery. It is the story of his wartime adventures in Burma during World War II. They had been fighting for days under the most miserable of conditions. The night before what they anticipated would be total carnage and annihilation, they shot a water buffalo. They roasted the meat and made merry late into the night. I can still see the smile that broke over his face as he related this story to me. He had never forgotten that moment. It reminded him that above all else he was a man, a human being, and that neither victory nor defeat could change that fact.”

Kaye’s mind traveled to the unfamiliar world of her lover’s upbringing through the medium of his persuasive stories. His stories were set on a landscape which acknowledged his presence and beckoned him to its warmth. It was in stark contrast to the place where he now stood unarmed and unaccompanied while waging a fierce battle. In the background, enchanting melodies of Amharic folk songs carried her imagination to the cradle of life she wished they could escape to.

After dinner the couple walked hand in hand around the city until she could contain her secret no longer. “I have been thinking about your situation,” she said softly, “and after speaking to some of our friends I’ve come to believe I am part of the problem.”

“What do you mean? Without you I’d have fallen apart or gone insane. You are the only part of my life that has been running smoothly of late,” Yusuf declared.

“Darling, I love you. I always will, but even love must give way to reason,” Kaye continued. “I had a lengthy discussion with Okwu last weekend. Although at first I

resisted his logic, he suggested that I should get out of your way and let you move on to a *real* solution. Your future and your dreams depend on it, and I can no longer stand in your way.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Yusuf expostulated.

“I am sorry if it upsets you, but you came here to get an education. I’ve no doubt that you will accomplish great things. Your family, your country, depends on it,” Kaye responded.

“What else did that bastard tell you?”

“Cool down! Anger will not change the facts,” she insisted.

“Kaye, I am no stranger to heartache,” Yusuf said solemnly. “The struggle before me now demands the illogical optimism of a martyr.”

“At times life seems so unfair,” Kaye declared.

“Perhaps if we had it too easy, we might have taken life for granted,” Yusuf replied. “Because of our pain, we can love more dearly. As my mother used to tell me, Allah lights up our spirits to glow in the dusk of our tribulation.”

“You are certainly more optimistic than I,” Kaye responded.

“I’ve never told you this,” answered Yusuf, “but when I was in high school I fell in love for the first time. It was magical, but Rose—that was her name—died suddenly and inexplicably. No amount of weeping could bring her back.”

“I can only imagine what a devastating experience that must have been,” Kaye replied. “How does a person ever recover from such heartbreak?”

“I had never felt so lonely in my life,” Yusuf explained. “I would lie on my back for countless hours searching the skies for hope and deliverance. Instead of seeing the benevolent arm of the Almighty, I was only confronted by a gaping void. One day I just walked away from my tomb of despair and never looked back. I learned to put one foot in front of the other and follow my heart wherever it led.”

“How did you do it?” Kaye asked admiringly.

“I carry in my pocket a poem I inherited from my late grandfather,” Yusuf declared. “It inspires me when I am fearful or discouraged. Its words echo from memory: ‘Beyond this place of wrath and tears / Looms but the Horror of the shade, / And yet the menace of the years / Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.’ How can anyone remain unmoved by such a bold insurrection?”

CHAPTER 23

When Kaye decided to attend Harvard Law School, she was rejecting a powerful impulse to escape the suffocating gloom of a large city. After spending her whole life in this environment, she wanted to relocate to a serene town away from the endless urban gridlock. Her heart had fallen for a less prestigious institution located in a small bucolic town. During her visit there she had been captivated by the charming sight of ladies in colorful dresses riding their bicycles gracefully to their daily errands. The quaint campus was surrounded by sloping green lawns where students tossed Frisbees between classes. The students’ housing, aptly referred to as The Village, was situated on a hill with a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. Academically speaking it was not Harvard, but it was perfect nevertheless, and Kaye would have given up anything to enroll there.

But then there was Yusuf, her lover and soul-mate, trapped in an endless quagmire of difficulties in Boston. In all honesty she did not expect him to beat the odds that were stacked against him. Foremost was the daunting obstacle of tuition, which had proven insurmountable even at the eleventh hour. In addition, he would need books, large and expensive books, and endless hours to read and muster their content. She didn't mind paying the rent for the apartment they shared; that was a burden she could shoulder capably if not cheerfully. She was even certain that the two of them could stretch their pennies to cover living expenses. But in light of everything else the occasion demanded, her contributions fell mockingly short of what was required.

What Kaye feared the most was not Yusuf's total lack of funding. She foresaw the psychological devastation that would dog him for the rest of his life if his academic dreams were stifled. In the worst case scenario, she could imagine of no greater tragedy than his being forced to drop out midway through medical school with nothing but debts to show for it. Such a situation would be more unbearable than the inability to enroll at all. These were the apprehensions that kept her nervously pessimistic, although she dared not confess.

In the fall, when the forests of New England transformed into a beguiling natural paradise, Kaye found herself sitting in one of Harvard's many historic lecture halls. As a first-year law student she felt small, even out of place. All around her she was surrounded by ubiquitous reminders that the place specialized in grooming intellectual heavyweights and reformers. Although until then she had never doubted her abilities, she wondered whether she could measure up to the lofty expectations implied by her admission. She smiled as she recalled Yusuf's humorous jibe that morning before they parted.

"Go get them, babe," Yusuf had said encouragingly. "Just remember the three S's of law school, and you'll do fine. The first year they teach you how to *shock* your clients, the second year how to *surprise* them, and the last two years how to *swindle* them."

While Kaye was immersed in law school, Yusuf did what he could to further his medical knowledge. Even though he had not paid a dime in tuition, he attended lectures alongside his more fortunate classmates. To his great relief, the issue of his unpaid arrears seemed to capture no one's interests. His name appeared on every class roll and study group leaving him reassured that he had ascended to a world which ignored all earthly disparities.

As he would mournfully learn in the ensuing months, this initial silence was nothing more than a short-lived grace period. A frantic deluge of notifications and threats would follow and threaten to annihilate him and drown all his gains. The tough curriculum, however, left no room for acclimation or self-pity. In only a matter of days he found himself exposed to highly challenging courses. Looming deadlines and frequent examinations were a constant companions along the transformative journey. And of course, there was the Gross Anatomy lab which was held three times each week during the first semester.

On his first day in the lab Yusuf approached the pungent workshop with nervously excitement. Little time was allowed for mustering composure. Upon his entrance Dr. Morton, the professor, promptly and unceremoniously unzipped the grey body bags, exposing their contents to the class. When Yusuf's gaze fell upon the cadaver on the metal table, an icy chill ran through his bones. The prominent forehead rising above a set of penetrating eyes was unmistakable. Although death had suspended the

piercing intensity of her scrutiny, it had not altogether eradicated the hint of aggression in her face's other features. Not even death could entirely disfigure or disarm Elsie Compton. She had returned from death to tell the story he had interrupted. She would leave him no choice but to listen with every nerve.

"Each of these bodies was a *real* human being," Dr. Morton emphasized, "and we are obligated to treat them with respect at all times. We'll dissect every organ before the course is over. Now, without further ado, pull out your scalpels and let's get started."

A few moments later, when he spotted Yusuf staring at the cadaver hesitantly, Dr. Morton chided, "What are you waiting for? Make a midline incision extending from the xiphoid process to the pubic bone."

Yusuf felt the cold handle of the scalpel between his tremulous fingers. He tried to avoid Elsie's eyes, but he could not free himself from her gaze. He took a wary step closer to the table and rested the scalpel's blade just below her prominent sternum.

"Now cut along the linea alba, around the umbilicus, and down to the pubic symphysis. And make sure you go deep—full thickness," Dr. Morton instructed. "I hope it is no surprise to you that the dead have no feelings."

Yusuf had come to the point of no return. He drove the scalpel through the taut skin and into the yellow fat underneath. It caught him by surprise how thick the skin was, and how far from the surface the internal organs were located. Beneath the layer of fat his scalpel encountered the resistance of tough connective tissue. Only after he broke through it did he see the folded loops of bowel covered by a fatty sheath known as the omentum. The edge of her smooth liver gleamed from beneath her ribcage against the bright lights above the dissection table. Mindfully and delicately, he extended his incision down to the sunken navel and around it, until he finally came to a halt against the pubic bone. Cold beads of sweat oozed from his forehead. When he lifted his eyes from the cadaver, he was met by Dr. Morton's approving nod.

"That was impeccable. You have the finesse of a surgeon," Dr. Morton said.

Elsie's corpse seemed oddly detached from its surroundings. As he studied the macabre scene, it gradually dawned on him that the object of his deepest curiosity lay underneath her rigid sternum where it was guarded by the mysterious shroud of *apical ballooning*, *non-obstructive coronary artery disease*, and *tako-tsubo syndrome*. Although he ached for the opportunity to delve below the sternum to continue his exploration, he could not wander from the path prescribed by the manual of anatomical dissection. In the ensuing weeks his silent confrontation with Elsie continued, and even in his dreams her sightless gaze followed him like a menacing ghost.

"So what is the matter, brave warrior?" Kaye teased one evening as Yusuf stared at images in his dissection manual. "If I didn't know better, I'd think the *danse macabre* has left you a bit shaken."

"I never claimed to be a voodoo priest," Yusuf replied. "You will never understand until you clasp in your palms the stiff hand of the dead or gaze into their lifeless eyes. It makes you long for divine touch."

"Darling, it is natural to dive behind the curtain of religion for cover when one is faced with the raw reality of death. That is why Karl Marx called religion an opiate for the masses. It is a lazy way out."

"In my view, the burden of belief is heavier than that of unbelief," Yusuf answered. "Religion demands perfection from the believer, while atheism only asks for

disclosure. This is why the atheist finds his position highly adapted to the realities of his existence. While one walks in darkness, if the only demand placed upon him is to reveal when and where he stumbles he can accept his condition with a high degree of confidence. He appreciates that his stumbling is not entirely his fault—after all, he did not create the darkness that blurs his vision. But man in religious terms stumbles because he has defied the higher laws of his Creator. His transgressions have dimmed the flame of divine light and robbed him of his sight. It is entirely his fault!”

“Sweetheart, you assign too much reason and thought where none is warranted,” Kaye replied. “You should learn the blissful art of shallow mindedness.”

As time went on, Yusuf’s immersion in medical courses opened a doorway to deeper reflections on the human condition. By the end of Gross Anatomy he had made his peace with the grim reality of human mortality. With a scalpel and a textbook he had followed Elsie’s nerves and blood vessels up and down their winding trails, while stockpiling a cache of liberating wisdom along the way. While Gross Anatomy had exposed tangible secrets, Embryology had whispered subtle and powerful truths about the delicate processes of creation. It was as though the curtain had parted, exposing the fingers of a Creator in the very act of evoking form from a formless void.

It came as a strange fact to Yusuf that humor was never too far distant in medical school. This was especially surprising in the monotonous world of Histology lab, where students spent countless hours hunched over, squinting through microscopes and memorizing the appearance of a myriad of cells and tissues ranging from the brain to the anus. At the beginning of the course each student was entrusted with a case containing a collection of slides labeled to indicate their site of origin—liver, thalamus, lung, vagina, and so forth. In no uncertain terms the professor made it clear that a hefty fine would be levied on any student who misplaced any of these slides. It was in light of this penalty that a comical moment arose. At the end of the reproductive system section, one of Yusuf’s female classmates drove the whole class into laughter with her frantic plea.

“Where is it? I’ve lost my vagina! Please, has anyone seen it?” she begged hysterically.

“Have you checked between your legs?” the class clown quipped.

“I meant the slide, fool!” she retorted amid a general uproar.

This experience, humorous as it was, brought a moment of reflection to Yusuf. He loaded his vagina slide onto the microscope for a second look. There before his eyes, bland and divorced from passion and desire—dried up and mounted on a slide—was humanity’s gateway to life, to unspeakable joy and unfathomable terror.

The afternoon before the beginning of his clinical clerkship, Yusuf sat at the back of a large auditorium in his new white coat listening to the dean of the medical college. That he had made it this far in spite of his seemingly insurmountable obstacles was a miracle in itself. Although Okwu was frustrated by Yusuf’s stubborn refusal to accept his prescription to his chronic financial ailments, he had willingly co-signed Yusuf’s student loans. Now, as Yusuf sat listening to the marching orders for the final leg of the journey, the end seemed finally within sight.

“You will remember this occasion as the day you changed from a passive reservoir of information and into an apprentice,” Dr. Kennedy remarked. “I have no doubt that you are adequately equipped with the knowledge and skills to diagnose and recommend appropriate treatment to many common diseases. Henceforth you will be

required to hone the traits necessary to touch people's lives and allow healing to occur. Each patient is a unique human being, with dreams and feelings as valid as your own, who must wait for healing to come upon your wings. . . .”

It was a moving speech that lasted for nearly a full hour. At the end of it, like bees venturing beyond a comfortable hive, the medical students joined small teams throughout the hospital as junior clerks. Yusuf found himself in Neurosurgery without the company of friends he had come to trust during his first two years of study. Unlike the classroom, the hospital was a dreary place made more so by long hours and gruff personalities.

On the evening before the first day of his clerkship, Yusuf caught up with the chief resident in Neurosurgery in one of the wards. Dr. Cory Stringham gave him “a quick and dirty” introduction to the clerkship and a checklist of required reading. He then sent Yusuf home with instructions to meet the team at 5:00 the next morning for rounds.

In a large and busy urban hospital, most encounters soon lapse into oblivion. Another face on the fleeting scene of endless commotion soon replaces the previous one, but this general rule was broken for Yusuf one foggy autumn morning. Shortly after morning rounds he arrived in Operation Room #24 for the first surgery of the day. Because it was his first day there, he did not leave anything to chance. He had heard some unsettling things about Dr. Nasser, who would be his supervisor during his rotation in Neurosurgery. In preparation for the occasion, he had spent hours the previous night reviewing every medical detail about the patient and the brain tumor they would be removing. His excitement at the privilege of participating in the complex operation was exceeded only by his fear of disappointing Dr. Nasser or making a fool of himself.

“And who are you?” a female nurse bluntly asked Yusuf when she found him in OR #24.

“My name is Yusuf Ibrahim. I'm the new third-year medical student in the rotation,” he said, trying to keep his composure.

“My name is Natalie. I'm the circulator,” she replied almost absentmindedly.

“Nice to meet you, Natalie,” Yusuf replied politely.

“Will you be scrubbing in?” she inquired without interrupting her chores.

“Yes. Dr. Stringham informed me that it would be alright. Do you want me to get my gloves?” he asked, mindful of making a good first impression.

“That would be very helpful. I'll fetch you a large gown,” she said with a hint of friendliness.

Shortly thereafter, a flurry of activities began with the patient's entry into the OR. One moment the patient was joking casually; the next he was completely anesthetized. Through the medium of potent drugs contained in numerous syringes, the man's bodily functions had been seized from his control by the short, intense wizard that was the anesthesiologist. After the anesthesiologist finished his delicate rituals, the head of the bed was turned toward the surgical team. They shaved the man's head and washed it with an orange solution before wrapping it methodically, as though they intended to package it and mail it to a loved one.

“Dr. Nasser,” said Natalie as she assisted the head surgeon into his gown, “meet Yusuf, our stellar new third-year student.”

“Yusuf, how much did you pay her to say that? Anyway, we have six weeks to see how stellar you *really* are.”

Although Dr. Nasser was tough and demanding, he captured Yusuf's admiration, not least for his seemingly encyclopedic knowledge. Time in his company passed almost imperceptibly. He also was a widely traveled adventurer whose interests seemed to be as vast and complex as the sphere of the craft he had mastered.

"Yusuf," Dr. Nasser asked unexpectedly a few weeks into the rotation, "who is the father of surgery?"

"I'd have to say Joseph Lister because he discovered aseptic techniques," Yusuf answered after a long pause.

"Gosh, do I have to put up with one more Eurocentrist?" Dr. Nasser objected. "Lister was more than 4,000 years late when he made his debut in England."

"Let me guess," interjected Dr. Stringham. "All great things come from Egypt."

"I have taught him something!" Dr. Nasser exclaimed cheerfully. "Long before Hippocrates staggered into medicine, Imhotep, an ancient Egyptian physician, was performing decompressive craniotomies on the banks of the Nile."

"Imhotep!" Yusuf exclaimed in a subdued voice. He trembled as he recalled Kajiwe's invocation of Imhotep's name in a distant shrine.

"The man was far ahead of his time," declared Dr. Nasser. "His anatomical sketches are graphic confessions of a mind that was intimately acquainted with the human body. His journal compiled on papyrus shows the first glimmering of evidence-based medicine."

"How did he manage to evade fame over the centuries?" Ron, the African-American surgical technician, inquired.

"Good question, Ron. Yusuf, you should pay attention to Ron. He is a critical thinker. My answer to your question is simple: this is not the sort of news you disseminate when you want everyone to believe that you invaded a continent for the sole purpose of delivering benighted savages from the grip of timeless darkness," Dr. Nasser replied to everyone's laughter.

"I want to hear more about this Egyptian genius," Dr. Stringham said when the laughter subsided.

"In Imhotep we meet a thoroughly cultivated mind. He was a pioneering surgeon, a gifted man of letters, a pious priest in a highly complex religion, and an architect who played a central role in the construction of some of history's most breathtaking monuments. The driving passion in his life, it seems, was an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and excellence."

"Our curriculum is absolutely silent on the subject of Imhotep. I feel cheated!" Yusuf said when he recovered from his initial shock.

"Arise and meet the dawn," Dr. Nasser implored Yusuf.

The OR was a unique theater that remained marvelously detached from the mundane world. In this place where life and death mingled amicably, Yusuf came fully alive. In the discipline of surgery, he found a unique stage where intellect and skill coalesced to create remedy. Like a determined warrior, the surgeon wielded his scalpel to battle ailments and death, and not infrequently victory was on his side. In the end the allure of surgery became an incurable compulsion for Yusuf.

Like a fire lit by lightning on the prairie, a consuming intellectual relationship developed between him and Dr. Nasser. On more than one occasion he was invited for dinner in the surgeon's home. On those occasions Dr. Nasser's wife disappeared into

their spacious home in the company of Kaye with whom she shared an English upbringing.

Dr. Nasser assumed the role of a mentor to Yusuf. They sat for hours on end discussing and debating a variety of issues ranging from medicine to sociopolitical affairs.

“Surgeons in the Third World context,” Dr. Nasser stated fervently, “must be willing to take their prowess outside the operation room. If you want to achieve any meaningful success, you must be willing to engage with mankind on an unsterile arena.”

“Why surgeons?” asked Yusuf. “That task seems best suited to career politicians.”

“Not so! Politicians seek compromise, but surgeons seek enduring solutions. In our profession we interact with humanity in a very unique way. We literally enter into the body of man and bathe our hands in his blood. At times we even cut off his flesh. All this takes immense trust and confers great power! The patient experiences discomfort for days and weeks thereafter but still trusts you. He realizes that pain precedes healing and that at times it is a necessary part of deliverance.”

“That is a unique perspective,” Yusuf agreed.

“It will take such an approach to resolve the relentless crises that plague Africa,” Dr. Nasser continued. “You are young, and the obligation is yours to cultivate your mind further if you intend to make a real difference. I call this the Imhotepian Oath. It aims to create accomplished physicians who are also deep thinkers and catalysts for sociopolitical change. The alternative would be for you to take the *Hypocritical* Oath, purchase a mansion on the hill, and settle there with your trophy wife.”

These words were seared indelibly into Yusuf’s memory. Shortly after their conversation Dr. Nasser sold his palatial home and returned to Egypt. Before his departure, he invited Yusuf to his home for a farewell dinner where he gave him a priceless collection of books and Egyptian antiques.

“I would like you to keep this ankh,” Dr. Nasser told Yusuf during their farewell meeting, “which to our venerable forebears like Imhotep, was a symbol of the infinite quest for self-refinement and knowledge. I could think of no better gift to give you.”

After Dr. Nasser’s departure there was hardly any time to pause or grieve the loss. No gap existed between clerkships. At the moment of transition, students were expected to go to bed with a mind full of the concerns and expectations of one specialty and wake up the next morning fully adjusted to those of an entirely different clinical landscape. On most clerkships there was scarcely any free moment between early morning rounds and evening follow-ups. The strength to carry on was fueled by the wonder in the attainment of special skills and the allure of new discoveries. As Yusuf completed his final clerkships, he was buoyed by a profound sense of confidence. In this state of mind he could not have foreseen the calamity looming in his path.

CHAPTER 24

On a summer morning during his final year in medical school, Yusuf found himself in the company of Okwu en route to a courthouse. In spite of the fact that two weeks had passed since his being given a citation, Okwu was still fuming with rage. Every muscle in his body seemed primed for the anticipated conflict ahead. For his part, Yusuf was as excited

about the imminent showdown as he was amused by the discussion about the incident while they drove to Lowell District Courthouse.

“When the policeman said he was citing me for jaywalking, I was dumbfounded,” Okwu explained. “I didn’t even know what that word meant.”

“I’ve never heard the term before,” said Yusuf. “It has a naughty ring to it.”

“At first I thought he had confused me with a man named Jay Watkins, and I immediately started telling him that my name was Okwu, the son of the Igbo people. Imagine my surprise when he pulled out his little book and wrote a citation.”

“He didn’t explain what you had done wrong?” Yusuf inquired.

“He handed me the citation and stood there watching me with a smug look on his face as I read it,” Okwu explained.

“‘Jaywalking.’ Who came up with such a phrase, anyway?” Yusuf wondered.

“The white man has stocked his arsenal with weapons of extortion,” Okwu explained. “He has been at it for a long time and has organized things in a way that allows his knavery to flourish. His most lethal weapon is his language. It is a net cast on the sea of humanity, a hazard to unsuspecting millions.”

“I guess I never thought of language as a weapon,” Yusuf answered. “In fact, I’ve always thought of English as empowering. Its complexity enhances human expression.”

“On this planet the doorway to entitlement is fluency, or rather the ability to mobilize and impose your logic on another person’s frame of reference,” Okwu explained. “A native speaker of English can rob you because he has such a powerful language at his disposal. He couldn’t pull the same tricks in the Igbo or Maasai language! He would run out of the words necessary to weave his devious schemes.”

“We should not defend linguistic mediocrity under the pretext of innocence and purity of purpose,” Yusuf countered humorously.

“Now you are being thick-headed! Only in the white man’s world do you find wealthy people who are only rich thanks to their command of diction,” Okwu argued. “Think about it! They are merely merchants of words, which have become the source of their daily bread. Tell me, how many people in your village can afford to live on mere words? In my village even great storytellers have to abandon their tales at dawn to cultivate their crops, but not here. That is why I tell you the white man’s language is suspect.”

“My brother, you are either delusional or more likely a brooding schizophrenic,” Yusuf countered humorously.

“And I am sure you’re about to prescribe my treatment!” Okwu retorted.

“Yes, I recommend shock therapy—a double dose!” Yusuf joked.

Okwu’s company provided Yusuf with a welcome hiatus from his consuming studies and chronic financial struggles. His friend’s amusing but engaging critiques of American culture provided Yusuf with a set of lenses through which he could face his daunting world with humor and resilience. And although it seemed as though he lived with his eyes trained on the clock, the pressures of being a medical student hastened the pace of time. So much had transpired during his four years of training that Yusuf felt as though he had passed through multiple lifetimes when it all came to an end.

On a quiet evening he sat alone reflecting on his experiences during this transformative phase of his life. In his hands was an elaborate diploma with the inscription, “We grant you the rights, privileges, and honor of Doctor of Medicine.” He

read the words over and over, savoring their triumphant ring as they echoed in his mind. Two weeks had passed since his graduation. Although he had chosen not to attend commencement, he had celebrated the occasion by accompanying Kaye and her mother for a weeklong vacation at a beachside resort in Florida. The vacation had provided acutely needed rest, although it had proven too brief a respite. Kaye had accompanied her mother back to London where she planned to spend a few weeks before returning to her studies and work as a law clerk. Her absence left Yusuf with abundant time for contemplation, especially in the evenings when his friends returned home, leaving him a prisoner of his insufferable loneliness.

As he sat on his bed, he combed through various papers and mementos, his attention shifting from one object to the next. When his gaze fell upon a large envelope containing letters he had received from Peggy, the administrative secretary at the medical school, it slowed to a halt. For reasons beyond logic he had preserved these letters, perhaps as relics of conflicts and battles he had endured. The exchanges captured the relentless misery that had hounded every waking moment of his time as a medical student. The correspondence revealed a struggle between two irreconcilable worlds.

Peggy: Dear Yusuf, I am writing to remind you that your tuition is past due. Please pay at the earliest occasion possible to avoid disruption of your academic activities.

Yusuf: Dear Peggy, I am hoping to get the amount I owe soon. Please give me a few more days to procure the money. I have already paid \$3,000 and will come up with the remaining balance before the end of the semester.

Peggy: Dear Yusuf, As I've mentioned on several occasions in the past, tuition must be paid on time. The cost of medical training cannot be met if students do not pay for their tuition. You are the only one who hasn't yet paid. Your tardiness does not speak well for you as a future doctor.

Yusuf: Dear Peggy, Please understand that my situation is different from that of my classmates. As a foreign student I do not receive financial aid or grants as they do. In addition, my tuition is double the standard amount, not including an international student fee. The process of getting a loan is not automatic or guaranteed, and I'm constantly pleading with reluctant lenders for money. So excuse me if my tuition is frequently late.

Peggy: Dear Yusuf, Please be advised that I do not make school policy. It seems fair to me that foreign students should pay their fair share since they do not contribute to the taxes that support our nation's enviable educational system. The season for excuses has passed. You should know that the school is developing a mechanism for dealing with these fiscal delinquencies.

Yusuf: Dear Peggy, I am working on paying what I owe as previously mentioned. I have no interest in anyone's charity. I am sure that most

people, including Americans, would find it difficult to come up with \$8,000 every five months. All I am requesting is a little more time. I come from a Third World country, and it is somewhat ironic that students from a comparatively rich nation should pay less than half the amount I pay. I am sure that your policy-makers know a few things about global economic disparities.

Peggy: Dear Yusuf, Please be informed that the university administration has approved a new policy regarding the late payment of tuition. Beginning next semester, failure to pay tuition by the due date will result in cancellation of all classes for which a student is registered. The Office of International Students has also made it clear that any foreign student who fails to be registered for full-time coursework will lose his or her visa privileges and may be deported. I hope that you will take this warning seriously and pay your tuition on time in the future.

Yusuf: Dear Peggy, In light of the new tuition policy, I am requesting a little more time to pay my tuition. Please, I am begging you, do not drop my classes. I am facing obstacles beyond my control and need only a few days by way of a deadline extension.

Peggy: Dear Yusuf, We have been through this issue many times before. Your lack of planning is not my emergency!

After his second year the correspondence between Yusuf and Peggy stopped abruptly. His financial struggles had persisted in spite of his taking on a string of odd jobs on the weekends. As he reflected on that period, it struck him as an unusual coincidence that, as soon as it was discovered that he worked throughout his weekends, the examination schedule changed, moving all exams from their usual Thursday and Friday slots to Monday mornings. Was it anticipated, he wondered, that his work commitments would spare him no time for study, forcing him to flunk out? In spite of an abundance of malice, he had continued to excel academically.

Kaye had also worked tirelessly during this turbulent period. She had footed most of their bills without a single complaint. In spite of their heroic efforts, however, their combined income fell desperately short of the cost of his tuition. In the end Yusuf had been left with no other option than to take out toxic loans that carried exorbitant interest rates.

“There are times when a man must make the Devil his bedfellow in order to achieve the greater good,” Kaye had said consolingly as Yusuf signed the application forms for a predatory loan.

When everything else failed, faithful Okwu provided timely assistance by unhesitatingly co-signing most of his loans. When Yusuf pressed him for an explanation of this generosity, Okwu uncharacteristically gave a measured response.

“When you are the lastborn, it makes you feel good when you finally get a baby brother,” he said.

During his third and fourth years, Yusuf's busy schedule and the distractions of clinical clerkships had kept his mind wholly occupied. For nearly two years he felt like his privileged American counterparts who were not pestered by financial woes. Although his tuition was occasionally late, he managed to procure the necessary funds each semester. Peggy's nagging had ceased, and the end was within sight. But as he would learn, he had misread the signs. Peggy's silence was only the calm before a dreadful storm. This fact dawned on him one wintry February evening during his final year. The news caught him entirely by surprise. The letter from the Office of International Students read:

Dear Student,

After reviewing your records, we regret to inform you that you have been out of status for eighteen months. Your failure to comply with the terms of your student visa by not registering for classes has led to this unfortunate outcome. Because you have been out of status for more than five months, you will be required to travel back to your home country and seek reinstatement at the American Embassy there. Please be advised that your reinstatement is not guaranteed. If it is denied, you will be forbidden to return to the United States for a mandatory period of seven to ten years.

The letter threw Yusuf into panic mode. He ran to Peggy, whose duty it was to register him for classes. When he finally caught up with her, she was brusque and dismissive. It seemed that she was determined to make her point at whatever cost. His pleas and protests at the Office of International Students also landed on deaf ears and led to more aggravation. The closer he analyzed the situation, the more he suspected a conspiracy.

"Where do you go from here?" Kaye inquired in disbelief when she found out.

"They informed me that I'll be allowed to graduate. Since I don't owe them any money, they have no excuse to withhold my degree. I intend to erase them from memory at that point," Yusuf answered stubbornly.

"And then what?" asked Kaye.

"I am planning to report to my residency program on July 1," Yusuf declared firmly.

"You don't think they will ask for proof of employability? This whole mess makes me thirst for blood!" she said angrily.

"I too crave revenge, but I must carry on," he replied.

Kaye left for London shortly thereafter. Although she hated to leave Yusuf in such distress, she had a pressing obligation that could not wait. During her absence Yusuf was no longer sure that things would work out in the end. He went to Okwu's apartment where for three days the two friends brainstormed in search of a lasting solution. Okwu's comments echoed in Yusuf's mind long after they parted.

"You have come to a very unfortunate crossroads. The solution will be either expensive or tragic. If you screw up, you will have the rest of your life to regret it," Okwu had stated candidly.

The situation was undoubtedly precarious. Yusuf thought of packing up his belongings to return to the land of the Mijikenda and never look back. But the thought of

leaving Okwu, who had co-signed his school loans, with the burden of repaying his debts was as vexing as it was repugnant. Such an insult to goodwill would unhinge his sanity.

“If going home is not an option, the only other way to get your visa status reinstated is through marriage. If you marry an American today, you should receive your papers from the Office of Immigration within a week or so,” Okwu stated confidently.

“But whom am I going to marry? There is hardly any time to fall in love, and what about Kaye?” Yusuf protested.

“Fall in love? Brother, in times of crisis you’ve got to look beyond Hollywood! If you are deported, you will be worse off than a guy who did not waste his time at anyone’s school. Kaye, of course, will carry on without you. She will likely find a better lover with fewer problems and live happily ever after. This is definitely not the time to be shortsighted. You are staring down the barrel of a loaded gun!”

After spending three gloomy days at Okwu’s apartment, Yusuf and his host decided to take a break by driving to downtown Boston. Although they had no predetermined destination, the journey offered a refreshing break from the harrowing quandary. After visiting several notable attractions in the city followed by a sumptuous lunch at an Ethiopian café, they decided to head back home. En route they stopped at an intersection where they were approached by a panhandler. Moved by pity, Yusuf reached into his pocket in search of coins.

“What’s the matter with you?” Okwu yelled disapprovingly.

“The poor guy must be hungry,” Yusuf explained. “I only have two dollars in my pocket. . . .”

“I’ll take the money if you have no other use for it,” Okwu declared.

“Man, you are an African. You shouldn’t allow America to transform you into a heartless brute. The man is probably a traumatized veteran.”

“Veteran, my ass! I’m sure the guys who instigated the overthrow of Nkrumah and the CIA operative hired to assassinate Patrice Lumumba returned here to call themselves veterans. So are you going to buy them lunch too?” Okwu asked derisively.

“I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink,” Yusuf recited from the Bible. “Your preacher father must have spoken those words in your presence.”

“Mind you, Jesus did not say, ‘I was hungry because I would not work’ or ‘I was homeless because I used all my money on heroin,’” Okwu rejoined. “You are looking at the poster child of American entitlement. The man does not need special employment authorization in order for him to work. In fact, he did not have to hustle for a Social Security card as you and I did.”

“Your point is well taken, but we must avoid broad generalizations. The American Dream does not trickle down into every hand that reaches out for it,” Yusuf argued.

“Poor soul,” said Okwu, mocking the panhandler. “Wouldn’t his 200-pound body blend in perfectly among the starved children in an Ethiopian refugee camp? Look, as long as people like you keep giving him money, his disease will never find a cure. Every penny that drops onto his palm strengthens the shackles of his dependency. And soon he’ll learn to see himself through your pitying eyes. In the journey of life he’ll become road-kill, a victim of your out-of-control mercy.”

“When did forsaking the destitute and vilifying the downtrodden become virtue?” Yusuf responded.

“Brother, look around you! We’re surrounded by humanity’s restless striving. The reason most people abandon the warmth of their beddings at dawn is because they have a mountain of challenges they intend to conquer some day. It is immoral to deprive any able-bodied human being of his share of troubles. The sooner you take them away, the sooner you strip man of his reason to live.”

“That sounds ironic coming from a guy who buys lottery tickets religiously in hopes of becoming a millionaire,” Yusuf joked.

“It is not a contradiction. You are just thick-headed enough to imagine that millionaires have no troubles. Ask me, and I’ll tell you!” Okwu rebutted, leading to more laughter.

“Seriously, though, do you honestly think that it is wrong to reach out to the needy?” Yusuf asked.

“I just think that you shouldn’t create more destitution in the process of helping the needy,” Okwu said emphatically. “If a man is blind or deaf or otherwise impaired, he must be helped to the extent of his handicap. But you must never deprive anyone of the wonders that are born from pain, hunger, and unadulterated suffering. There is a reason why Adam and Eve rejected the paradise of Eden. They longed for the wonder to be found in misery.”

“Who would have thought that masochism had its disciples!” Yusuf exclaimed. “Give me bread and a safe escape from endless heartache, and I’ll never accuse you of depriving me of life.”

“I can understand why you feel that way. It is amazing that you have maintained your sanity through it all,” Okwu said sympathetically. “You have inspired a lot of us, and you should be proud of your grand achievement.”

“And to think it is not over yet. I am tired, bro,” replied Yusuf in despair.

“Keep your head up! One good thing about suffering is that it prepares your heart to inspect the human condition more mindfully and to perceive truths that would otherwise be beyond your reach,” answered Okwu.

“In that case I must pay closer attention lest the gods feel it necessary to extend the lessons,” Yusuf responded.

“At any other time,” Okwu continued, “you’d resist these dreadful truths, but now you likely understand that to be a hard-working, legal alien makes you worse off than being an undocumented alien. No one gives a damn about your goodness or diligence or discipline. In fact, if you showed your diploma to the average guy out there, he’d suspect that you owe it all to Affirmative Action and tell you that without American generosity you wouldn’t have achieved any of it. Only two things in this country are under your complete control: your vision and your hustle!”

“I’ve never felt so helpless in my life,” Yusuf confessed, “and to imagine we are the luckier sons of Africa! When you analyze the situation, it makes you wonder whether God has not written off the African.”

“Don’t allow yourself such narrow-mindedness. This planet is seventy percent aquatic. What does that tell you? The aspirations of the fish are more important to the Creator than your dreams,” Okwu declared.

"I've become the unfortunate she-rat caught in a snap trap, and I feel the merciless thrust of America upon my back," Yusuf responded dejectedly.

"But in this case you've the power to turn the tables. This situation calls for decisiveness and courage," Okwu insisted as they parted, "but you must realize that time is not on your side. You don't have weeks or months to ruminate on this. In a few hours I'll have everything lined up for you. I don't know why I continue to help you. You've disappointed me on many occasions, and this is your final chance. Take it or go to hell!"

"I know I'm asking for too much, but is it possible to find me a sister...I mean, an African American girl?" said Yusuf.

"You mean you don't have enough troubles already? You are seriously asking for a *ghetto* chick?"

"We have a shared history of struggles. Fundamentally we are the same people," Yusuf stated.

"Only in your naïve head," Okwu replied impatiently. "Look, if the white man despises you, he does so for who you are not, and that is an easily fixable problem. On the other hand, if the American Negro resents you, he does so for who you are, and there is no remedy for that."

"I don't understand your parables. What do you mean?" Yusuf asked.

"Put another way, when you cross over to the dark side, you'll be entering into a boxing match. It is not shadowboxing or sparring. The blows are real and can be lethal. If you are outwitted by your opponent, you'll die in the ring."

Sleep evaded Yusuf that evening. Kaye called in the middle of the night, but they only spoke briefly before the phone connection was broken. He lay on the bed waiting for her to call back, but his waiting was in vain. He wondered whether she too had grown tired of his problems and decided to move on to a more predictable future. He loved her dearly, and in spite of her recent detachment he had no doubt that she deeply loved and cared for him. How then could he bring himself to commit such a betrayal as he was contemplating?

With mournful blues playing in the background, he sat at his study table in the wee hours of the morning. He could not bring himself to call Kaye back about the dreadful remedy before him. He struggled to find his words, and when he found them he wrote them reluctantly and remorsefully.

My dearest Kaye,

I realize it would be quicker for me to pick up the phone and tell you what I have to say, but I cannot bear to hear myself speak such awful words as this occasion forces me to write. Ever since you left I have been engaged in a constant battle to resolve my agonizing predicament. I have come to realize that there is no easy solution. I either have to return to my village as empty-handed as I came (but worse now that I've opened and gazed into the treasure box of my dreams) or must make the Devil my bedfellow.

Friends have forced me to face the awful truth. The cure for my predicament is debilitating, but it is a cure nevertheless, and neither choice nor time is within my grasp. This weekend I plan to marry a woman

I still do not know. I sit here and stare at these words, wishing I were dead, but what else can I do, Kaye? I know how selfish and heartless this must sound to you. I feel as if I have crossed the line that separates the living from the dead.

I want you to know that I have loved you the only way I knew how—with all of my heart and soul. I will miss you every waking moment of my life. There is no love for me beyond this point, and I curse the gods that made me! I'll always love you, even to my dying breath.

Yusuf

After several weeks Kaye's brief and direct reply came. She wrote:

Dear Yusuf,

I am sorry that you had to resort to this. I was afraid that life had turned out too perfectly for me. I understand, and I am not angry, only disappointed and heartbroken. I could not ask you to walk away from your dreams; it would be unfair and selfish of me. I will love you forever, and I look forward to a just world where the seeds of pure love can reach their full bloom.

Kaye

Within a few weeks Yusuf was married by the Justice of the Peace at the City Hall in Lowell. He had a new wife with whom to get acquainted and share a life. Her name was Kimberly McDonald, but she preferred to be called Kim. She was a pretty-faced blonde with a body built to survive a severe famine. Although he found her pathologically self-conscious and morbidly petty, she was a kind and warm person, qualities that only made his scheme the more insufferable. At the after-wedding party his friends stood in line and one by one imparted their wisdom to the new bride and groom.

"The battle for liberation is waged on two fronts," Bernard, a Jamaican friend, whispered to Yusuf. "One front is in the trenches; the other is in the bedroom. Go forth and conquer!"

Tuma's advice was drawn from the wisdom of their shared Swahili heritage: "*Ukitaka kula nguruwe, kula aliyenona!*" In translation the proverb offered both guidance and a warning to the wavering Muslim: "*If you must eat pork, get it from the fattest pig!*"

Kim's parents had initially forbidden the marriage, but they had adopted a more favorable disposition after all the facts about the bridegroom were made known to them. In the end they paid for the wedding and even arranged for the honeymoon.

True to Okwu's predictions, Yusuf had his Work Permit approved within days after the wedding. He watched in disbelief as the troubles that had dogged him for years evaporated from view. The newlyweds initially settled in Kim's small apartment in Plymouth, with plans to relocate to North Carolina where Yusuf would be starting his surgical training on the first day of July. In the middle of June, and only weeks after their hasty marriage, Kim cheerfully clocked out for the last time at the restaurant where she worked as a hamburger specialist. Although the couple had little in common, she adjusted smoothly to her new role as a doctor's wife. Like in Greek comedies, she had entered the

scene at the critical juncture as a *deus ex machina* and had rescued him from a disastrous collision with fate.

CHAPTER 25

The first day of July found Yusuf sitting in the company of his fellow surgical interns in an orientation meeting. His name was beautifully emblazoned on his new white coat above his heart. On several occasions he reached up to the inscription and, like a blind man reading Braille, traced its letters tenderly with the tips of his fingers:

*Yusuf Ibrahim, M.D.
Department of General Surgery*

Was this the prize he had craved for so long? he wondered. Was it worth all the sacrifices, the heartache, the tears? Certainly he had not come through the battle unscathed. Indeed his losses were immense, but he had lived to see the triumph of hope.

“I just wanted to introduce myself while I’ve a chance,” a pleasant and tall gentleman said to Yusuf during the interns’ guided tour of the department. “I am Dr. Scott, chief resident in the GI/Colorectal division. I’ll be your go-to man during your first rotation.”

“I am looking forward to joining your team,” Yusuf answered politely.

“Please make sure all your codes are activated and working before you leave today,” Dr. Scott instructed. “You will be expected to be up to speed on Monday morning. Rounds begin at 5:30 a.m. in the surgical ICU. See you there.”

Although long hours of orientation had sapped his energy, Yusuf was eager to join his fellow intern, Dr. Mikita Hawks, over a light dinner at the apartment of one of the senior residents, Dr. Tyrone Watkins. Dr. Watkins was beginning his final year of surgical training and had been directed by the program director to act as Yusuf’s and Dr. Hawks’s mentor during the rigorous internship year.

“We both know the obvious,” Dr. Leventhal, the program director, had said to Dr. Watkins. “They’ll naturally look to you for guidance. I’m sure it has taken great personal sacrifices for them to get here, and it is our job to ensure their survival and professional development.”

“I’m eager to offer my assistance, sir,” Dr. Watkins had answered.

“One unintended consequence of Affirmative Action for minorities is the fact that it has created the expectation of intellectual inferiority,” Dr. Leventhal had declared. “As you might have noticed, some faculty members assume that you don’t have the innate capacity that others possess to comprehend and function in a complex field such as surgery. If they had their way, they’d relegate you to family medicine or, at best, to an outpatient surgical center performing hernia repairs. You catch my drift?”

“Sir, this is all news to me,” Dr. Watkins had answered with a sly smile.

“Tyrone, I am a Jew, and you are a black man. History has placed upon us some unique burdens and privileges. I was very glad when you chose to pursue subspecialty training in pediatric surgery. Now I want you to infuse some of your courage into your younger colleagues.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Dr. Watkins had promised as the meeting concluded. He immediately made arrangements to host Dr. Hawks and Yusuf for dinner in his apartment.

Dr. Watkins’ apartment was plain, if not hopelessly unappealing. In the sitting room was a single worn-out couch in front of a large window. Next to it stood a small table that doubled as a dining table. A large pizza lay on the table next to two large soda bottles. A set of plastic cups and paper plates provided the only utensils in the apartment.

“As you can see, these are the living quarters of a working man,” Dr. Watkins said in a casual attempt to excuse his simple accommodations.

“It is very clean. I am impressed,” Dr. Hawks responded.

“You don’t have to kiss up, Mikita! All I can offer you is pizza. We should get right down to business as time is always scarce. I have to prepare for tomorrow’s Morbidity and Mortality conference, and I doubt that one of you will volunteer to take my place. So what questions do you have?”

“What do you wish you had known before you started your residency here?” Yusuf promptly asked.

“That’s a loaded question, but a good one,” Dr. Watkins answered. “I wish that I had brought along a thicker skin. During my internship I used to have sleepless nights after every unpleasant interaction at work. I’ve come to understand that nothing here is personal and that, if it is, just assume it’s not. You’ll be much happier that way.”

“How do you deflect the kinds of meanness you hear about, especially when it comes from your seniors or faculty?” Dr. Hawks inquired.

“Everyone has a special way of coping, but you must remember this important caution: however you choose to cope, always show due respect and don’t hold grudges. Surgeons are a genetically egotistical and impatient breed. Getting along is eighty percent of the job.”

“Are there unique challenges you face because of your heritage?” Dr. Hawks asked.

“*Heritage!* Come on, gal. You put it so politely. Why not just ask, ‘Do they have problems with Negroes around here?’ Well, I believe that most people do not consciously set out to impede anyone’s success or happiness,” Dr. Watkins declared as the laughter subsided, “but don’t forget that doctors are human. When I have a choice, I prefer to surround myself with people like me where I can put my guard down and relax. I’m sure other people have similar inclinations. A good portion of your training, especially in surgery, will depend on how you socialize with others. If people feel you are a pain in the ass to be around, they’ll avoid you and your training will suffer. It’s that simple.”

“But there are situations in which you try to get along but encounter a wall no matter how hard you try. Does that happen here?” Yusuf inquired.

“It is true that sometimes interpersonal friction occurs at a level that neither you nor a colleague understands. That scenario is common everywhere. Unfortunately, there is no way to sanitize or standardize human interactions.”

“So how do you deal with those situations of subconscious friction?” Dr. Hawks was keen to know.

“It is evident that these things have real consequences,” Dr. Watkins replied. “Studies have looked at the performance of minorities in professional schools to determine the role that their *heritage* plays in academic performance. The thing that

stands out is the significant disparity between standardized performance and subjective performance. Just compare your performance during your first two years of medical school with the last two years. One is mostly standardized grading, while the other is based on how others gauge your abilities. Your task is to rise above it all, to keep your eyes on the ball!”

“I went to Howard University,” said Dr. Hawks. “It sounds as though I have a lot of adjusting to do.”

“Your priority right from the outset is to attain as much autonomy as possible, and there is another important caveat here,” replied Dr. Watkins.

“What is it?” Yusuf asked.

“Actually there are two important caveats. First, you must know that in America if you are black you are presumed ignorant until proven otherwise. This means that your mistakes will be assigned greater weight than the next guy’s mistakes. Therefore you need to know your stuff through and through!”

“But no one can avoid mistakes a hundred percent of the time,” protested Dr. Hawks.

“Don’t shoot the messenger!” Dr. Watkins joked. “Awareness is the antidote to disappointment. Just realize that even the nurse is suspiciously reviewing every order you write. In the end, you’ve to accept that whatever makes the patient safer is good.”

“And what is the second caveat?” Yusuf inquired.

“The other trap you should watch out for is called the ‘strategic noose.’ Sometimes a staff surgeon will give a disliked resident unrealistic liberties. He’ll even turn a blind eye when the resident makes major decisions or performs procedures without consulting him. The foolish resident will falsely regard this freedom as a sign of respect until the moment comes when he commits a disastrous mistake. The surgeon will quickly declare that he was never consulted and that the resident acted unprofessionally.”

“That scenario sounds like a Catch-22,” Dr. Hawks said. “If you do, you are damned; if you don’t, you are screwed!”

“You’re right. Residency will force you to develop and sharpen your judgment,” Dr. Watkins continued. “This is not your ordinary eight-to-five job. You have been inducted into a very privileged and complex society, but you are wholly capable of mastering its ways. Your mission is to refine and deploy your genius in every situation, however benign or serious.”

“You’ve obviously thrived here,” Yusuf observed, “so there must be a pathway to success.”

“There are no magic bullets in residency,” Dr. Watkins declared. “The formula to success is old-fashioned guts, sweat, and balls. Do not allow the system to wear you down. Do not seek favors, praise, or commendations. Do not wait for some benevolent professor to take you under his wing or chart your path for you. You are the master of your own fate. The onus is upon you to succeed.”

“Have you ever met an intolerant patient, and if so how did you handle the situation?” Dr. Hawks asked.

“Most patients, even when they hail from Bull Connor’s neck of the woods, control their prejudices while in the hospital, but you shouldn’t be surprised if they don’t. A few weeks ago an arrogant skinhead called me a nigger after I had operated on him. I did not trade insults with him, but as soon as I left his room I went straight to his chart

and made him NPO for two days. On Monday morning he was too weak for anything but an apology.”

“Man, that is classic!” Yusuf exclaimed with laughter.

“Wisdom comes in precious droplets, like honey,” Dr. Watkins added in a self-congratulatory tone.

The internship year would be one of the most challenging yet enriching of Yusuf’s life. The Department of General Surgery had six divisions. In the GI/Colorectal division were three staff surgeons who spent the bulk of their time performing surgeries and who only rarely made the trip upstairs to see patients. Their perennial absence left Dr. Scott, the chief resident, a wide berth as the most visible authority figure. Dr. Scott was a tough, no-nonsense fellow who was quick to assert his position as the team leader. He firmly set the pace for the team and made the majority of the clinical decisions affecting the thirty patients under his care. The other members of his team included a junior resident, three medical students, and an intern.

“I’ve developed a system that works for morning rounds,” declared Dr. Scott on Monday morning. “The intern keeps the checklist of chores to be done during the day. The junior resident writes down orders on the patients’ charts. It is the duty of the medical students to undress and dress the wounds during rounds. It should not take us more than an hour to see all our patients.”

On the first day, however, rounds took nearly two hours, putting Dr. Scott in a foul mood. There was little time left for him to sit down and review the day’s plans with Yusuf. By the time they saw the last patient, the OR was waiting for the chief and his entourage of junior resident and medical students. Everyone knew that delays in the OR cost the hospital money and could not be tolerated. In the end it was up to Yusuf to make sure that everything on the checklist was completed before evening rounds, a situation that translated into an impossible mission.

“Come down to the OR if you have any questions,” Dr. Scott directed Yusuf as he disappeared into the elevator.

Standing outside the elevators with a lengthy checklist of chores in hand, Yusuf felt alone and terrified. Not only did he have the challenge of navigating his way around a new hospital, but in addition he had a dozen critically ill patients in the ICU to take care of. Another dozen and a half patients waited for him in the wards, four of whom he was required to discharge home before noon and two to a rehabilitation center in town. There were special surgical dressings to be changed, wounds to be debrided, labs and imaging to follow up, and a myriad of orders to write, including complex orders for Total Parenteral Nutrition (TPN) that needed to be faxed to the pharmacist before 1:00 in the afternoon.

“Code Blue 64, Code Blue 64. All available physicians to Room 6442,” came a female voice over the intercom while Yusuf was weighing the gravity of his situation.

“6442? That is Mr. Simpson,” Yusuf exclaimed. He dashed down the hallway and arrived just in time to assist a team of nurses.

“Dr. Ibrahim, thank goodness you are here. What do you want us to do?” the supervising nurse asked. All eyes in the room turned toward the door where Yusuf stood dumbfounded.

“Shock him!” Yusuf replied without hesitation.

“Shock him? He doesn’t have a shockable rhythm,” retorted an imposing male nurse. “He doesn’t even have a rhythm at all, *doctor!*”

“Alright, let’s get him out of it, Yusuf declared.

“And how do you suggest we do that, doctor? Do you even know how to run a code?” the male nurse said disdainfully.

“Should we start with mask ventilation and chest compressions?” the supervising nurse asked Yusuf, nodding to inform him of the correct answer.

“Yes,” Yusuf agreed nervously.

“Doctor, now do you want us to give him atropine and epinephrine?” the supervising nurse asked, continuing to guide Yusuf.

“Yes. Do what she says,” Yusuf muttered uneasily.

“Kathy, just run the code. We don’t need a middleman,” the male nurse declared while performing chest compressions.

Within minutes, although it seemed far longer to Yusuf, the code team arrived at the scene and took over. They profusely thanked him for “doing the right things” without delay.

“We need better venous access,” said one of the residents on the code team. “Would you like to place a central line, or is it okay if we do it?”

“I’m a little pressed for time. Do you mind doing it?” replied Yusuf, hoping to avoid another episode of embarrassment.

“Not at all,” came the answer. “What is the patient’s history?”

Yusuf knew the man’s name, but the rest of his story was filed away in his chart. Seeing the terror on Yusuf’s face, the supervising nurse intervened and recited the man’s medical history flawlessly. With the crisis avoided, the code team assumed care for Mr. Simpson and transferred him to the ICU. Calm replaced the flurry of commotion as the patient was wheeled from the ward, but the wheels in Yusuf’s mind continued to spin chaotically.

“Some doctor you are!” sniped the male nurse as he passed Yusuf.

An hour had passed, and the long checklist of chores had gone unattended. Yusuf walked to the nursing station and began filling out the discharge paperwork for the homebound patients. No sooner had he started to dictate a discharge summary than his pager went off. He was needed in the ICU immediately to write transfer orders for Mr. Simpson. Was it possible to stay afloat in this turbulent environment? he wondered as he stood in the elevator.

Internship involved a constant struggle to keep up with incessant chores and emergencies. There was always more work to be done than time allowed. The wise intern learned to prioritize, to distinguish the essential from the non-essential. The critical task was to learn how to think like a doctor while working as a technician, a social worker, and a detective. It was mostly a thankless job. An intern was always presumed to be lazier than a sloth, yet he or she was expected to perform astronomical tasks by the end of the day. To be an intern was to be guilty of everyone else’s crimes, even those committed without your knowledge.

Several weeks into his internship Yusuf was paged to the OR by the chief resident to discharge a patient following a minor procedure. Dr. Scott was very candid and emphatic in his instructions to his junior colleague.

“This guy is a prisoner who will try every trick in the book to get you to admit him into the hospital,” Dr. Scott explained to Yusuf. “Your job is to send him away whatever the cost. After an uncomplicated procedure he has no reason to stay, other than the fact that he would rather spend the weekend in this five-star hospital than in his prison cell.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Yusuf replied as he headed to the recovery room where the patient was waiting for him.

“Yusuf, I don’t care if he goes home with you tonight. I just don’t want that guy in my service when I come out of the OR this evening,” Dr. Scott declared sternly as he returned to the OR.

When Yusuf walked into the recovery room, he met a very upset middle-aged man chained to the bed. A burly prison warden sat uneasily on a chair next to him, and the two were embroiled in a fierce argument. A young nurse had assumed the role of peacemaker, albeit without much success. She sighed in relief when Yusuf arrived at the scene.

“I am Dr. Ibrahim from the Department of General Surgery. I’m here to see how I can expedite your discharge from the hospital,” Yusuf informed the prisoner in a firm tone.

“You can do all the *expediting* you like,” declared the agitated prisoner, “but I ain’t going nowhere with my dick swingin’ every which way!”

“If you had cared about which way your dick was swinging, you wouldn’t be in prison for rape,” the warden retorted. “You ain’t out-smarting anyone. We all know what this is about.”

“I am trying to understand what’s going on here,” Yusuf interrupted. “You had an umbilical hernia repaired. How does that affect your genitals?”

“Sir, before they put me under, they told me that I could only have the hospital gown on,” the prisoner explained, “so they made me remove my underwear, which they handed over to this fool. Instead of watching over my stuff, he threw it in the garbage.”

“What did you expect me to do with your underwear? I didn’t have a bag to put it in, and as sure as hell I wasn’t going to walk around with your nasty drawers in my pocket. I did what any reasonable man would do. I put it in the trash,” the warden said.

“Have it your way, but I ain’t leaving the hospital without my underwear. Prison ain’t no place for a man to walk around without underwear,” the prisoner declared.

“If that is the only problem, I’ll make arrangements for you to get a pair of underwear,” Yusuf stated.

After a brief absence he returned from the Labor and Delivery Unit carrying a nicely folded package. “Here, sir. Labor and Delivery deals with these sorts of incidents all the time. These underwear are brand new, and you don’t need to return them,” Yusuf said, assuming that he had solved the problem.

“Wait a minute. Is this a joke?” the incensed prisoner yelled amid a burst of laughter from the warden and the nurse. “You expect me to wear this see-through, meshy underwear? I ain’t anyone’s bitch! Might as well wear lingerie from Victoria’s Secret. There are a thousand holes through which a man can be assaulted wearing this mess. Why don’t you hand ’em over to that fat ass over there, and he can go home and play peek-a-boo with his mama?”

“Let this be your first lesson about prisoners: no good deed goes unpunished,” the warden said to Yusuf as he recovered from his fit of laughter.

The hospital was like a patient afflicted with multiple personality disorder. On some days it wore a warm persona glazed with heart-rupturing humor, on others a grim face varnished with disfiguring spite and heartbreak, and yet on others it donned the saintly temperament of grace and compassion. As the months passed, each intern inevitably toughened. The pager that once connected the trainee to a privileged community gradually turned into an insufferable leash, and the flames of perpetual crisis changed from a terrifying threat to a benign pacesetter. As abruptly as it had begun, Yusuf’s year as an intern came to an end.

CHAPTER 26

After completion of his internship, Dr. Ibrahim’s surgical training now rose above performing tedious routines to assisting the staff surgeon in complex operations. Gradually unmarked trails leading to remote corners of the human body became familiar paths. With each step committed to memory, the apprentice approached something like mastery. The staff surgeon eventually assumed the role of an advisor, while his maturing apprentice guided junior colleagues on the transformative pilgrimage.

Although he had overcome most of his challenges as a surgical resident, Yusuf’s domestic failures only seemed to fester and multiply with time. Kim, while proud of her new status as a doctor’s wife, had grown weary and resentful of the sacrifices demanded by the profession. With great astonishment she had learned that a resident’s meager income was barely sufficient to pay household bills, not to say anything about extravagance or even normal leisure. Her propensity for angry outbursts drove Yusuf away from their small apartment and into the enchanting arms of his seductive craft. At the hospital where he spent most of his time, gratifying friendships flourished and offset the tension at home.

Among the relationships he treasured most was his bond with Dr. Mikita Hawks. Over their years of training they had traversed similar worlds of daunting insecurity and backbreaking toil. While at first she was guarded and respectfully distant, Dr. Hawks had grown more confiding as their friendship matured. When their night calls coincided, they engaged in delightful conversations and vigorous debates late into the evening.

On a chilly winter night they lay chatting on opposite sides of a bed in their hospital’s Call Room. Between them was a six-year-old boy who was soundly asleep. He was the son of Dr. Hawks’s childhood friend who had moved into her apartment after a domestic crisis. Dr. Hawks had offered to watch over the boy while his mother underwent a procedure that evening. While she waited for her friend to come out of surgery, she sought respite from her gnawing heartache through conversation with Yusuf.

“Poor boy,” she reflected, “He looks so serene and carefree. Little does he know of the heartache that awaits him.”

“It is so unfair that his father should be incarcerated for three decades for selling a few ounces of pot while ruthless crooks on Wall Street get a mere slap on the wrist for far more heinous crimes,” Yusuf said with disgust.

“Justice in America is not color-blind,” Dr. Hawks replied. “This boy’s mother was left with no other option except an abortion this time. She just couldn’t afford another child. She is lucky that she still had that choice. Otherwise she would live to see her offspring dying of starvation.”

“From the outside one never sees this side of America,” said Yusuf. “To the foreigner this is nothing less than the land of milk and honey.”

“Ever since I was a little girl I always dreamed of Africa. My great grandmother, as the daughter of slaves, used to tell me stories that left me enchanted. Tell me about Africa, Yusuf.”

“When it comes to material things, African Americans have a lot more than we do,” he declared, “but when it comes to the connection with one’s essence, and therefore one’s capacity for liberty and self-actualization, history has robbed you of a precious jewel.”

“I want to regain that connection. Over the last several days my friend and I struggled under the weight of her decision to have an abortion,” Mikita confided as she cuddled the sleeping boy. “At a personal level it was a tragic decision, but one has to look at it in the larger social context. Shanika is exercising her right to choose her path in life.”

“That is indeed a difficult decision, especially when one imagines the potential of the life being destroyed,” Yusuf responded while rubbing the boy’s head. “When did we in the progressive ranks become merchants of death? Only a generation ago we were tirelessly canvassing for the inclusion of all mankind in the human family. We have an obligation to protect all life, even in its most defenseless and voiceless form. The portrayal of ‘contraceptive’ abortion as some sacred right is a mockery to conscience.”

“I’m certainly not convinced that conservative anti-abortionists are guided by genuine care or compassion,” replied Dr. Hawks, “for in one breath they defend the life of the fetus and in the next advocate the defunding of any social programs aimed at reducing childhood hunger and mortality. What kind of morals are those?”

“I make a distinction between political posturing and moral positions,” declared Yusuf.

“From a safe distance it seems like such an easy decision,” Mikita said, “but when one takes into account life’s harsh realities, the mind is suspended in a standoff between necessity and ideals.”

“In the end,” replied Yusuf, “we must leave these things in the hands of a just God. He is the only one capable of mending broken lives.”

“Yusuf, I love you dearly. I wish I could have you all to myself forever,” she said, gently stroking his cheek.

“I love you too, Kita,” he whispered with his eyes closed, “but one can’t always choose as one would wish.”

“Yusuf, is it true what they say about ambitious black men—that they need a white woman to validate their standing in society?”

“I cannot speak for anyone else, but the reasons behind my marriage are more complex than I care to explain,” Yusuf said in an attempt to deflect her question.

“Are you sure? You’d be surprised how commonplace your unique reasons are. Lately I’ve been reading Frantz Fanon’s *Black Faces, White Masks*, which I highly recommend.” She watched him turn uncomfortably under her scrutinizing gaze.

“I’ll get to it as soon as I finish reading the *Sabiston Textbook of Surgery*,” he said with mild sarcasm.

“The unique thing about Dr. Fanon is that he was a black guy from the Caribbean who ended up in France where he became an accomplished shrink, married a white chick, and began to analyze himself and other black men around him. His work masterfully exposes the hidden pathology that haunts the black man deep in his conflicted conscience.”

“Whatever happened to judging all men by the content of their character instead of the color of their skins?” Yusuf rejoined.

“Oh come on. That is a cowardly evasion of the issue,” she shot back.

“Okay, you’re right. I am a shameless race traitor and have cowardly deserted the good fight. There is your confession. Are we done?” he retorted.

“Sweetheart, the words traitors and deserters are military terms, but we are dealing with the delicate matter of a bruised psyche and an inferiority complex.”

“I certainly don’t feel inferior to anyone,” Yusuf replied dispassionately.

“But it is all in the subconscious mind. As Fanon puts it, the black man desires to be loved like the white man, to have his children suckled on white breasts, and ultimately to dissolve into white society. In essence, he desires to become a white man, and he does it the only way he can—by clinging to the white woman, to her pink lips and nipples.”

“In your opinion, then, is it impossible for a black man and a white woman to simply fall in love, or are all interracial relationships pathological in nature?” he asked.

“The important question is whether progressive black men can find their true love among black women. When an ambitious black man would rather accept a stale marriage with a white woman than seek out an intelligent black woman, it appears he is on a mission to abandon a resented self.”

“Goodness, Kita, what has entered into your head? Now I really want to read this book that has left you so unhinged! Perhaps I’ll find the answers to this black man’s *real* struggles,” Yusuf declared.

This conversation opened an important doorway in his life. Within a few days Yusuf found Fanon’s book discreetly placed in his hospital mailbox. Although he was chronically pressed for time, once he cracked open the book he found it nearly impossible to put down. Dr. Fanon was a masterful author and discerning physician who could eloquently dissect a complex malady. He spoke an awful truth with candor and sought to guide his patients into the crucible of self-reflection and reform. In his words Yusuf heard a fervent call to redemption, an invitation to abandon a crushing alienation from his essence. But while certain lessons had retained their relevance over the years, Fanon’s message was tied to a fixed moment in history.

While he excelled professionally, Yusuf’s marriage went from bad to worse within months after their move to Charlotte. Public disapproval combined with the rigors of his demanding training soon took their toll on the union. The *coup de théâtre* had its roots in the bedroom but rapidly spread to other aspects of life, as a phone conversation between Yusuf and Okwu revealed.

Yusuf: *My brother, I am shipwrecked and drifting helplessly on a precarious sea.*

Okwu: *What has she done?*

Yusuf: *She says that she can no longer live in a sham marriage. She has even threatened to go to the authorities to report the arrangement as an immigration fraud.*

Okwu: *You must not let it go that far! Have you made an attempt at reconciliation? I mean, have you bought her flowers and that chocolate rubbish they love to eat?*

Yusuf: *Man, I don't have time for that rubbish. I have better things to do with my time than indulging her insatiable appetite.*

Okwu: *Listen to me, bro. You don't want this thing to get out of hand. Make her believe that you are remorseful and that you're working very hard for your future together. Then conclude the whole thing by making love to her like a gigolo.*

Yusuf: *We haven't done that for months. After a while it was just too difficult for me to complete the act.*

Okwu: *They have medications for that problem. Ask your doctor to write you a prescription.*

Yusuf: *It is not a physical but a psychological problem. It terrifies me that she might get pregnant and add another victim to this tragedy.*

Okwu: *Isn't she on the pill? Pregnancy in the twentieth century should never be accidental, especially for a doctor.*

Yusuf: *That is how the whole drama started. She discarded her pills and insisted that she wanted a baby. She is beside herself.*

Okwu: *Man, now I see you have a real problem. I guess you could get neutered—you know, secretly. It only takes fifteen minutes, and you're fixed for life.*

Yusuf: *I suppose she won't notice that I'm walking funny. Look, I need real solutions!*

Okwu: *Seriously, I had it done. After the doctor makes small incisions on each side of your scrotum and disconnects the tubes, your boys will never swim again. In a matter of days you'll be completely healed, and she'll never know.*

Yusuf: *I am unwilling to contemplate my own castration for the sake of preserving a sham marriage.*

Okwu: *Well, progress demands sacrifice! And make sure that when you eat her food, you compliment her on it, even when it is repulsive.*

Yusuf: *She always burns her food!*

Okwu: *Just think of yourself as a god and enjoy the burnt offerings.*

Yusuf: *I'd give anything to get my sweet Kaye back. What have I done to myself?*

Okwu: *By the way, she was asking me about you last weekend. I can still sense love on her part.*

Yusuf: *No, bro, I'm afraid not. As you can see, I am reaping what I sowed. Some nights I lie awake pleading silently for deliverance, but I can't even do that peacefully since my bedfellow snores like a lawnmower.*

Okwu: *I'll tell Kaye that you miss her. Hey, just apply for citizenship and then break it off.*

Yusuf: *I've done enough harm already. I am heading back home as soon as I can pay off my loans. I've obtained my education, and that is what brought me here. I don't care for their citizenship or whatever. I am finished with it all.*

Okwu: *Then you should move on right away. Just make sure that the split does not expose anything.*

Yusuf: *I'll tell her that she can keep everything of value. I'll give up anything to extricate myself from this mess!*

Okwu: *You can trust me to watch over your true love. I know she still loves you, and with a little persuasion she can be recovered. Just between us, I have recently unearthed a huge secret about her.*

Yusuf: *Honestly, I am not sure I want to know.*

Okwu: *No, you do. She invited us to her place last weekend, and she had these two large photo albums. Bored, I started looking through the pages, and there staring at me from one of the pages was a picture of one of my uncles.*

Yusuf: *She is going out with your uncle?*

Okwu: *Listen. When I calmly inquired about the guy in the picture, Kaye told me that he was her father who left before she was born. Can you believe it? Your lover is my cousin!*

Yusuf: *Are you serious? Did you tell her?*

Okwu: *Hell no! I couldn't tell her that the vagrant who deserted her is my uncle. I did what any other bright person would do under the circumstances. I kept my big mouth shut. But I have to confess that I've been feeling very protective of her since then. She is family, after all.*

Upon his return to the apartment one evening shortly thereafter, Yusuf was faced with a voice from the past. Perhaps out of respect and a desire to maintain a cordial relationship, Eunice O'Neal had steered clear of any contentious topic in her communication with him. She had preserved her presence in his life through periodic letters and parcels that mostly contained humorous articles and simple gifts. It therefore caught Yusuf completely by surprise when he received a letter from her husband. Upon seeing John's name on the envelope's return address, it immediately occurred to Yusuf that something terrible had either happened or was about to happen to Eunice. Even though he did not care for the tangent her religious devotion had taken, she remained dear to his heart and a beacon of enduring love. Was this the dreaded moment when he would lose the last thread that connected him to the past?

Dear Yusuf,

I'm sure you'll find my letter unexpected, but I have been writing it for a long time and I hope you'll spare me a few minutes. I do not write to you as a professor, but in the humility of a man who is compelled to speak with absolute candor. My words here do not appeal to intellect, reason or manifest logic. Rather I seek to put into words lessons I've learned in a language that transcends and overpowers all human expressions. It first came to me when I accepted the elders' invitation to study the scriptures

and ask God our Eternal Father if they contain His Truth. As I fumbled in an awkward but earnest prayer, not knowing if anyone was listening, I felt a powerful and unmistakable presence which bathed my whole being with light and warmth. In that moment I felt like an endeared child locked in an embrace with a loving and gracious parent. I was filled with the purest of joy and I wept like a child knowing that in a way that I can never deny I had connected with my Eternal Maker. That feeling returns to me each time I pray earnestly, whenever I immerse myself in scripture study, and when I worship in holy places. In a sense, God has become my immortal companion.

I speak of a conviction which pierces the heart more powerfully than logic. These are transactions of the spirit, where God's spirit illuminates the human spirit. From these sacred experiences, I obtained the most durable and sustaining conviction. They penetrate the deepest part of the soul and bring contentment and unspeakable joy.

I do not fault you for feeling as you do about the flaws of men manifested in the history of the church of Jesus Christ. Frankly, my position is not based on naivety or ignorance of those disconcerting issues. Yes I have studied and wrestled with these problems over the years: from racist doctrines that had no Christian basis, to anachronism and troubling mis-translation of hieroglyphics, to polyandry, etc. And if this was all that I knew, I'd be sitting next to you in your camp. But I know more than this, a lot more. I am not a blind zealot but I've learned that even the best earthly depiction of God's mind and purposes falls miserably short. While scriptures and prophets give the words of God, they do not replace or equal Him—therefore their inevitable flaws do not represent flaws in Deity. Only the Holy Spirit, speaking to human spirit in that most overpowering divine way, can convey unblemished Truth.

I now understand how it is possible to "bless those that curse you" and how to look at other men's sins and faults with tender mercies. Having partaken from Christ's cup of mercy and consuming love, how could I reject his invitation to follow His holy footsteps by doing to others as he had done to me?

While you reflect on these matters, remember that the apostle Peter's repeated denials of his Savior did not negate the testimony for which he ultimately gave his own life; that Paul's initial collusion with persecutors and murderers did not place the mercies of Christ beyond his reach; and that while one may easily compile a lengthy checklist of flaws and mistakes committed by followers of Christ, we must not ignore the central role of He who can mend all wrongs and heal all wounds. This is His true church and His everlasting gospel, and all those who open up their hearts to His eternal truths are raised to a newness of life where they can feast upon His love forever. Here there is no pretense of perfection, only a fervent hungering and thirsting after it! I wanted you to know this from the bottom of my heart, and I invite you to read and contemplate the beautiful teachings in the Book of Mormon. Its simple message has

ushered my soul into a dawn of hope and delightful communion with Christ that I never thought possible. I invite you to "come and see" for yourself!

With brotherly love, John

Under the constant pressure of a mounting domestic crisis, Yusuf had little time to dwell on John's letter. The struggle to negotiate a loveless marriage consumed all of his time beyond the hospital. For three years he had walked a difficult line between desertion and cohabitation. Eventually a comical cat-and-mouse game developed in the warring couple's relationship. As the battle approached its final stages, Kim decided that Yusuf had to be starved into submission, and her plan involved hiding food wherever she could. It did not take long before Yusuf discovered her scheme. Driven by contempt after discovering Kim's hidden dish one evening, he poured a near-toxic amount of hot sauce on it before retreating to his study room to await her reaction. Within minutes he heard an agonizing scream followed by a thunderous sprint to the bathroom.

His attack would not go unanswered. While Yusuf was away at work the next day, Kim emptied a generous quantity of laxatives into a gallon of milk. Upon returning that evening he sat down as usual to enjoy a relaxing glass of warm milk. If his attack on her had been fiery and violent, the misery had been short-lived; on the other hand, the results of her retaliation, albeit slow of onset, were equally dramatic and lasted several days. In the end the two combatants lived uneasily under the same roof without a truce. Such an existence was not sustainable, and they both knew it was only a matter of time before the toll of the death knell. When an opening presented itself, Yusuf did not waste a moment before announcing his intentions.

"I'll be returning home next year for good," Yusuf informed Kim as he approached the end of his training.

"What about me?" Kim asked in shock.

"You are welcome to come along. Africa is a big place. There is room for all of us," he replied casually.

"It doesn't work that way," she fumed. "I had no plans to move to some godforsaken jungle when I married you. That kind of life is not for me. We can visit there later when we are better off."

"I'll not force you to come along, but I am definitely going back," he replied indifferently.

"What about all your loans from school? You can't just pack up and leave!" she protested.

"Not to worry. I've found a way to take care of my debts."

"That's impossible! You are going to leave me in a financial mess, and I am not having it!" Kim replied angrily.

"Dr. Leventhal was gracious enough to make some arrangements, so if that is your only concern. . . ."

"Why can't he get you a job right here where you can make a lot of money? We are entitled to comfort and the American Dream, aren't we?" she argued.

"The American Dream is not one I've ever dreamt. I am a Kenyan, remember? My plan has always been to return home . . . to pursue my African dream. I realize that may not work for you, but I am obliged to do so."

“Why does it have to be about your plan? I have needs too!” Kim exclaimed.

“I would never force you to abandon your plans or your dreams,” he responded.

“I’ve sacrificed a lot too. I’ve put my life on hold, waiting patiently, and I think I am entitled to a piece of the pie. I’ve been cooking your food and. . .”

“Yes, how could I forget your burnt offerings?” Yusuf interjected sarcastically.

“Get out of my face, nigger!” Kim yelled. “Take your things and don’t ever come back here again.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Yusuf replied.

CHAPTER 27

The couple’s explosive argument carried them into the territory of irreconcilable differences. With nothing between them to salvage, they assumed that their divorce would be rapid if not smooth. When they made their appearance in court, to their surprise they were presented with an arbitrator and a marriage counselor, both of whom were determined to save their “holy matrimony” from falling apart. But how could they rescue the dying when life beckoned him from beyond the horizon? Twice each week the reluctant couple sat through a mind-numbing ritual presided over by the marriage counselor. Her role as she envisioned it was to bridge the warring couple’s spectacularly disparate worlds. With the best tools of her trade she embarked on a mission to decode and reassemble their broken vows.

“What do you recall about your childhood?” she prodded them gently. “How was love expressed in your home? Were there moments of despair and abandonment along the way?”

As hailstones of truth began to descend from dark clouds, the fault lines on the surface widened, exposing perilous craters beneath. The bride was an American princess: bottle-fed on nutritious formula, cradled in a soft crib, lullabied with gentle melodies from an electronic player, socialized into a life rich with expectations and soft in its demands, guided throughout childhood to a happiness predicated on grandeur. The groom, on the other hand, was a raw outcropping from Africa’s ageless soil: suckled on breasts glazed with red Savannah dust, carried on his mother’s back in tattered cowhide, lullabied with carols filtered from ancient chants, fed in infancy with boluses chewed to a pulp by his mother, who fought the urge to swallow to quell the fire in her own empty stomach; an unplanned life staked against death’s mysterious whims.

Before the counselor’s eyes, the implacable warriors glared at each other from the opposite banks of an unbridgeable gulf. Lacking any grounds for compromise, they repelled each other like the two ends of a magnet. There was no denying it: the tectonic plates beneath the surface had long since migrated beyond return. All that could be hoped for now was a graceful end to the ill-fated union.

Not long thereafter Yusuf packed his few belongings and temporarily lived the nomadic life of his forebears. When his plight came to the attention of his mentor, Dr. Leventhal accommodated Yusuf in his basement and persuaded him to billet there until the end of his cardiothoracic fellowship.

It was there that Yusuf confronted the stark reality of his new station in life. An oppressive feeling of gloom rested heavily on his already strained heart. With

unforgiving clarity it was obvious he had committed another moral violation by entering into a marriage of convenience. The thought of his first offence, similarly driven by unbridled self-interest, raged in his memory like a brush fire. The emaciated face of a dying African child was now accompanied by the far different features of a heartbroken, plump American princess. As if this was not enough, Elsie Compton's irate ghost hovered over his mind continually. Yusuf was certain that time would not heal the wounds he had inflicted. Fate had damned him to live with a stained conscience forever.

His mind wandered obsessively through a maze of potential retributions for his transgressions. When sleep failed to return to rescue him from his misery, he abandoned the warmth of his bed and sat on a chair in solemn meditation. On several occasions he sought to assuage the assault by drafting letters he would never mail. In one such letter he reached out to his beloved Kaye for deliverance. As though their minds were conjoined, she in the same bitter hour was groaning under a similar weight of despair. She also had resorted to scribbling her thoughts on paper.

Yusuf: My truest love, if only tears could extinguish the flames of an anguished conscience! I crave you as the bereaved crave life, knowing too well that death never sets free its captives. What I wouldn't give to gaze once more into your adorable eyes. If only your voice could banish this imprisoning silence!

Kaye: I roam in the valley of despair longing for the echoes of affection now silenced. How could love be so cruel, so devoid of remorse? Do you suspend the scalpel to pay homage to love's lost pulse? Does the spasm of tender memory startle you from slumber?

Yusuf: Let me whisper my love to her alienated heart. Let my invocations speak the truth of a love that carries on without sight or knowledge. I love you as the blind loves his guide. Without you as a lodestone I stumble and wander in a wasteland of grievous errors.

Kaye: Would that I were capable of hating you as well as I mastered the art of loving you. With the sword of spurned longing I'd split your heart into jagged halves, yet I yearn to save you from fate's frigid tomb. I love you as the petals of flowers seek the dawn.

Yusuf: At times I wonder whether death promises any rest for me, but something deep inside is repulsed by the thought. So I must remain on this side of the grave and hope against hope for redemption. I pray that my thoughts conceived in abject solitude will find the way to your graceful heart.

The two former lovers' mutual longing for each other was endless and unbroken. It was in this frame of mind that Yusuf seized the opportunity provided by a weeklong vacation to return to Massachusetts.

It was springtime in Boston, and Okwu's spacious home offered a tranquil retreat from the exigencies of Yusuf's life in Charlotte. One evening the two close friends sat by the fireplace sipping African tea while enjoying the luxury of wide-ranging discussion and renewed interaction.

"If you had given me enough warning," Okwu said, "I would have organized a party for you. You'd be amazed to see how much the African community here has grown."

"Who is left behind to build the homeland?" Yusuf asked rhetorically.

"I am very concerned about what will happen to Africa after losing most of its intellectuals and skilled workers," replied Okwu.

"I don't think we can be counted as part of any brain-drain," Yusuf countered. "After all, we came here right after high school when we had not yet found our brains."

"Speak for yourself, brother! I am a child prodigy. On a more serious note, however, Africa and the rest of the Third World must develop innovative mechanisms to deal with this crippling poaching of its best minds."

"It seems that the urge to succeed professionally has risen above the call to solidarity and patriotism," Yusuf observed.

"The solution to the problem lies beyond the realm of sentiments," Okwu declared. "Think for a moment. Over the ages, enduring even the Holocaust, Jews remained committed to their ancestral homeland. Can the same be said of Africans? I believe that you cannot arrive at the root of Africa's postcolonial predicament without resorting to ethnographic psychoanalysis."

"So from your courtroom, political and economic hit-men unleashed on poor countries by Western powers must walk scot-free from the seeds of depravity and carnage they've planted?" Yusuf asked critically.

"When there is political or economic disaster in Europe or North America, who do they blame? Do they run to Asia or even Cuba looking for culprits?" Okwu argued emphatically. "No, they are men—and to be a man means to accept both the seed and the fruit of your labor. The African therefore must attain this mature stance as it pertains to the affairs of his world; he must replace blame with introspection, and covering with the indomitable spirit of his forebears."

"That is a resource available only to the truly free," Yusuf declared. "The average African is an expendable cog in a complex socioeconomic system, one that hardly has his interests in mind."

"Then he must make it his most urgent business to free himself from this slavery, shouldn't he?" Okwu replied resolutely. "And the sooner he learns that no one is sympathetic, the faster he shall rise to this crucial task. Let him be told: *your bondage is yours alone, the shackles are on your neck—wake up and do something about it!* Each must buy his liberty with the precious coins of a personal insurrection; each must walk to freedom on his own feet. To suggest otherwise would amount to casting your pearls before swine."

"We must therefore accept," Yusuf stated adamantly, "that the brain-drain is a necessary step towards this ultimate goal. Whether you like it or not, it brings about economic and political empowerment and liberation."

"That is precisely the point I was making when I said we must reject generic solutions," Okwu stated. "The economic disparities of our world would be exaggerated

by a ban on migrations from poor countries to rich ones. In this light, the new immigrant must be seen as a man in pursuit of his stolen wealth.”

“But what is the fate of those who are left behind when all the doctors, the engineers, and professors leave?” Yusuf countered.

“If I were involved in formulating public policy in Africa,” Okwu responded, “I’d account for the brain drain...in fact I’d encourage it and train a select group for it. I’d help them get where they’ll thrive economically. Modern China has proven that this is an investment which yields great returns!”

“You are in a lonely camp,” Yusuf rejoined. “All of the world’s brilliant economists, including the IMF, consider the brain drain an impediment.”

“You must learn to distinguish between weathermen and rainmakers,” Okwu declared.

“Your prescription is truly unique. It calls for a cohesion that is grounded on dispersion,” Yusuf concluded.

“Speaking of cohesion, I am thinking about getting married—this time *for real*,” Okwu announced. “I should be excited, but I find myself sleepless and terrified.”

“Don’t be afraid to lose your virginity. Nothing lasts forever!” Yusuf quipped.

“Bro, this is not a joke.”

“What is the problem then, tiger? Is she too aggressive?” Yusuf asked.

“Quite to the contrary. Karen is a delicate and graceful woman. I finally feel truly connected with another human being,” Okwu confessed.

“Stop beating around the bush and explain the source of your anxiety,” Yusuf responded.

“Look, brother, she is white. *Karen is a white girl!*” Okwu said.

“Since when did that stop you from doing anything you wished? Weren’t you married to an Anglo-Saxon before?” Yusuf asked.

“There is a crucial difference this time around,” Okwu declared. “Our community understands, in fact excuses, the reckless ‘marriage’ for the hustler trying to survive. It understands that he needs his papers and is therefore forced to marry against his better judgment. The problem now is the fact that I am past that point. In my present circumstances marriage is purely a matter of choice. My bride therefore becomes a statement in flesh and blood.”

“In matters of love,” replied Yusuf resolutely, “no one should be dictated to. You can’t alter the desires of your heart.”

“That may be, but I’ve been analyzing this issue for a long time. Are we truly free when it comes to our choice of lovers, or has Hollywood taught our hearts what they should desire? What I once found irresistible I now deem unattractive! All my life my deepest fear was to wake up one day and find my mouth full of another man’s words or my heart infested with another man’s passions. Now I pause and wonder whether this is me in love.”

“Love is messy. I think you are trying too hard to sanitize the process,” Yusuf stated.

“I’ll tell you a funny story,” Okwu said with a chuckle. “A couple of years ago I made an attempt at self-rehabilitation. I wanted to return to my roots, to break free from the shackles of cultural domination. So I found and befriended the prototypical African

queen. Her name was Mariam from Sierra Leone. She was delightful and as full of energy as any other village woman in Africa.”

“This is getting interesting!” Yusuf said.

“Man, nothing fazed her!” Okwu continued. “I remember one time we set out to go to a fancy dinner, and on the way there one of her high heels broke. Any other woman would have been embarrassed or broken down in tears, but Mariam exploded with a hearty laughter, accusing the Chinese of making flimsy heels with sweet and sour pork. And just when I thought the date was ruined, she removed her shoes and walked barefoot to the restaurant.”

“So why didn’t you keep her?”

“We had an amicable separation,” Okwu said defensively. “I just felt as though the whole relationship was some sort of social experiment on my part. It wasn’t fair to her, and I certainly didn’t want to end up like the so-called ‘race brother’ who marries a black woman only because of cultural expectations and then spends the rest of his life philandering. Such behavior amounts to self-imposed psychological bondage, and it is as harmful as it is unjust.”

“I’m not convinced that you’ve told me everything,” Yusuf said.

“Well, part of the problem was Karen,” Okwu conceded. “I had to face the fact that deep down I was in love with another woman. I still feel conflicted about this...it is hard to know that one has made the right decision.”

“As I’ve already said,” added Yusuf, “stop trying to sanitize the process.”

“But it would be a tragic mistake for us to embrace that attitude,” Okwu continued, “because studies have shown there are real economic consequences attached to a foolish choice of a mate. The process of creating the educated man that you have become is expensive and requires capital. Any marriage that removes you from your community divests this capital and the gains are harvested, whether in full or in part, by another. The end result of an intercultural marriage is the impoverishment of one’s own people. The Jew rarely marries outside his group; the Negro, on the other hand, is always eager to do so. The economic consequences are obvious.”

“Yours is the first economic argument I’ve heard against miscegenation,” Yusuf declared. “You might now be qualified for membership in the Ku Klux Klan.”

“Actually miscegenation in America is anything but disadvantageous to the Anglo-Saxon race,” Okwu explained. “Historically blacks who married whites tended to be well educated and economically successful, and even then they seldom married the cream of the white crop.”

“As a man who was forced to stare into the eyes of a loveless bedfellow,” Yusuf stated, “I must advise you to have no other consideration besides love when it comes to marriage. I mean love for love’s sake—unvetted, shameless, and unrehearsed.”

“But shouldn’t our hearts be guided by reason and principles? And shouldn’t we be willing to live or die by our principles?” Okwu asked.

“If I ever marry again, I’ll allow my heart what it craves,” Yusuf declared. “In the conflict between mind and heart, one must always follow the heart’s imperceptible wisdom. That is why I am still in love with Kaye.”

“I think she is still holding out for you,” Okwu confided. “She was silently elated when I told her about your divorce. She asked whether you needed legal assistance, but I didn’t want to place her in an awkward position.”

“My brother, when I look back on my mistakes, I feel like Faustus. I sold my soul to the Devil!” Yusuf said with his eyes closed.

“Is it possible for a black man, having ascended to the throne of white love, to abandon that privilege and return to black love?” Okwu asked sarcastically.

“I have opened human chests and stared at the restless heart within,” declared Yusuf. “It is an awesome epiphany when you see life from that perspective. Beyond this threshold, you can no longer keep company with shallow vanities.”

CHAPTER 28

Time passed quickly in the company of Okwu. The seven-day vacation in Boston was timely, as Yusuf would soon learn upon his return to Charlotte. The pace of work there picked up dramatically during his final months of training in anticipation of the slow month of July when new and inexperienced trainees were expected to join the program. His graduation almost caught him unprepared as he struggled with chronic sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion. After the festivities he found himself discussing with his trusted friend and mentor his future plans to return to Africa.

“You are now a highly skilled surgeon,” Dr. Leventhal told Yusuf. “I don’t doubt that you will succeed wherever you decide to practice. Your desire to return to Africa where your skills are critically needed sets you above your peers. I’ll do everything within my means to assist you. Please keep me updated on your progress, and don’t hesitate to ask me for help if you need it.”

With those words in mind Yusuf packed his belongings and left the hospital where he had spent the most important and grueling seven years of his life. He planned to make a short trip to Boston before flying to Kenya. When he arrived in the city, Yusuf returned to the place where the long journey had started—Eunice O’Neal’s former home on Common Street in Quincy. He drove by the house and stopped briefly to recapture memories of his coming to America. Except for the young family that had moved in—he saw their children tossing water balloons in the front yard—the place remained unchanged.

When he left Quincy, he retraced his route north to Okwu’s house as they had done during his first visit accompanied by Kaye. His host had promised to throw him “a hell of a farewell party,” and he had more than one reason to arrive on time.

“I’ve invited as many of our old friends as I could find,” Okwu informed Yusuf upon his arrival. “I didn’t tell them the reason for the party. I wanted it to be a big surprise.”

“I look forward to the occasion,” Yusuf replied.

“I thought that I would have to beg you-know-who to come. She actually smiled shyly when I invited her,” Okwu confided.

“I have to admit that I’m a little nervous. I haven’t seen her in such a long time, and I don’t know what to say to her.”

“You won’t have to say much. Deep down she loves you more now than before. There’s something about women and jerks,” Okwu jested.

“Yeah, that makes me feel really good about myself,” Yusuf retorted.

The party lived up to Okwu’s expectations. The turnout was huge, and the invitees were all pleasantly surprised by the guest of honor. Although life had taken

various twists and turns for most of those in attendance, they had remained a cohesive community. What started as a merry-making occasion turned into a fundraiser before the evening's end. Following Okwu's lead, the celebrants contributed a total of \$30,000 as a farewell present to Yusuf.

But the most thrilling moment for the honoree came during the last dance of the night. With atypical courage Kaye approached Yusuf and asked him for a dance. After a brief hesitation he rose to his feet and followed her to the center of the room. In a manner that seemed rehearsed, she rested her arm on his shoulder while he placed his around her waist.

"This is where we danced our first dance, and I wanted it to be the venue where we danced our last," she whispered into his ear.

Yusuf was speechless. He did not want it to end this way, so he changed the topic. "What kind of law do you practice?" he asked, even though Okwu had thoroughly updated him on all the details of her life.

"Criminal law. You should count yourself lucky that you escaped before I got to you," she said in jest.

"There are some things I wish to talk to you about, privately if possible," he managed to say.

"That's suspicious. Does your wife approve of such meetings?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I'm flying out in two days. We can meet wherever is convenient for you," he said, ignoring the insult.

"Oh, my convenience is now important! Well, we have a sizeable budget from this evening's fundraiser, so I can choose the most expensive restaurant in Boston . . . and I will."

During their evening out together Kaye and Yusuf spoke freely of their careers and post-separation experiences, carefully avoiding uncomfortable topics. She even made jokes about the time she returned to their deserted apartment. He was too ashamed and remorseful to respond, but he appreciated her good spirits.

"Kaye," Yusuf said penitently, "I apologize for putting you through such an ordeal. In my shortsightedness I put my ambition over what we had together."

"I'm over it," she reassured him. "You were under immense pressure, and I'll be forever grateful for the fulfilling relationship we had. We must let bygones be bygones."

"There's no justification for my behavior. I just hope that you can forgive me," he said.

"I moved on, and you should too," Kaye said. "So what is your plan when you return to Kenya?"

"I am hoping there will be a hospital where I can practice. I am sure that there will be no shortage of patients."

"With your skills I am sure you will have no trouble finding a job. The *haute bourgeoisie* will be able to save their money by receiving treatment locally instead of flying to London for their surgeries," she said sarcastically.

"I have no plans of becoming the rich man's doctor," Yusuf replied.

"Then you should plan on working for free, because we both know that the average African lives on less than a dollar a day," Kaye stated, "which is hardly enough to buy essential medications, let alone to pay for heart surgery."

“Will you stay in touch?” he asked.

“I haven’t for seven years, and it appears that you survived unscathed. Why is it important now?” she asked.

“It would mean a lot to me,” Yusuf said, struggling to find his words.

“Did she leave you, or did you desert her?” Kaye asked bluntly.

“We drifted apart. I prefer not to talk about it.”

“I understand,” she said. “So did you ever hear from your mother?”

“No, not a single letter since I left home. I don’t know what to expect upon my return.”

“Is it likely you will have no family there?” Kaye asked with veiled empathy.

“I guess I’ll have Kajiwe, the mystical healer, if he is still alive. I’ll try to reconnect with him, but he may not want me around him.”

“Tragically you have managed to alienate everyone who has ever been close to you,” she said in a voice that conveyed both pity and rebuke.

“What can I say? I suppose I am only reaping what I sowed,” Yusuf said.

“Here’s my card. I’ll try to stay in touch, but I am not making any promises. Write me when you get a mailbox in Kenya,” she said before they parted.

“Can I get a goodbye hug?” he asked sheepishly.

Kaye gazed into his eyes for a long while. In the silence she seemed to reacquaint herself with the man who stood only inches away from her. Her heart was ablaze with conflicting emotions. A part of her wanted to watch him suffer, to order him onto his knees to lick the dust off her shoes, but a more overpowering side wanted to soothe his weary spirit.

“No one should have to beg for hugs,” she said as she embraced him. “What time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Late at night,” Yusuf replied. “It would mean a lot to me if you can come to see me off.”

“Unfortunately I cannot. I usually go to bed early since I report to work at the break of dawn,” Kaye stated. “Take care, and a safe trip.”

After his outing with Kaye, Yusuf retreated to Okwu’s guest bedroom for private deliberations. When his mind did not find reprieve in meditation, he tried to rest but sleep eluded him. He found himself combing through every word that she had spoken that evening. “This cannot be the end,” he murmured as he stood at the window staring at the city’s lights. When he could no longer contain himself, he jumped into his clothes and braced himself for the imminent battle.

Meanwhile in Cambridge another set of eyes searched the night’s sky for solace. Her brief encounter with Yusuf had aroused an unappeasable desire. When she answered the doorbell, he stood in front of her, breathing heavily. She was secretly delighted and relieved to see him there. Something had gone unsaid, and it had to come out before the opportunity was lost.

“Do come in,” Kaye said as she ushered him into her apartment. “I imagine something very important has brought you here this late.”

“I could not sleep,” he said, trying to excuse his intrusion.

“I’m afraid I have no cure for insomnia,” she answered, “but would you like a cup of tea?”

“Sure. That might do the trick,” he answered. “You’ve really given this place a facelift. It’s adorable.”

“If only I could afford one for my face, wouldn’t you say?” she quipped.

“Oh, come on. Don’t be silly,” he chided her.

“You’re right. I am beyond repair,” she rejoined. “Here is your cup of tea. Wait. After you take your first sip, I’d like to know what you think of it.”

“I’ll bet this has something to do with your endless disputes with Okwu!” he said with feigned exasperation. “Well, it has a very familiar taste. What is it? It is not just tea.”

“Ah, the famous last words!” Kaye replied.

“This is not hemlock, is it? On the other hand, what better place to die than here,” he joked.

“Even hemlock should not be wasted on undeserving recipients. It is Kenyan tea. Hence the familiarity.”

“You’re right. It tastes like my mother’s tea! I knew there was a reason I needed to come here,” Yusuf said.

“I should be careful then. Anyway I am sure you didn’t come here just to drink my tea.”

“But now I wish I had!” He knew Kaye’s limits and could not resist the pleasure of their old games.

“Yusuf, times have changed. You cannot just walk back here and pretend everything is the same. Our worlds have diverged. We are merely acquaintances in a world of billions,” she said in a no-nonsense tone.

“Kaye, I know I hurt you. If I could mend the past, heaven knows I would do so in a minute. But here we are.”

“At least we both now know that life is possible without each other. We should take comfort in that,” she replied bluntly.

“I miss you, Kaye, and I want to be with you. Day and night I crave nothing more than what we had,” he pleaded remorsefully. “I know that I broke your heart, but our future must not be held hostage by past mistakes. I want to be with you. What more can I say?”

“How would you feel, if the situation were reversed? If I had walked away from everything we shared and jumped into bed with a total stranger, would you regard me as a friend or as a fraud? At least if you had fallen out of love there would be a veneer of dignity. That is a salvageable situation, but what you did was cruel and unpardonable. You ripped out the beating heart of a healthy relationship, and you did it knowingly, consciously, and callously. That is depraved!”

“Kaye, I take full responsibility for my actions,” Yusuf replied.

“Or perhaps it’s okay for a man to behave this way,” Kaye continued, undeterred by his visible anguish. “Man is, after all, bound by destiny and genetics to reign over a subservient harem, while the woman must submit and receive him whenever he wanders back into her hut. I am not obliged by passion to defy reason.”

“I did not create the hell in which I found myself submerged,” he declared. “There are times when our feet and hands must do what our hearts detest. A man’s mind can revolt against his heart. In the end we’ve converged here at the cemetery of squandered opportunities and betrayed loyalty, equipped only with the power to resurrect them if we

choose to do so. Otherwise we must trudge onward into an existence devoid of hope and joy.”

“No one wishes more than I to return to what we had, but I am afraid that world exists now only in ruins,” she said, fighting back tears. “I cannot un-know what I already know.”

“We do not have to build a future on anguished memory,” Yusuf pleaded. “We can go forward from here empowered by the wisdom we’ve gained from yesterday’s sorrows. Please come with me, and I promise I’ll love you to my dying breath.”

“Yusuf, it is late, and I have work in the morning,” she said reluctantly. “I wish you a safe journey.”

“I’ll miss you, Kaye, and I’ll never stop loving you,” Yusuf said as he walked toward the door.

Before leaving he pulled her gently to him. For a brief moment her anger drained away as he pressed her body tightly against his chest. He stroked her hair gently as he took in its disarming fragrance. Moved by deeply imprinted reflexes, she stroked his back as she rested her head against his neck. They kissed, hesitantly at first and then passionately. As if startled from a deep sleep, Kaye suddenly regained her composure and pulled herself away from him.

“Goodnight, Yusuf. It is late. Have a safe trip,” she said after she extricated herself from his tremulous embrace.

Yusuf hurried away into the darkness, hoping that the midnight breeze would slow his throbbing heart. His quest for love and redemption had only earned him rebuke and rejection. His wounds would only be healed by death’s insensate slumber.

After she shut the door, Kaye collapsed to the floor under a torrent of heavy emotions. She wept helplessly until she found the strength to get up. When her feet finally obeyed, she staggered to the phone and dialed Tuma. Although it was already after midnight, she needed someone urgently to steady her volatile mind.

“Tuma, I’m sorry to wake you up, but I desperately need you,” Kaye blurted almost incoherently.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” Tuma answered when she detected the urgency in Kaye’s voice.

In no time Tuma was knocking at the door. In her rush she had not changed from her nightdress.

“I came as fast as I could,” she announced when Kaye opened the door. “What is the matter?”

“Thank you for coming. I need to speak to someone before I fall apart.”

After helping her friend to the couch, Tuma rinsed a washcloth with warm water and placed it over Kaye’s forehead. She clasped her hand gently while waiting to listen.

“Yusuf came by this evening. I thought it would be easier than this, but he left me confused and disturbed,” Kaye explained.

“You don’t owe him anything. You don’t have to see him if you don’t want to,” Tuma said.

“I know, but I wanted to. I didn’t realize how much I missed him. He said that he is returning to Kenya tomorrow. I don’t know why I care, but I don’t want him to leave.”

“Are you still in love with him?” Tuma inquired sympathetically.

"I'm not sure, but I know some things he doesn't know about his home . . . about his mother."

"What? How?" asked a confused Tuma.

"I've never told anyone, but the summer we broke up I was in Kenya," Kaye explained. "I had planned a surprise visit to meet his mother. His friend Kent took me to his village."

"Kaye, I can't believe what you are telling me. You met his mother?"

"I wanted to, but she was long gone by the time I got there. I learned that she had gone missing in the middle of the night a few months after Yusuf left. The whole village searched for her but to no avail. They decided not to tell him knowing that the news would ruin his life. I stayed in her abandoned hut while I was there. I slept on her bed and cried myself to sleep, mostly for Yusuf who now has no parents. I picked up a half-full bag of tea leaves she had left behind and brought it back with me. It was all I could salvage."

"Did you tell him about the visit?" Tuma inquired.

"No, I couldn't bring myself to do so. I made him tea with his mother's tea leaves, but I couldn't broach the topic," Kaye declared. "I don't want him to return home to that dreadful reality. How would he cope with such a devastating loss alone?"

"You know all too well how stubborn he gets once his mind is made up," Tuma observed. "I doubt that anyone or anything can change his mind at this point."

"Then what are we to do, Tuma? We cannot simply watch him groping his way toward a bottomless pit and say nothing!"

"In Africa no one is ever alone. Villagers and deities are always at your side," Tuma said. "It is obvious that you care deeply for him."

"I do, but don't tell him that. If I could dispel all my doubts, I'd accompany him home. It was so painful saying goodbye tonight. I want to see him again."

"We could take him to the airport tomorrow," Tuma suggested.

"No, I refused when he asked," Kaye said adamantly. "I want to see him where he cannot see me. I want to see him cleansed from the defiling touch of the other woman."

"I'll see what I can do," Tuma answered reassuringly. "Come with me to my place. It is not good for you to spend the night alone."

Without protest Kaye accompanied Tuma to her car. As they drove away, Tuma hatched a plan that would satisfy Kaye's desires.

The next morning, while Okwu was at work for half a day, Yusuf planned to stay in bed until 10:00 and then pack his belongings. After a decade and a half in America, he was eager to leave. His rendezvous with Kaye had left him without much to look forward to, and he was more than ready to distance himself from his past. He lay on the bed deeply immersed in his thoughts when the doorbell rang.

"For goodness sake! It is only 8:00," he mumbled as he jumped out of bed to answer the door.

"*Bwana*, I'm sorry to surprise you like this," Tuma said, standing at the door with two young boys, "but someone told me you're idle and needed some distraction."

"Look at you all grown up!" Yusuf said cheerfully. "Please come in."

"You know I'd love to, especially after the way you left us. I've a big axe to grind with you," Tuma said with a wink, "but I'm in a bind just now and need you to watch my sons for a couple of hours."

“No problem! So who are you, tough guys?”

“Ali is four, and Musa is two,” Tuma explained. “Down the street there is a new water park that’s a lot of fun.”

“You mean the one with those fancy sprinklers and tipping buckets? We drove by it yesterday,” Yusuf said. “Now I have an excuse to go there. I saw a bunch of dads carrying their little ones on their shoulders as an excuse for a free shower.”

“Can we go there, please?” Ali asked.

“You don’t have to beg me, buddy. Let’s go,” Yusuf answered.

“*Asante sana*. I’ll see you in a couple of hours,” Tuma said as she dashed to her car.

The water park lived up to its reputation. While Ali began frolicking with his age-mates as soon as they arrived, his younger brother held onto Yusuf with an unrelenting grip. Even after intense persuasion the shy boy refused to descend from Yusuf’s shoulders, although he chuckled as Yusuf romped through the sprinklers. When Yusuf walked underneath a series of tipping buckets, the boy nervously rolled himself into a ball as a gush of cold water poured on their heads. Each time the downpour stopped he laughed anxiously, relieved that he had survived but aware that another drenching would follow.

For Yusuf, as the water cascaded down his bare torso, it drowned an ache within his broken soul and restored a sense of wholeness and peace. The chorus of children at play only intensified his longing for his ancestral village. As he playfully cavorted around the sprinklers, he nostalgically recited one of Kajiwe’s solemn chants: “*Oh gentle weaver of dawn’s delicate beams, instill in this breeze the cure to my soul’s unseen ailments; quench my thirst for renewal with showers of refreshing epiphanies; breathe into my heart the abundance of life promised to the shepherd of the sun.*”

He could no longer bear patiently the burden of his separation from his primal essence. For reasons that were as mysterious as they were logical, he was filled with longings for the timeless rhythms of village life.

CHAPTER 29

The journey back to Nairobi was as exciting as it was exhausting for Yusuf. The young nation he had left behind had moved forward, albeit along chaotic and haphazard paths. The city had outgrown its former confines and flung its tentacles into the backyards of unsuspecting villagers. Its sprawling slums attested to the same brazen drama of the struggle for survival as their counterparts in America’s metropolises, except that here hope and deliverance were further distant. But while most inhabitants were subject to destitution, a brood of recently made millionaires had emerged. The gulf between the haves and the have-nots was everywhere evident. Hordes of starved urchins descended on ubiquitous heaps of waste to scavenge for food, while the immaculately attired *nouveau riche* indulged freely in conspicuous consumption and gluttony.

“My,” Kent teased Yusuf when he picked him from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, “I expected that you would have fattened up a little in America!”

“My friend, you forget that I didn’t go there just to eat,” Yusuf replied.

“Every Kenyan I know has doubled in size after living in the U.S. for five years,” Kent stated.

“I just don’t think it’s very polite when your ass drags behind you as you walk,” Yusuf quipped. “Man, I am amazed. There were perhaps a dozen cars here when I left, and now there is barely any space to drive one.”

“I hope you don’t mind my dirty car. It was raining this morning,” Kent said apologetically.

“Next time you should hold off the rain when important people are coming into town. I still can’t believe this is the same city I left. It’s teeming with people.”

“Now that I am a senior government economist, urban overcrowding is right up my alley,” Kent remarked. “The root of the problem is rural-to-urban migration. Everyone from the countryside wants to try his luck here, but most are sorely disappointed.”

“I’m sure that life in the shanty towns is miserable. Why don’t they pick up and return home when they realize how desperate things here are?”

“That is the question my colleagues and I have been asking for years,” Kent continued. “Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that most of them have left nothing but abject poverty behind. I mean, no land for farming, no new frontiers to explore. For such people there is no looking back.”

“I’ll bet it is even harder to accept that grim reality when they see others not so different from themselves driving big cars and splurging on every kind of extravagance,” Yusuf observed.

“You’re right. While I do not commend Tanzania’s outdated socialism, unchecked capitalism as it exists here grows vicious claws that disembowel its victims to feed the victors.”

“It must be an exciting opportunity for you to be at the forefront in the battle to fix a broken nation,” Yusuf responded.

“It used to be when I first joined the public sector from academia,” Kent confided. “I was brimming with theories and strategies. I reveled at the prospect of leaving an indelible mark in our national history, but I quickly learned that there were no partners or foot soldiers eager to support the changes I was proposing. There were only pigs and dogs, and they expressed their displeasure in no uncertain terms when anyone threatened their feasting.”

“But where do you go—I mean, ideologically and morally—when you give up in such a fight?”

“You don’t go anywhere. You stay and savor your small victories as long as you are allowed to hang your coat in your office. To do otherwise is to court the same fate which has recently dragged Dr. Bob Ouko into the arms of cold-blooded murderers,” Kent declared.

“It appears this has become a world where one has to part with conscience in order to succeed,” Yusuf replied.

“Maybe you’ll succeed where we have failed,” Kent replied. “I informed some senior people in the Ministry of Health about your homecoming, and they were very excited. His Excellency is interested in having you all to himself!”

“What do you mean?”

“You see, the problem in Africa arises from an acute shortage of local expertise. I mean, the President is not expected to stand in a queue for penicillin alongside thugs and prostitutes from the Kibera slums when he catches a cold. He needs his own doctor, and a qualified one at that. The idea of flying to Israel or to Germany every time he needs a checkup is potentially hazardous. After all, a German doctor is not exactly beholden to His Excellency’s or our national interests. That is where you come in.”

“You mean I am up for grabs too? He doesn’t know a thing about me. For all he knows I could be a quack! Simply because one has received training in America does not make him proficient in what he does. I find it baffling that he’d be willing to put his life in the hands of a total stranger,” Yusuf asserted.

“Don’t worry. You have been thoroughly vetted! You forget that he has the machinery of the state at his disposal. The more he learned about your credentials, the more he wanted you at his side. It is a great honor, for in the end the President’s doctor is much more than just a clinician. The life of the state is often in his hands.”

“What your *Excellency* needs is an internist with special training in geriatric medicine,” Yusuf said dismissively. “I am a surgeon with a special interest in the Mijikenda people.”

“You would be a fool to refuse this offer, and I mean a fool in every sense of the word,” Kent said. “I realize you are stubborn, but that is different from being stupid!”

“Let me ask you a question in your capacity as a senior government economist,” Yusuf continued. “What is the ratio of doctors to patients in Kenya?”

“That would be a great question for a clerk in the Ministry of Health,” Kent replied, “but what is your point? Even in the Western hemisphere heads of states have personal physicians. It is simply a matter of national security.”

“I’ve always tried to derive personal meaning from my struggles. I have come to my current position after wading through floods of sorrows and setbacks. It would be a grave insult to my Maker who delivered me if I should now dedicate my knowledge and expertise to the preservation of some self-absorbed hypochondriac while allowing scores of truly needy and deserving Kenyans to perish unattended. That to me would be the ultimate miscarriage of social justice.”

“It seems that America has inflated you with too much hot air,” Kent said. “After immersion in African reality, it won’t take long for you to cool off. My friend, consider what you can do that would make a noticeable difference here. In today’s world the odds are heavily stacked against utopian idealism.”

“Just don’t hold your breath, brother. Anyway let’s focus on something more interesting. What have you heard about my mother? My letters have gone unanswered over the years, including the ones I sent to you. It’s as though she fell off the face of the earth the moment I left. I am anxious to see her.”

“Yusuf, I couldn’t bear to tell you the truth. She disappeared from the village shortly after your departure. There was no evidence of struggle or foul play. She just picked up and left. I personally searched for her for a very long time and only stopped when I ran out of places to look.”

“I knew that I shouldn’t have left,” said a suddenly stricken and remorseful Yusuf.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Kent responded. “I lived with your mother just before she disappeared. I can vouch for the fact that she was truly happy, even triumphant. She

rehearsed to me moving stories about the fears she abandoned once you left for overseas study. She had not expected to see you grow up because folklore had convinced her that the mystics would abduct you before you reached maturity. When that didn't happen, she was beside herself with joy, and most of all she was immensely gratified that you had an opportunity to pursue your academic dreams. I don't believe for a second that she left to escape sorrow or despair. Love was in her breath. . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous!" interrupted Yusuf angrily.

"You don't have to believe me. Ask anyone when you return to the village," Kent said calmly.

For the next few days Yusuf was a guest in Kent's plush bungalow located in one of Nairobi's leafy neighborhoods. Driven by a compulsion to flaunt his social standing and affluence, Kent spared no expense in entertaining his childhood friend. On his first night there Yusuf found himself the guest of honor at a surprise party attended by high-ranking government officials and several foreign dignitaries, all of whom were Kent's neighbors. While the food was sumptuous, Yusuf found the pretentious company of the *haute bourgeoisie* irritating if not insufferable. Their inability to engage with the naked reality of the place they called home compelled them to speak endlessly of the lavish vacations they took to distant attractions and resorts around the globe.

"I know what you are thinking," Kent whispered during a private moment before the party ended, "and I'll admit that I also don't care for some of these attitudes. But these are the movers and shakers of this nation, and you need them to get ahead."

"No wonder we have been moved and shaken so far off course! We can do better," Yusuf replied. "How did some of these morons rise so high?"

"It's all about whom you know. Social networking," Kent explained. "It would take a man several lifetimes to ascend that high if he depended entirely on his *curriculum vitae*. How do you think I made it here?"

"Good question. How did you get here?"

"Like Isaac Newton, I too stand on the shoulders of giants," Kent replied.

"Newton would be surprised by the company he keeps nowadays!" Yusuf stated sarcastically.

"Kiss my ass!" Kent retorted as he headed back to the sitting room to rejoin his guests.

The highlight of Yusuf's time in Nairobi came on the day before he returned to his ancestral village. In the company of a conservationist and experienced game wardens from Kenya Wildlife Services, Kent took Yusuf on a daylong trip to the expansive reserve in Nairobi National Park. The sight of majestic lions surrounded by endless herds of wildebeests, buffaloes, and zebras stirred in him a profound longing for the ancient *Kaya* forest. Upon this stage resilient actors in a timeless drama had endured as reminders of a pristine past. Although located just a stone's throw away from Nairobi's sprawling slums, the park was far removed from their squalor. In this serene paradise it was evident that Africa's heritage had not succumbed wholly to the greed of her new custodians. By the end of the day Yusuf felt refreshed, even hopeful.

That evening Kent informed Yusuf that the President would like to meet with him in the morning.

"You mean you did not persuade him to change his mind?" Yusuf replied.

“Well, I figured it would be best if he heard it from the horse’s mouth. And, as I said the other day, I know you aren’t a total fool,” Kent answered. “Whatever you do, though, remember that you owe the old man some respect.”

The night before his meeting with the President, Yusuf stayed up late trying to organize his thoughts. He anticipated that the occasion would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and he wanted to derive all he could from the aging head of state. Sleep was hard to come by that night, and when it did come it was in fleeting snatches. By morning he was groggy and worn out to the bone. He again rehearsed his answers to the questions he anticipated the President would ask. No doubt it would be a high-stakes meeting. He would not insult or demean the larger-than-life statesman, but he needed to be firm and resolute.

He was still reeling under the weight of these thoughts when a pretty, soft-spoken secretary invited him into the President’s office. For more than a decade the old man had remained at the nation’s helm, and even now, amid the restless tides of change, he appeared self-assured and in control. Unsurprisingly, the issue of political change and the ongoing unrest occupied a generous portion of their lengthy conversation.

“It takes great trust for a President to put his life in anyone’s hands,” the President said to Yusuf, “but I have little to fear from you people from the Coast Province. On the other hand, I would only trust a Kikuyu doctor, however brilliant he might be, when my grave was already dug and ready for occupation.”

They both laughed at the President’s joke at the expense of the country’s largest tribe. The Kikuyu had an extensive history of opportunism and unbridled ambition, not to mention they were at the forefront of the current political turmoil. However, after spending nearly two decades analyzing the conditions of oppression, Yusuf had little of the awe that characterized the average man’s interaction with power.

“Perhaps because of deep longings,” Yusuf confided, “I had a romanticized image of Africa while living overseas. Needless to say, the Africa I dreamt of appears to be only a figment of my imagination. That Africa was a graceful mother beckoning her offspring to return to her bosom.”

“It takes a keen mind to comprehend Africa’s complex realities,” the President stated. “The tragedy of the European colonization of Africa is that nearly all Africans believe that the white man has a supernatural arsenal of wisdom and expertise at his disposal. They jump when he says jump, and they regurgitate his worn-out slogans from dawn to dusk without stopping to think for themselves. What do you see in common between Oginga Odinga, Richard Leakey, and Kenneth Matiba? These are not divinely anointed saviors who have responded to the urgent duty of rescuing a sacred motherland from a diabolical dictator, as they claim. They are simply a gathering of vultures! Write them a check today, and they will be singing a different tune on their way to the bank. Politically speaking, they are just guns for hire. The white man understands this fact and will use it to attain his ends. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: democracy is a luxury we cannot afford. It is a wasteful and inefficient form of government, but the average idiot is too thick-skulled to see beyond the smokescreen.”

“*Mzee*, I must confess that I am politically unschooled. In fact, I never imagined that democracy could be a hazard,” Yusuf replied politely.

“First of all, how do you define democracy?” the President asked with a chuckle. “On a good day democracy is a vague idea that leaves the average citizen believing he

controls that which he cannot even comprehend. In fact, this idea of constitutional democracy is utter nonsense! It is foolish to stake 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' on the dictates of a group of deceased forefathers unless one believes they were equipped with the gift of prophecy. The dictatorship of the departed should be more suspect than the dictatorship of those familiar with present conditions."

"That is certainly a unique perspective. You say that democracy is a mere illusion," Yusuf responded, "but I left America believing their Congress was the guardian of the people's interests."

"In democratic governments nothing truly transformative gets done. Progress comes excruciatingly slowly. In fact, I can't think of anything less efficient and more prone to corruption," the President explained, his voice trembling with deep emotion. "Secondly, there is a fact which eludes average Americans when it comes to their own government. They assume that being allowed to put an X next to some guy's name on a ballot gives them *real* political power. America is actually governed by a pack of unelected lobbyists who are only guided by personal gains and special interests. And while ordinary people are indulged with the periodic pleasure of filling out ballots, the real seat of power remains unchallenged and unthreatened from one election to the next. If we open that floodgate here, this nation will be pushed into total anarchy and ruin."

"We have a Swahili proverb which says that when a child cries for a razor, you should give it to him," Yusuf suggested nonchalantly.

"Contrary to what my opponents want everyone to believe, I am not afraid of competing with them in a general election. I have spent all of my life in the eye of the storm. Look at my competition: on a good day Odinga is a zombie; Leakey is a godless fool; Matiba is a lunatic; and Mwai Kibaki for all practical purposes is a lady in need of a skirt. It wouldn't take me a day to crack their nuts!" the President bragged with a hearty laugh.

"Why then delay their moment of shame?" Yusuf asked. "I mean, with a good beating at the polls the demonstrations would end, and the nation would return to tranquility."

"You really think it is that simple?" the President asked. "Do you think that the hooligans who have been running around town throwing stones at the police and shouting until their mouths foam will dispose of their weapons the day after the elections and return to gainful employment? *Daktari*, theirs is a disease as serious as the one that obliges you to open a man's chest!"

"So where do we go from here?" Yusuf asked.

"Well, when everything around you is in turmoil, the best recourse is to stay the course. Those who survive political battles enter into them armed with both patience and a sharp eye for opportunities. And after the storm recedes, I'll round up the naughty boys for a good spanking! You see, while one may be pardoned for shaking hands with the Devil, it is an entirely different matter when one jumps into bed with him."

"Ours is a relatively small country. I can only imagine how much more difficult it is to govern a huge nation like the United States," Yusuf replied.

"The American president is nothing more than a figurehead," the President declared contemptuously. "On his first day in office he is handed a checklist of do's and don'ts that must govern his conduct while in office. In addition, he is assigned a pack of handlers who keep him from trespassing should he be tempted to do so. As if all this were

not enough, he is constantly besieged by a hostile Congress eager to strike down any of his initiatives.”

“I take it that things are much different here in Africa,” Yusuf replied.

“When it comes to politics, Africa is a bold venture,” the President stated proudly. “The absence of so-called ‘checks and balances’ calls for great judgment and personal restraint from a President. You become the pulse of the nation: when you fall ill, the nation falls ill; when you prosper, the nation prospers. You become the nation, and nation becomes you. This is not a job for the faint-hearted . . . or a fool for that matter.”

“Sir, your job is a difficult one, and I wish you well.”

“Lately I’ve been hounded by a very pessimistic thought,” the President continued. “Have you noticed the universally dreadful state of black people? From Africa to South America, and even in the ghettos of developed nations, black people live in perpetual crises. Endless bloodshed, grinding poverty, and all sorts of other afflictions plague our people everywhere. I haven’t found a satisfactory answer as to why this is so. I’m beginning to wonder whether one exists.”

“I agree that is precisely the question of our time,” Yusuf replied. “We cannot escape the painful truth, nor can we continue to entertain the belief that our troubles are always imported from somewhere else.”

“Please, let us move on to something more cheerful,” the President declared. “I summoned you here to ask you to become my personal doctor. Everything is in place: your accommodations, your salary, government vehicles and a chauffeur—you name it, you have it.”

“You are very generous. I’ll definitely give it very careful consideration,” Yusuf stated courteously.

“I have heard great things about you. My people have checked your track record, and they tell me you are top-notch. I guess I’ve developed a taste for the finer things in life,” the President said with a chuckle.

“I am honored by your opinion of me. What you are proposing would probably give us the opportunity to explore some of my interests in public health.”

“I would be very interested to hear your recommendations,” replied the President. “I’ve nearly run out of patience because, as you may have read, nothing seems to work in our health sector. The whole system is in shambles. The doctors steal from public hospitals in order to stock their private clinics; the nurses are usually lazy and rude to the ailing. And to make matters worse, the Minister of Health is a womanizer, which doesn’t help our campaign against the HIV epidemic.”

“That must be a big problem indeed,” Yusuf agreed. “The virus has turned into Africa’s bubonic plague.”

“I sometimes suspect that this thing was created abroad for the specific purpose of exterminating us. Think about it: when only a few of us are left, there won’t be any deterrent to a second wave of colonizers. Africa can be re-partitioned without a protest.”

“I am sure if we all work together, we can defeat any enemy,” Yusuf said.

“I admire your tenacity,” the President declared. “You remind me of my youth. When I came to this office, I was full of big ideas and plans. I dreamt of a prosperous nation and worked hard to make things happen. But the attempted *coup* changed everything. And why not? Are you going to stay awake at night worried that your future murderer is going to bed hungry? To each his own. Isn’t that what the white man says?”

“Self-preservation is the most powerful human instinct,” replied Yusuf diplomatically.

“When I consider how many guns were pointed at me on that fateful day, I know I am here only because of the grace of the Almighty. I won’t lie to you: there were times I went to bed hoping I’d not see the dawn. To die peacefully in my sleep would have been vastly preferable to meeting my death at the hands of deranged lunatics. But here I am more than a decade later! I have outlived most of my enemies and outwitted the rest,” the President stated in a self-congratulatory tone.

“In the end life is a melodrama: good always prevails over evil,” Yusuf replied, anxious for the meeting to end so that he could get on with his life.

“How very true! You should start working today. I can’t recall the last time I had such a candid discussion with anyone.”

“It would be a great privilege, except that I arrived only a few days ago and haven’t yet visited my village,” Yusuf explained.

“Are your parents still living?” the President inquired.

“That is partly the reason I am eager to return home. I haven’t heard from them in a long while,” Yusuf answered.

“You should definitely hurry home then. I would have arranged for you to use the presidential helicopter, but I’ll be using it to travel upcountry this afternoon.”

“Once again thank you for your hospitality. I’ll definitely be in touch with your office as soon as I reach a decision on your kind offer,” Yusuf said.

“Don’t waste too much time thinking about it,” the President warned. “There are countless others haggling for a chance to take the job. I would hate to see you miss out on such a rewarding opportunity.”

After a warm farewell from Kent and his friends, Yusuf hurried out of the city in the early afternoon hours. His rented four-wheel Land Rover was the perfect machine for the long and treacherous expedition to the coast. A beautiful four-lane highway led him out of the city’s center past a gigantic stadium named after the President and toward the international airport. Shortly after he passed the airport, the road quickly deteriorated. Deep gullies crisscrossed it at regular intervals, forcing vehicles to swerve and brake unpredictably. On a few occasions Yusuf was forced to come to a screeching halt to avoid running over Maasai herdsman and their flocks. Their stern glares indicated how they felt about his noisy intrusion into their world.

“*Kwenda kabisa!*” one herdsman yelled as Yusuf sped away.

It was early the next morning when he finally made it to the coast. He drove into the port city of Mombasa and, after refueling, continued his southward journey, eager to revisit his homeland after years of absence. He followed the line of palm trees and intently searched the faces of pedestrians for anyone he might recognize. Eventually, after negotiating seasonally muddy lanes, Yusuf arrived at his ancestral village. The old mud huts stood largely unchanged under the weighty load of their grass-thatched roofs. Villagers trekked the same dirt paths he had walked as a boy. He saw caravans of women and girls returning from streams in the valley with their water pots delicately balanced on their heads.

He parked his truck by the roadside, hoping to revive his senses and ease himself back into a tribal consciousness. After several minutes his solitude was broken by a stray

goat that ambled to his side and started licking his hand. The goat's elderly owner, one of the village elders, soon joined them and, in spite of his waning vision, recognized the visitor immediately. In no time the whole village was engaged in celebration and feasting. Their illustrious son had returned home at last!

On his first night in the village, sleep eluded Yusuf. Villagers who had refused to abandon hope by maintaining his mother's deserted hut felt vindicated by her son's return to inhabit it. After spending many hours in their company, however, he was left alone that night to piece together the mystery of her disappearance. Late into the night he sat by the fireplace on an ancient three-legged stool, his eyes peering into the fire like a diviner reading from a fiery scroll. Had his mother forsaken the only world she knew in pursuit of love? he wondered. Although this was the story everyone told, it did not fit his impression of Amina's temperament.

Long after the roars of thunderous laughter and the piercing cries of children had been replaced by the croaking of frogs, he stepped outside the hut to gaze at the valley below. It was as though time had stood still. The night's breeze bore upon its wings the same purity and freshness he had experienced in his boyhood. After years of wandering afar, he had returned to his Eden.

As an irrepressible thought invaded his mind, he dashed back into the hut to collect his pen and notepad. With a flashlight in hand, he returned outside and found a place behind the hut to sit on the grass under the full moon. He was nostalgic but composed as he began writing a letter.

Dearest Kaye,

Ever since we parted I've carried the agony of your rejection with the despair that accompanies the diagnosis of a terminal illness. I miss you terribly, much more than words can convey. I wish that there were an antidote to the blindness of my ambition. I wish I could heal the wounds that I inflicted upon your tender heart. I've learned through painful experience that no accomplishment can surpass the reward of a serene conscience. I am a soul in crisis because I placed myself beyond love's redeeming touch.

Your love is all that I strive for now. I crave your soft touch, your laughter, your presence. I long for your company here where the midnight moon glows so purely and freely. I plead for your whisper here where the evening breeze rekindles the flames of weary hearts.

As I write this letter, I am sitting outside my mother's hut listening to the sleepless ocean as it dances to the choruses of croaking frogs and chirping crickets. Dearest Kaye, are we forever doomed to count our fortunes in the tombs of memory? I love you, and I know that you love me too. Upon this inescapable truth I rest my hope of our reunion. Please write back soon.

Forever yours, Yusuf

CHAPTER 30

Life in a rural African village beckons the visitor with a disarming openness while lulling him by its monotony. It is a static world where heavy feet march to the familiar tune of a timeless rhythm with little if any variation. Yusuf's return to this sphere was both a choice and a compulsion.

As soon as he broke his ties with the city, he attended to the task of reconstructing the life he had left behind in his coastal village. Not only did he wish to rediscover his place among his clansmen, but he also wanted to construct a health center where he could educate and treat their ailments.

The design of the clinic proved a daunting task. Yusuf's extensive training in medicine had taken place in technologically advanced institutions filled with abundant resources. He soon learned that technology in the impoverished village had come to a halt shortly after the Stone Age. If he hoped for success, it would only come through meticulously coordinated cooperation. Every villager had to be mobilized.

Chief Desturi, the village leader, was a thoughtful and generous-hearted man. Although Yusuf's plans were light years beyond his ken, he sat calmly through Yusuf's lengthy explanations.

"The wisdom of the elders instructs us to guide our clan away from disease and avoidable misery," Chief Desturi declared at the end of Yusuf's appeal, "but we have mystical healers, and indeed some of the most renowned. If we are to undertake what you have suggested, it would be an affront to these men who have served us benevolently since time immemorial."

"I do not seek to reduce the greatness of our healers," responded Yusuf. "They will always have a place in our society. I am afraid, though, that times have changed, bringing new ailments that demand a more direct and confrontational form of healing. These ailments are like enemy warriors that cannot be appeased with reason or gifts but must be fought with swords and spears."

"My son, in that case I think the solution is easily attainable," replied Chief Desturi. "I will dispatch a messenger to our healers right away to inform them of the need to be a little harsher during the healing rituals. I am sure they'll excuse my presumptuousness."

"*Mzee* Desturi, I am afraid that will not do," Yusuf stated politely. "The situation calls for a physical confrontation with disease. Even pious warriors must at times depart from holy shrines to wield their weapons far from home."

"I am curious to see the weapons you plan to use to wage these battles with disease," Chief Desturi stated. "How do you wound or kill an enemy you cannot see?"

"I've spent two decades learning the skills needed to wage this unique kind of battle," replied Yusuf. "I have the weapons for this warfare; what I lack is an arena in which to conduct it."

"If only to satisfy my curiosity, this arena must be built right away," Chief Desturi declared, rising to his feet. "I'll gather the people. You tell them what they need to do."

It did not take much persuasion to get curious villagers committed to the building of the health center. In no time donkeys were hauling logs and rocks from remote corners of the coastal jungle to the site of the future health center. The building's unique construction required Yusuf to spend his evenings studying an old architecture manual he had purchased from a distant bookstore. He met each dawn equipped with new designs and drawings, and week after week the villagers worked tirelessly to erect a structure that

reflected his dreams. Several months later they stood upon the hill overlooking their village marveling at the magnificent facility they had built with their bare hands.

Afya Health Center, as the building was named, was a moderately sized clinic with a large triage unit, two wards, and two surgical theaters. The triage unit occupied a large hall that Yusuf hoped to also use as a learning center. Patients would be separated by gender into the two wards. In the beginning only minor surgical procedures were performed due to lack of vital equipment and trained assistants. Although his friends overseas were planning to ship over old but still functional equipment and supplies, there was no easy solution to the shortage of qualified staffing.

After weeks of brainstorming for a solution, Yusuf turned to the most unlikely source for help. He had hoped for a clean break with the city, but necessity forced him back. He thus made his way to Mombasa General Hospital, where he hoped to convince the medical director that it was in his trainees' best interest to be exposed to rural medicine. After an initial exchange of pleasantries, the discussion rapidly turned into a confrontation.

"What is a doctor of your caliber doing in the bush?" Dr. Khan inquired.

"One is never too big to return home," Yusuf answered with a smile.

"You can't fool me. I know your kind very well," Dr. Khan continued. "Believe me, you are not the first. Your type is driven by messianic delusions in which you anoint yourself as saviors of the forgotten. When you finally burn out, nothing will have changed, and you'll have accomplished nothing."

"You don't even try to understand my point of view," Yusuf said.

"Why should I? Better to tell the truth and gain an enemy than to tell a lie and gain a friend, don't you agree?" Dr. Khan asked rhetorically. "Look, the problem is larger than any of us, than all of us. I am not blind to the healthcare disparities that exist in this country. I love the poor as much as the next guy, but I am not prepared to drop everything to run into the bush to persuade the Maasai that the time has come to abandon a primitive lifestyle. People and the institutions around them evolve at different strides. Left alone they will catch up in due time."

"So in the meantime you suggest that we stand back and do nothing?" Yusuf asked.

"We are not doing *nothing*. We are making the best of a bad situation," Dr. Khan stated firmly. "Do you think this hospital caters only to privileged urbanites? Logistics dictate that it is easier for the sick to come to us than for us to go to them. However well intentioned, your little clinic may help one village, but that leaves thousands more without help."

"Our inability to bring about sweeping changes should not force us into inactivity or cynicism," Yusuf replied. "Progress has many enemies, and foremost among them is rigid conformity."

"Dr. Ibrahim, we have a hospital with modern equipment and the highly trained staff you need to excel in your profession. With only one cardiothoracic surgeon available to work four days a week, we have an acute need for your skills here. You could make a profound difference in many people's lives. What do you say?"

"Thank you for your generous offer, but it's not for me at this time," Yusuf answered.

“I am sorry we could not agree. I can’t in good faith commit any of my trainees to your misguided experiment. I really doubt you’ll find anyone willing to come down to some pathetic outpost in the name of redressing healthcare disparities,” Dr. Khan stated as he brought the meeting to a hasty end.

“I appreciate your honesty. I’ll look elsewhere,” Yusuf said with a forced smile.

“Feel free to come back when you are ready to return to work. We’d love to have you on board,” Dr. Khan said as they parted.

Yusuf was met by the same skepticism wherever he went to beg for trained staff. By the time he finally jumped into his truck to return to the village, he had made up his mind that he would never set foot in the city again. He was determined to create the solution he sought, just as he had built the clinic without external help. In spite of their lack of academic achievements, the villagers were intelligent and teachable people. He would draw upon that communal intellect and mold it into a formidable force. Most importantly, he was determined to send Dr. Khan’s unabashed arrogance to a timely grave.

While Yusuf was actively laying down the foundation of his future practice, Kent Musa had been impatiently trying to get in touch with him. Repeated inquiries from the Office of the President about Yusuf’s whereabouts increased the urgency to find him. When Kent’s calls to Mombasa went unanswered, he feared that something terrible had befallen Yusuf during his return trip to the coast. He sent out a member of his staff to investigate, but after five days of unbearable silence Kent could no longer bear the uncertainty. He jumped into his Range Rover and headed to the coast. When he arrived in the village on a rainy night, he found Yusuf sitting on a stool by the fireplace in his mother’s hut.

“This place holds so many precious memories,” Kent said as he warmed himself by the fire.

“If only these walls could speak!” Yusuf agreed.

“Her presence is still palpable after all these years,” commented Kent.

“I miss her sorely. She is the bedrock of my life,” Yusuf replied.

“When Kaye comes, you should build your upcountry home on this site,” Kent suggested. “It’d provide you with a peaceful escape from the hustle and bustle of the city.”

“I guess I never mentioned that Kaye and I split up years ago. Whatever the case, I don’t intend to return to the city.”

“But do you have a choice? What about your profession? You are a surgeon, and an American-trained heart surgeon at that. You don’t understand how much clout you possess in Nairobi!” announced an impassioned Kent.

“It seems that you believe there are no diseases in the upcountry,” Yusuf replied, “but neglect is not a form of therapy.”

“And what message would you be sending to the President by refusing a coveted appointment as his personal physician in exchange for *this*?”

“I am sure there will be many eager to take the job,” Yusuf stated calmly.

“Look, you are not the first to discover the ‘exploited masses’ or their plight in the face of the ‘gluttony and wastefulness’ of the so-called bourgeoisie. Most of those you now resent have walked that same road, but we all woke up from the utopian dream.”

“The older I get,” replied Yusuf, “the more evident it becomes that two people can share words but not the same language.”

Kent now gave way to anger: “There’s no need to beat around the bush. You can’t tell me that you are unaware of your monumental failures. I know a few people who were in America for half the time you were there, and now they own mansions in the Lavington and Muthaiga suburbs—and, unlike you, they are men of substance! After nearly two decades in America not only have you returned empty-handed but you also insist on sitting here sniffing your bottom while contributing nothing to society. What’s more, my friends did not just return from the West with wealth; they also became Americans and have passports to prove it. Brother, wake up and smell the coffee! You are a squatter in the land of your birth—not to say anything about your losing a jewel of a wife in Kaye.”

“Alternatively I could be like you,” Yusuf rejoined, “so focused on the pursuit of wealth and status that it doesn’t matter what must be sacrificed to attain them. To every opportunity or crisis you and your cronies bring the one thing that has never failed you: an insatiable greed. And what does the nation get in return for its tolerance of your excesses? It gets nothing more than heaps of waste and ideological flatulence. Give me a break! I have no use for your sympathies or kickbacks.”

“Why can’t you see the obvious?” Kent declared in a patronizing tone. “You are flirting with failure and heartbreak. First you abandon untold fortune in America for the pursuit of a fantasy in a hopeless village, and when fate shows you a bit of mercy by offering a rescuing hand you reach over and bite it.”

“In that case fate should consider itself lucky that I did not chop off its hand,” Yusuf said mockingly.

“Your disease is more pernicious than I imagined,” Kent said after a long pause. “Your mother took me in when I returned from France and had no one else to turn to. For her sake I’ll persist with you until you come to your senses. William Shakespeare tells us ‘there is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of life is bound in shallows and in miseries.’ This is probably your last shot at success. Don’t relinquish it lightly!”

“Whatever you do, don’t hold your breath,” Yusuf said with indifference. “Now can we enjoy some roasted maize, or must we prolong this vapid conversation?”

“Hell, we might as well enjoy the maize,” Kent said, reaching for a large cob.

The two friends, despite their other differences, were soon immersed in discussions about a shared past. While making a conscious effort to avoid rubbing open wounds from their recent scuffle, they accompanied each other along familiar tracks of memory for the remainder of the night. When sleep finally caught up with them, they made their bed beside the fireplace and slept soundly until they were awakened at daybreak by the crowing of village cockerels. Before Kent departed for the city, the two made a visit back to Shimo la Tewa High School, where they walked with heavy emotions on memory lane.

“We must stay in touch,” Kent declared before jumping into his Range Rover and speeding off.

Yusuf chose to linger a little longer at Shimo la Tewa High. He walked beyond the soccer field to the former living quarters of Sister O’Neal. As he came face to face with relics from his past, his whole body seemed to drift to events entombed in departed

moments. He felt a boy's restless heart beating restlessly in his chest as the roots of nascent desire broke through from a delicate core. Rose's pleas for deliverance from the noose of fate now resonated with threatening force. He felt the pitiful reach of a stranger's words roaring like thunder while declaring the unceremonious end of love's fleeting season. With a heavy heart, he stumbled to a nearby bench and paused to reflect on the winding path of his life. He had faced and, perhaps in spite of himself, survived a string of grievous challenges, but now before him stood his most important trial. This, he conjured, would be the most critical phase of his life; he had no choice but to go forth and conquer.

It took monumental patience and dedication to transform simple shepherds and fishermen into clinicians. Even the task of training perennial gossipers to stay on task while obtaining a patient's medical history instead of wandering off on endless trails of village gossip was overwhelming. After months of unstinting repetition and immense frustration, however, the dream became a reality. Nine months into the project, unlicensed but capable hands were serving the needs of hundreds of patients at the Afya Health Center.

The day when the operating room opened was an important milestone and a highlight for Yusuf. Three surgeries, although minor in nature, were successfully performed with the assistance of two gifted midwives. His overseas friends had kept their word, and the clinic was receiving monthly parcels of crucial supplies. Through the generosity of an unnamed benefactor in Nairobi, they had even managed to acquire two generators that eliminated the nightly fire hazard arising from the use of kerosene lamps. Laundry and cooking at the hospital were done mostly by family members of the hospitalized patients. As he watched these developments unfold, Yusuf could barely contain his excitement. He wrote to his mentor in the U.S. regularly with updates on the clinic's progress.

Dear Dr. Leventhal,

I am immensely grateful to you for arranging delivery of the cardiopulmonary bypass machine. I remembered it because I saw the dent you put on it that night when we were struggling with the lady who failed to separate from the bypass after nine hours of hard labor.

I have done more surgical cases in the past ten months than I ever did as a resident physician. We now have two operating rooms, the larger of which I have reserved for future cardiac surgeries. Recently I've been spending a few hours each week fixing it up for the debut.

I have three cases lined up. The first is a middle-aged woman with severe aortic stenosis from rheumatic fever. She is otherwise healthy, and her prognosis is good in spite of her surgeon. The second case is a man with unstable angina for coronary artery bypass. This patient, I'm afraid, will likely die—with or without my intervention—and soon. The third surgery is one I am reluctant to perform and will undertake only when I am satisfied that the OR and our team is in perfect running order. The patient is a six-year-old with a debilitating coarctation of the aorta. I am hoping to get to her before she reaches the point of no return.

*I have much more to report, but time and frankly fatigue prevent a longer letter. I'll forever be indebted to you, Chuck, for being a true and resourceful friend. I'll stay in touch.
All best, Yusuf*

The next few months passed quickly. Yusuf's surgical team received very timely help in the person of Ms. Florence, a former ICU nurse who had returned to Africa after more than a decade of training and working in the United Kingdom. She became the crucial player Yusuf needed to attempt complex and demanding heart surgery. The first open-heart operation at Afya Health Clinic brought a new height of trepidation and exhilaration. Assisted by Ms. Florence as the anesthesia provider, an adventurous wildlife veterinarian as his surgical assistant, and a boat mechanic as operator of the heart-lung machine, Yusuf led his battalion into the restive den of a beating heart. Like a mystical healer in a trance, he traced his way along a familiar but unmarked path. The talkative patient now silenced by heavy sedatives did not perceive the rush of warm blood coursing into his steady fingers to animate ritualistic motions. Like a conductor in an orchestra, he led his team in flawless harmony using simple but deeply imprinted cues.

"Sternotomy saw, please," he requested as they approached the point of no return.

"The saw is ready," announced the assistant.

"Ms. Florence, lungs down, and ensure total deflation, please," Yusuf declared as he engaged the saw on the patient's sternum.

After the patient was properly cooled and the heart emptied, the boat mechanic administered a shot of cardioplegia, halting the heart's beating. Now it was a race against the clock. Yusuf had learned, sometimes through tragic experiences, that patient outcomes were related to the length of time they spent in this pulseless state. The patient's diseased valve was removed and replaced with a pig's valve. After examining all the sutures to ensure a perfect seal, Yusuf initiated the process of calling back the patient from the border of death.

"Start warming the patient, please," he directed, followed by a rapid string of commands as body functions resumed: "She is fibrillating. Charge the paddles. I need to shock the heart. What is her core temperature? Keep her in the Trendelenburg position. Give a bolus of magnesium and lidocaine. Good, we are back in sinus rhythm, but she is too slow. Ms. Florence, hook up the external pacing box and put her in overdrive—88 beats per minute. A-V synchrony is preferred. She is looking good. Keep coming down on your flows. Perfect. Let's separate from the heart-lung machine. Great! Her heart is competing with the external pacer. Stop pacing. I like everything I see! We did it."

Although the operation was nerve-racking for all the participants, the surgical team had remained calm and composed. The procedure had been a risky gamble, but in the end it paid off handsomely. It also opened the doorway to new adventures, as captured in the frequent correspondence between Yusuf and Dr. Leventhal:

Yusuf: We repaired the lady's valve successfully! I could barely contain myself. I think that I made my assistants nervous when they saw how thrilled I was (they might have wondered whether it was my first time doing the procedure). That night we all went out to celebrate. We had installed a pig valve, although I left out that piece of information while I was explaining the procedure to the patient, who is a devout Muslim.

Chuck: *Next time I find myself working with a clueless fellow, I'll throw him out and ask the janitor to take his place. It sounds as though your unschooled assistants are brighter than some of our doctor trainees. I'm actually not surprised. Lately I've been reading the autobiography of a guy named Vivien Thomas, which revealed that the hand behind Dr. Blalock's breakthrough in pediatric heart surgery was a brilliant but "uneducated" black technician. I am very proud of you, Yusuf. You are doing an essential task in a place where only a man like you can do justice. It gives me great hope in my position as a teaching physician. How has jungle medicine changed your practice philosophy?*

Yusuf: *Amazingly, the old man with unstable angina lived after his four-vessel coronary bypass surgery and has become a great advocate for my work. He has traveled extensively and told people about the "greatest healer among the Mijikenda." Thanks to him, we now have more patients than we can possibly care for. He has also unwittingly inflamed the deadly hostility that the mystical healers harbor against me. It is rumored that there is a conspiracy to exact revenge for their stolen craft. I almost feel obligated to refer some of my patients to them, especially the malingerers and the ones with factitious disorders.*

Chuck: *What qualifications do the "mystical healers" have? Do they at least have Basic Life Support (BLS) certification?*

Yusuf: *BLS? Are you kidding? The one thing they have going for them is the fact that they are excellent circumcisiologists (is that even a word?). On another topic I last month came across the most astonishing discovery of my career. A retired security agent came to my clinic seeking a remedy for the demons that haunts him from his ruthless past. I normally refer these cases to the watchman at the game, but for whatever reason I indulged the man. He confessed to murdering, by hanging, a one-handed political dissident three decades earlier. He didn't know that his victim was my grandfather. I wept with joy because with his confession he freed my grandfather from the stigma of an inglorious death. For all these years I have falsely believed that grandpa committed suicide. It was the greatest gift a patient has ever given me. However I had to get rid of a poem that has inspired me during my struggles since childhood (which I had falsely believed my grandfather had jotted and left behind). Instead it was part of a set-up to convince us that the old man had killed himself.*

Chuck: *Yusuf, why the long silence? Too much work? Please don't burn out. Take some time off and go to the beach. Have you found a girlfriend yet?*

Yusuf: Sorry for the silence, Chuck. We have been swamped with work. The little girl with aortic coarctation didn't make it. Although we managed to wean her from the bypass machine, she remained unresponsive. Something happened that left her neurologically devastated. Her death hit me like a ton of bricks, but here we don't have the luxury of stopping to reconsider. The lack of crucial drugs and technology makes our work a constant race against time. It is both exasperating and exhilarating.

Chuck: I have shipped the Bible (or should I say the Koran?) of pediatric cardiac surgery. I know that you don't have a lot of resources, so I thought the text would be helpful. Incidentally, I saw your ex with a big feller at the movies last weekend. I guess it is true that once you go black you never come back!

Yusuf: After two years in Africa my mindset has changed so dramatically that I cannot even fathom that empty shell of a life she had envisioned for us. For me the pursuit of the American Dream would have been an expedition to desolation.

Chuck: Aren't you lucky you never had kids? By the way, are you seeing someone? And don't feed me that nonsense about being too busy. Even surgeons need relaxation and distraction.

Yusuf: We are finally getting our overdue share of respect. I have been invited by the most reputable medical college in the country to speak to their students. The problem with our educational system—and with our society in general—is that it rewards conformity while discouraging innovation. It is a tragic reality that people who are preoccupied with perpetuating orthodox practices never quite engage with the system to the point of effecting progress. That is the main point I intend to make when I speak to the student body. My aim is to instigate a paradigm shift that will lead them off the beaten path in their professional pursuits. I hope that my presentation succeeds, but I need to make my appeal soon because I have an ailment that seems to be getting worse.

CHAPTER 31

The large auditorium was packed beyond its maximum capacity. In a place where people scrambled to leave the city before dusk to avoid muggings by its many criminals, the turnout reflected the renown of the guest speaker. It was late in the evening when he rose to the podium. Dr. Yusuf Ibrahim's invitation to address the University of Nairobi Medical College was a highly anticipated event among both the students and the faculty. At the peak of an enviable career, he was well qualified to speak with professional authority. Tall and robust, in spite of a vexing illness, he exuded vigor and optimism.

After a brief pause he began his meditative speech in a soft, engaging tone. “Students and professors, ladies and gentlemen, I am flattered by the honor you have bestowed on this son of fishermen by inviting me to address you. In a place not too far from here, by a hearth that has long since lost its fire, I took my first breath. Ever since then life has required me to fight many battles, but as we all know every struggle has its end. The moment comes when victory escapes the ardent seeker, when death can no longer be kept at bay. I do not know when my time shall come, but when it does I hope to be devoid of these two things: fear and remorse.”

Dr. Ibrahim’s opening remarks evoked a reverent calmness in the auditorium. His captivated audience seemed to enter into a trance as they followed his words into the deeper sanctum of his unsearchable mind.

“We who have been beckoned into the marvellous depth where the human heart is forced to become clean by abandoning all vanity must examine the lens through which we look at life. We who have been called to toil on the fields where life and death merge must not resist the urge to inspect the human condition or to import the profound lessons thereby acquired into public discourse. We must allow our unique insights to inform and shape our private and public initiatives. No longer are we justified for looking over our shoulders hoping that someone else will step in to carry our burdens for us. That attitude only invites defeat and labels us as useless spectators in the struggle for social justice and progress. This is your call to action!”

Here the distinguished speaker paused and scanned the audience with a somber gaze. His eyes were met by a constellation of keenly attentive and transfixed faces.

“The jolt that drove me to a self-reflective existence came from my late grandfather. With more wit than tact, he invited me to be his scribe. I brought my pen while he brought his restless mind. Unwittingly I became the medium in a deadly tussle between vested enemies. I have carried the fire of his vision in my soul like a volcanic mountain bears a raging inferno within its bowels. His words were those of a man whose devotion to equity and morals yielded to no danger or adversity. He paid the ultimate price for his unflinching courage, but I am certain he’d not have it any other way. In light of his valor, I was forced to ascend to the altar of an examined life. There are questions about our humanity which you and I must ask ourselves daily; there are critical truths that must permeate our hearts if we are to achieve self-fulfillment. If we fail in this regard, nothing else matters!” declared the venerated surgeon.

Dr. Ibrahim’s lengthy speech spanned nearly two hours, during which time his trenchant insights were combined with refreshing humor. Within only a few days his words would reverberate in the memories of his admirers with frightful force. Although some of his friends had tried to persuade him to remain in Nairobi until his health improved, he had hurried home after the speaking engagement, informing them that he needed to return to the work he loved and the people who so desperately depended on his dedication. Just before midnight he boarded the coast-bound train. Although he slept most of the way back home, his illness did not take a break. Within days of his return, his ailment had tragically spun out of control.

When he first fell ill, Yusuf and his friends assumed that he had another bout of malaria. They expected a rapid recovery given his overall good health and stubborn resilience, but after three weeks it was evident that his condition was neither typical nor transient. When he became delirious and unable to care for himself, they nursed him the

best they knew how. Ms. Florence, his trusted assistant and a trained nurse, remained at his side day and night. She initiated intravenous fluid therapy, but this treatment proved to be too little too late. From her experience she knew that a lot more would be required to save her critically ill patient. Anxious fishermen took perilous trips to distant towns in order to purchase medications, but in the end nothing seemed to halt Yusuf's rapid decline. They watched helplessly as their friend drifted in and out of consciousness.

Although the relationship between Yusuf and Ms. Florence had always been strictly professional, a bond of friendship had been solidified by long hours of shared exasperation and triumph. Even though she was much younger than he, she felt a sense of personal responsibility for his well-being. They had groaned together under the weight of dreadful challenges; they had even laughed often in the face of maddening frustration, and mostly because he could not bear the sight of tears. Now that Yusuf could not discourage it, she wept freely at his deterioration. When he sometimes awoke from horrid dreams and appeared free from the ominous grip of death, she indulged his passion for debate, but the debater in him had become slow and absent-minded.

When he received letters, Ms. Florence read them to him as a mother recites bedtime stories to a sick child. One letter in particular seemed to free his body from its bondage to misery. He begged her to read it over and over for him.

My Dearest Yusuf,

Many months have passed since I received your letter. I've tried many times to find something meaningful to say to you, but I've failed in that effort. I have never stopped loving you. I miss you terribly, and there is nothing in this world I desire more than to hear your gentle voice. On many occasions I have found myself visiting the places we used to frequent in happier times. I don't know why I do it; I don't expect to see you there. My life has become a sustained ritual of longing. I still live alone in an apartment in Cambridge across the street from our old place. I take long strolls along the Charles River and think of distant rivers where a boy learned to swim in a way that still makes me chuckle. That said, I am afraid of another heartbreak since at my age I no longer have the assurance of surviving disasters of such magnitude. However, I can no longer endure my loneliness and longing. For better or worse, I must live or die at your side. I love you and will see you soon.

Yours faithfully, Kaye

The overpowering emotions aroused by Kaye's letter exhausted the little reserve of strength left in Yusuf. In the ensuing days, he drifted deeper and deeper into his mysterious illness. Rumors of his imminent demise circulated widely among the villagers, but among the grieving were some who spoke of him with contempt. In hushed tones they pointed the finger of blame at his insolence toward the ancestral spirits in his utter disregard of their agenda regarding the Mijikenda. Such persons, though a minority, pressed village elders to exact retribution against the heretic before his infraction created widespread catastrophe.

"This man is dying," declared Chief Desturi as he stepped out of Yusuf's hut. "I have gazed into the eyes of death; I've seen its venomous fangs on the man's soul. His cause is lost, and now we must act swiftly if our clan is to be saved. His daring craft is an

affront to the gods, and they'll only be appeased when he is removed from society. We must deliver him to his just punishment.”

These words fell upon the ears of Yusuf's friends with chilling terror. To those who unquestioningly accepted the tribal ways of the Mijikenda, the chief's words sealed Yusuf's fate. As dictated by time-honored tradition, Yusuf would be carried away and left alone in a designated place deep in the *Kaya* forest. Exposed to the elements and wild animals, he would succumb to death quickly.

“There is no time to waste,” urged Chief Desturi as he walked away from Yusuf's hut. “We must remove him from the village at dusk.”

Shortly after sunset a band of somber clan warriors entered Yusuf's hut and began to wrap him in traditional burial gear in preparation for the long trek into the forest. They placed him on a makeshift stretcher and carried him on their shoulders as they sang and chanted. Chief Desturi walked at the head of the caravan dressed in his ceremonial regalia, spear and shield in hand. His extensive knowledge of the forest would guide the retinue to the place reserved for those rejected by the ancestral spirits. Village women wailed and ululated as they followed the outcast to the edge of the haunted forest.

After traveling a long distance from the village, the caravan came to a large rock in the depth of the forest. Three warriors climbed to its flat top and placed the stretcher there. Chief Desturi then placed a calabash of milk and a sack of baked potatoes next to the dying man.

“He must not die of hunger or thirst,” the chief murmured to his companions, “lest we suffer a terrible curse.”

He rose to his feet and surveyed the dark forest. The incessant waves of the sea could be heard a short distance away. A cacophony of ghastly noises from every direction pierced the nightly silence.

“I see something in the brush!” Chief Desturi exclaimed. “We must leave immediately. The legions have come to exact vengeance.”

The warriors retreated hastily back to the path leading to the village. As custom dictated, they marched homeward in a single file without looking back. Even before they had traveled a stone throw away from the rock they heard an angry shriek. The warriors dared not turn back to witness the eerie drama unfolding behind them. They proceeded resolutely toward the village where life awaited them, leaving behind the altar of death.

“Did you think you could escape?” snarled a menacing voice to an unconscious Yusuf. “After all these years you are back in my grip. You have returned more helpless than a newborn babe.”

The figure hovered over Yusuf's motionless body. Moved by anger, and in spite of frailty, his gnarled hands dragged the stretcher to the swamp below. He cut through the reeds to the seashore using his long machete, stopping every few steps to catch his breath before returning to the strenuous task of dragging Yusuf's limp body. When he finally made it to his waiting canoe, he was exhausted and on the verge of collapse. After hauling Yusuf into the canoe, he sipped some water from his ancient gourd and paddled deeper into the sea.

He had traversed these waters countless times in the course of his restless existence. When the nearest village became a mere flicker of light in the distance, he brought the canoe to a halt and began unwrapping Yusuf's cerements, which he tossed overboard.

“The sea brought you to me, and now the sea shall take you away,” he roared. “No one escapes!”

A heavy storm gathered above the irate man’s head. He was too busy rehearsing his grievances to notice the threatening clouds. Strong winds soon pummeled the sea, and the small canoe rose and dropped precipitously. Clinging to its gunwales, the man found that his invocations were swallowed by the deafening thunder. His face shone in the dark under the flashes of lightning.

For his part Yusuf lay motionless in the canoe. Whether he were dead or alive was not clear to his captor, but his presence made the terror of the moment less menacing. The exhausted man kept his victim from being tossed overboard by wrapping his bony legs around Yusuf’s waist. The mighty waves spun the canoe furiously and nearly capsized it on several occasions.

“It must not end here. The ancestors demand that I forsake my anger,” the captor mumbled as he paddled his canoe back to shore.

News of Dr. Ibrahim’s disappearance spread across the country like brush fire. It was perhaps due to the fact that each day the throng of patients awaiting his services on the doorstep of his clinic was growing. However, in spite of the villagers’ disappointment at his mysterious disappearance, they, like Chief Desturi, felt constrained by time-honored tradition to count him among the dead, but there was an outsider, and she would not rest until justice was served.

“I was the head nurse at the Afya Health Clinic,” Ms. Florence explained. “I worked alongside Dr. Ibrahim as he revived hope among villagers when it lay shattered by incessant suffering. He was dedicated to his work and to his patients, and this is not the way to honor those who sacrifice personal comfort for the poor and the neglected.”

Ms. Florence was responding to questions from Mr. Botella, a broadcaster with the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). She was visibly upset and determined to bring to justice those she deemed responsible for murder. The government had already appointed a special prosecutor to take up the matter, and the case had stirred a heated national debate. A reputable lawyer, the honorable Dr. K’Opiyo, was the defense attorney for Chief Desturi, who had been arrested and charged as the chief suspect in Dr. Ibrahim’s disappearance. Appearing along with Ms. Florence on national television, the lawyer was fielding questions and laying down the basis of his defense of the accused.

“The case before us, and its resolution, has far-reaching legal consequences,” Dr. K’Opiyo declared on KBC, “which is precisely why I took on this case *pro bono*. We have come to an important judicial crossroad in the history of this country. The morals of the nation are being altered insidiously. Ms. Florence and her supporters in the government are not to be viewed as devout disciples of justice but as prosecutors of every heritage-respecting person in this country. They are essentially neocolonial activists. If they get their way, you’ll only reject the ways of the white man at your peril.”

“To suggest that the concept of justice is foreign to tribal societies is the most degrading insult,” rebutted Mr. Botella. “There is nothing European about demanding justice for an exemplary citizen who suffers cruel and unfair treatment, is there?”

“If we act blindly,” Dr. K’Opiyo replied, “you’ll be next if you believe that your resisting son should be circumcised in a rite of passage. You’ll have to answer for human trafficking if you accept dowry for your daughter’s marriage. Africa must remain

African! After all, isn't it colonization when we impose external values on the established cultural norms of a people? As long as this Mijikenda chief is in jail, we must never again speak proudly of the Mau Mau Uprising."

"Are you suggesting that anything done under the auspices of tribal norms is beyond the reach of common law?" Ms. Florence countered.

"Young lady, I don't offer suggestions," Dr. K'Opiyo retorted. "I pronounce *learned* observations and recommendations. This nation is a product of many tribes, with each tribe having cultural autonomy. It is the only way this franchise can work. It is the only way we can remain one nation above the grave."

"If tribal norms are supreme, what purpose do the Constitution and the courts serve? Aren't you in fact advocating dissolution of the Constitution and with it the end your profession?" inquired Mr. Botella.

"The proper question to ask concerns the definition of crime in this unique legal context," Dr. K'Opiyo replied. "How does each tribe interact with the nation without losing its unique identity and character? Most importantly, as an African nation we must be prepared to deal with a militant subclass of Western-educated persons—and I use the term 'educated' loosely—who insist on recreating Europe here on African soil. We must combat their pernicious activism resolutely and single-mindedly. Or else, Mr. Botella, you must be prepared for arraignment in court for bigamy, for that is what they call your present domestic arrangement with four wives."

"Dr. K'Opiyo is using scare tactics," Ms. Florence said in anger. "We are here because an innocent man was brutally murdered, not for crimes he committed, not even for customs he defied, but simply because he was viewed as a threat to unscientific mystical healing. On that we'll rest our case. All these other allegations by the *learned* Dr. K'Opiyo are pure fear-mongering."

CHAPTER 32

Yusuf felt his spirit escaping his body. There was neither a tunnel nor a flash of beckoning light. Instead, he found himself surrounded by an overpowering brilliance where all his senses attained perfect awareness. In this state he was cognizant not only of imperceptible changes in time but also of the remotest organ functions within his being. Like a thin film of smoke, his delicate spirit rose above the forest canopy and mountain peaks towards a marvelous globe of fire. After he perched on its dazzling surface, out of nowhere appeared a black jackal-headed creature wearing a golden loincloth and holding an ankh in his left hand. He took Yusuf by the hand and began to walk. The two walked in silence, until they came to the entrance of a magnificent pyramid. Inside the imposing edifice, he found walls adorned with the familiar inscriptions and images he had seen in Kajiwe's ancient cave.

The courteous stranger led him to a chamber within the pyramid. Inside the brilliant room his escort reached for a chisel and proceeded to help Yusuf carve his name on a blank spot on the wall.

"I am Anubis, guardian of the passage, and I will prepare you for the afterlife," the stranger declared in a deep voice. "This is *The Book of Breathings*. You must learn to breathe like the gods before we can proceed further."

Yusuf immersed himself eagerly in the contents of the thick book. He was astonished to find a narrative of his life recorded on its scrolls. After poring over the tome, he committed to memory the phrases he needed to remember in order to gain access to the Underworld. He was then led onto a large wooden boat that sailed through several gates where his knowledge was tested by frightening sentries. His responses to their queries qualified him to enter into the most guarded chamber.

Once inside Anubis directed Yusuf to recline on a lion-shaped couch. With surgical precision he proceeded to dissect Yusuf's body, beginning in the thoracic cavity where he removed both lungs. Surprisingly, Yusuf observed these events with detachment. His heart also was removed and placed on a scale opposite a long ostrich feather. After a tense pause Anubis commended him joyfully; the weight of Yusuf's heart had not tipped the scale. He then proceeded to remove Yusuf's other internal organs and placed them in four jars underneath the couch. In lieu of each excised organ Anubis inserted an ankh.

"Justice, wisdom, and benevolence have been embedded in you," declared Anubis as he lifted Yusuf from the couch. "Henceforth you must tread the high path of a shepherd of the sun. Depart in peace."

Yusuf felt weak as he regained consciousness. He could not tell how long he had slept nor where he was. A warm fire burned a few inches away from his bed. He looked around and saw on the walls images familiar to him from his dreams. His searching eyes remained fixed on the depiction of an ankh.

"Are you hungry?" a voice asked calmly.

"Who are you?" inquired Yusuf.

"You answer my question with a question," the aged man replied with a smile.

"Yes, I am hungry. Please now tell me who you are and where I am."

"I think you will live after all. I was worried that you would not make it," continued the man. "I waited for you, as you can see. I could go nowhere before finding someone to keep the fire burning on the ancient hearth."

The realization hit Yusuf like a thunderbolt: he was in the holiest shrine within the *Kaya*. Was this Kajiwe nearly consumed away by age? he wondered. He wept, whether from joy or sorrow he could not tell, but this was home—the sacred home for which his heart had longed, the place to which his dreams in distant cities beyond the sea had returned him.

His mind immediately carried him back to the last time he had spent there. It had been a festive occasion. He had been singled out for a glorious honor, yet in the end he had barely escaped with his life. Now as he lay by the fire he delved into his heart in search of strength and bravery but found none. It was a terrifying realization: he was entirely at the mercy of Kajiwe.

He peered into the fire past the ancient man sitting on a three-legged stool next to his menacing machete. For a moment it seemed as if he were staring at an invisible drama unfolding in the flames. He turned his head as though to heed unheard voices arising from the dusk of departed moments.

"You don't need to concern yourself with the past," Kajiwe declared calmly. "We must let bygones be bygones."

In the days that followed Kajiwe continued to nurse his patient back to health. He made his own bed next to Yusuf's in the cave shrine and waited on him around the clock. He cooked meals for the convalescent and, as Yusuf regained his strength, took him on refreshing walks in the healer's garden. With renewed interest and curiosity Yusuf attended to Kajiwe's instructions. One evening, before they retired for the night, Kajiwe made a surprising announcement.

"I've kept one secret from you, and now I must divulge it," he declared.

"I am prepared to hear it," Yusuf answered.

"Did your mother tell you where you were born?"

"If she did, I don't remember. I would imagine that I was born in my village like everyone else."

"You entered into this world on an eerily stormy night," said Kajiwe. "Moist and warm from the womb, you slipped into my trembling hands. With a healer's intuition I anointed you with sacred herbs and ushered you into the birthright of the noble sons of *Tabibu*."

"How could that be? There were rumors, but I don't understand," replied a mystified Yusuf.

"I had been secretly watching your expectant mother, who had taken refuge in the trunk of the sacred baobab tree during her pregnancy. On that cold morning she nearly lost her life, and yours too, in the *Kaya* forest, but I was never too far away. That night I had kept vigil by her side without her knowledge."

"I don't know what to say," admitted a perplexed Yusuf. "She was not one to keep secrets, but she never mentioned this to me."

"Over the years I returned to your cradle to contemplate the mystery of your call to the healer's charge," Kajiwe declared. "I've come to believe that she came to the *Kaya* forest at the invitation of the ancestral spirits."

"I am just an ordinary man. I am not like you," Yusuf replied.

"We are all ordinary men," Kajiwe explained, "but for reasons indiscernible by the human mind you and I are privileged to see human afflictions through a sacred prism. Our paths, though divergent at first, have converged as shepherds of the sun. This is your charge, which you can neither abandon nor forsake."

That night Yusuf's imagination tried to conjure up his hazardous birth. He longed to enter into the space where his physical separation from a dear parent had ushered in an unbreakable spiritual union. More than ever he longed for his mother's gentle touch, for the grace of her delicate smile.

Like Yusuf, Kajiwe found it difficult to fall asleep, but his mind wrestled with a different, although equally momentous, burden. When he could no longer endure his inner turmoil, his voice broke the gravid silence.

"I have taught you everything about the ancient craft," he announced. "You have been initiated as custom dictates. I have shown you the healer's tools and their proper use."

"I thank you deeply," replied Yusuf. "My eyes have been opened to see what they might never have seen had I lived in the other world for a thousand years."

"Each flower blooms in its appointed season," Kajiwe declared. "Nature must never be rushed."

Although outwardly calm, Kajiwe was becoming more desperate with every passing moment. He knew from a myriad of experiences that an opportunity could be lost through needless hesitation. He needed to act. He needed to turn over the commission of a *Tabibu*'s life to his inductee before anything happened, but he was also aware that Yusuf had a glaring disqualification not easily remedied.

"The *Tabibu* must not be a bachelor," said Kajiwe, recalling his father's decree, unless he is the seventh in a cycle. The seventh must live and die a bachelor in order to allow fresh blood to enter into the *Tabibu* lineage. At the end of his life the seventh *Tabibu* must return to the valley of sanctuaries. There he may take a wife, and when he dies he must be buried on the banks of the Nile."

As the seventh in the series, Kajiwe had walked the difficult road of a solitary life. As he now approached the end of a long journey, his burdens seemed to multiply at every turn. Although his apprentice had met all the other requirements, Yusuf's bachelorhood remained an obstacle.

Kajiwe drifted into a restless slumber beside the dying fire. His dilemma followed him into his dreams, where it took the form of a puzzling riddle. In his dream he was stranded at sea in the company of his apprentice. After countless days had passed without rescue, they were emaciated and waiting for death when a mermaid jumped into his canoe from the sea. To their great surprise the creature nursed them back to health.

While Kajiwe was still reveling in his dream, the night's silence was shattered by gunshots, which seemed to be getting closer to the healer's cave.

"Who can it be?" Yusuf asked.

"I don't know," Kajiwe stated impatiently, "but I'll not sit here passively in the face of such sacrilege. Whoever it is must be punished! I'll not allow anyone to desecrate this shrine."

"But you are no match for bullets!" Yusuf pleaded.

"My work is done, but you must live. Someone must remain to stoke the fire on the sacred hearth of *Tabibu*," Kajiwe insisted as he fought to free himself from Yusuf's restraining grip.

Yusuf's determination to keep Kajiwe from walking into an instant death was matched only by the old man's resolve to break free. The two wrestled on the hard floor. Although he was still weak, Yusuf summoned all his strength and locked his shaky hands around the old man's knees.

"Kajiwe, it's over!" shouted a female voice from outside the cave. "If you are as brave as you think you are, come out now."

"It's a woman," declared Kajiwe, more determined than ever to confront the intruder.

"There will be no escape tonight," continued the incensed woman outside.

"Wait. I cannot believe my ears!" Yusuf said. "I know the voice, but I can't let her see me like this."

When a bullet ricocheted dangerously from the inner walls of the cave, the pair dashed toward the entrance. Kajiwe was fuming with a desire for retribution while Yusuf was driven by the promise of requited love.

"It's me!" shouted an overwhelmed Yusuf. "Please put down the gun."

"Yusuf? Yusuf, is that you?" Kaye exclaimed.

"It is me, please put down the gun," Yusuf replied.

“Oh my Yusuf, I feared you were dead,” she said, throwing herself into his arms.

“Darling,” he replied, “how I have missed you, but how in the world did you come here?”

“I don’t know. I just knew that I had to find you,” she answered, overcome with emotion.

“She is very beautiful!” commented Kajiwe hesitantly.

“I apologize for my rudeness,” said Kaye to the old mystic. “I was fearful for Yusuf’s well-being. My name is Kaye. I am his . . . his true friend.”

“I would hope so,” replied Kajiwe. “I am his father. Would you like to join us over a cup of tea?”

“Uh, yes, thank you,” she answered, a little confused.

Kajiwe led the couple back into the shrine. Moved by some mysterious logic, he laughed and rejoiced freely, showing no inclination to guard his world of secrecy from scrutiny. Guided by her discerning instinct, Kaye crossed the distance that separated them and sat next to the gnarled man as a gesture of gratitude. As she lightly stroked his bony back from time to time, Yusuf saw a side of Kajiwe he had never known. A boyish excitement replaced the gloomy face that had become the old man’s mask. He laughed heartily, exposing his toothless gums to the glow from his sacred hearth.

Before they retired for the night, Kajiwe held Kaye firmly by her shoulders. After a penetrating gaze into her eyes, he took a sip from his gourd and sprayed it onto his chest ritualistically. “May the nine clans of the Mijikenda turn to you,” he supplicated, “and may the next generation of shepherds of the sun descend from your womb.”

“I thank you . . .,” she began to say, but he stopped her.

“In our ritual you must not speak except in answer to direct questions. Now we’ll proceed with the marriage. Do you love my son?”

“Most dearly, but shouldn’t he and I discuss the matter before we make a public commitment?” Kaye stumbled for words and looked to Yusuf for rescue, but their reunion had left him delirious with joy.

“That will not be necessary,” Kajiwe declared. “He has been waiting for you and nearly died of longing. Now if you’ll excuse me briefly.”

Kajiwe rose to his feet and dashed into the shrine’s inner sanctum. Kaye looked to Yusuf for an explanation, but he appeared as perplexed as she was. After a brief absence Kajiwe returned dressed in his ceremonial regalia.

“I apologize for the short notice, but tonight marks a memorable occasion,” Kajiwe announced as he arranged the tools of his craft on a mat. “This is the highest honor any healer can attain. Now listen to the narrative. In the beginning an indomitable healer escaped from the valley of sanctuaries. He left behind a world in frenzied disarray and escaped into the serenity of this shrine. He brought along a sacred craft whose tenets purified its practitioners. From him arose a lineage of venerable healers, the lustrous shepherds of the sun, brave men who did not recoil when faced with danger or privation. Like the mighty baobab tree, they rise above the canopy to oversee the forest of humanity. Rise up and awake, all you slumbering spirits, to receive another into your noble company! We pour libations on the sacred ground of this shrine to the mighty healers from the households of Mijikenda in honor of this grand moment. Drink to your fill that none may complain of dishonor.”

Kajiwe continued his lengthy peroration while he sprinkled holy herbs on his captivated audience. He then began a celebratory dance, shaking a black and white cowtail high above his head as he danced. At the conclusion of his supplication, he rubbed Yusuf's body with leaves and began to clothe him in ceremonial regalia.

"Let this headdress, signifying the expansive mind, betoken the jewel of wisdom," Kajiwe declared. "This kilt will protect you from ill omens and ensure that your offspring will never be exposed to depravity or shame. Now hold the ankh in your right hand with your spouse's left hand holding its shaft. This is the key to life. She must wear this amulet around her neck to symbolize the productive union that binds her to you. And you must wear the symbol of the dung beetle around your neck to symbolize that you have been reborn as a shepherd of the sun. Finally, with your left hand hold this bowl of herbs, an emblem of the benevolence of our craft. Let it remind you to reach out to the distressed with a healer's touch."

At the end of the ceremony Kajiwe was ecstatic but exhausted. He limped to his bed and in no time was soundly asleep. Left alone, Yusuf and Kaye lay side by side next to the warm fire. They whispered into each other's ears and kissed while struggling to contain a mutual surge of desire. When sleep finally caught up with them, it captured them stealthily, stealing words of affection from their hushed lips.

The next morning Yusuf and Kaye awoke to soothing choruses of wild birds. While they were asleep, Kajiwe had slipped out of the cave and disappeared without a trace, taking only his ancient gourd and weathered canoe. They searched for him from one corner of the *Kaya* forest to the other but to no avail.

"Maybe he will return later tonight," Kaye said as they abandoned the search.

"I wish I could say that. This place moves to a different rhythm. At least I have you now," Yusuf said, his gaze fixed on the sea.

"We are now bound to each other by love and sacred ritual."

"I am sorry I betrayed your trust," replied a contrite Yusuf.

"Don't be sorry," Kaye said softly. "When it comes to love, the ultimate victors are distinguished by the heartaches they have overcome."

"Will you forgive me?" he asked.

"Only if you can forgive me for waiting so long to forgive you," she replied.

With their hands locked tenderly together, the wedded couple traversed the *Kaya* forest. Every now and then they stopped to take in the surrounding beauty. They kissed and embraced often as they enjoyed a refreshing midday bath under a pristine waterfall.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Yusuf confessed. "How did you know to look for me here?"

"Did you think I would forget everything you told me about Kajiwe and the *Kaya* forest?" Kaye replied. "Not to mention that I called you from here the summer you dumped me. Yes, I came to Mombasa to look for your mother, and that is why the phone connection was so bad during our last conversation."

"You were here?" Yusuf was dumbfounded.

"Yes indeed. I convinced your friend Kent to accompany me here after lying to him that I was your wife and wanted to meet your mother. Unfortunately, she had already departed."

"I am sorry, Kaye. I never knew," Yusuf said remorsefully. "Can I ever repay my debt to you?"

“There is something I’ve always wanted to know,” Kaye said as they lay sunbathing near the waterfall.

“I’ve no reason to keep any secret from you.”

“I just wanted to wait for the right occasion to go there,” Kaye continued. “It’s about Rose.”

“What about her?” Yusuf replied, visibly confused.

“I can wait if you don’t want to talk about her now,” Kaye said while examining his facial expressions.

“I promised to be an open book to you for the rest of my life. Let’s talk about Rose. In fact, now is a perfect time.”

“Are you sure?” Kaye asked.

“Absolutely. What do you want to know?” Yusuf asked as he sat up to face her.

“She died while you were still deeply in love, isn’t that the case?” Kaye asked.

“You could say that. When it came to romance, we were both novices, and in spite of our best efforts we struggled to contain the flames of passion that threatened to engulf our inexperienced hearts.”

“When death ends a relationship—I mean, a passionate relationship—I would imagine that love does not just fade away. Aren’t you still in love with her?” Kaye stammered.

“I don’t think that my love for Rose ever died. It only took a different form, a metaphysical one,” Yusuf replied contemplatively. “The physical cravings dried up and were replaced by something mystical. I don’t know how to describe it adequately.”

“I hope you understand,” answered Kaye. “I’m not jealous. It’s just that I don’t feel right displacing such a profound experience from the center of your heart.”

“The dead are loved very differently from the living,” Yusuf explained. “I love you wholeheartedly, without reservations or restraints.”

“Do you have any memorabilia from her?” Kaye inquired.

“I have a few letters. She sent me a lock of her hair, but I lost it to a bird,” Yusuf replied.

“You lost her hair to a bird?”

“Shortly before I discovered that she had passed away, I cleaned the lock of her hair, which had become dirty and matted,” Yusuf explained. “I hung it on the clothesline to dry, but a bird snatched it to build a nest on a tall tree in our school compound.”

“You should have climbed the tree to get it back,” Kaye declared.

“I eventually did and after risking my life by climbing up the tree, I found out that the bird had incorporated the hair in its nest, where two newly hatched chicks were sleeping peacefully. It was as if the mother hen had provided Rose with a burial in the sky and she, in return, had offered to protect the chicks. I couldn’t disrupt such an arrangement.”

“That was very thoughtful of you,” Kaye replied.

“You now know everything about my love life,” protested Yusuf, “but I know nothing about yours. That’s hardly fair!”

“There’s not much to tell,” Kaye replied. “Before we met I had only had a semi-romantic relationship during my sophomore year in secondary school.”

“What do you mean by ‘semi-romantic’?” queried Yusuf. “You mean you loved him with only two chambers of your heart?”

“Because I had been taught to be wary of boys, I only took my chances with a blind Greek boy,” Kaye explained.

“So you took advantage of a blind boy and then dumped him?” Yusuf teased.

“No. We only kissed once, but I never could bring myself to repeat it.”

“I’m glad that you saved the rest of your kisses for me,” Yusuf said while stroking her cheek.

“And I am glad that we found each other again,” responded Kaye with a kiss. “Promise me that we’ll make this our home forever.”

“This is the ideal workshop for the next mission of my life,” Yusuf replied.

“What is the mission?” she inquired.

“I must fulfill three duties before I die,” said Yusuf. “First, I wish to blend my soul perfectly with yours. I want to dissolve every doubt and fear from your heart with my sincere, unwavering love. Second, I wish to rent a small space in your uterus for a brief period of nine months to incubate my seed.”

“Darling, that would be delightful!” Kaye exclaimed. “I love you, Yusuf, and it would be the realization of my fondest dream. And what is the third duty?”

“I’ve come to understand that history is rarely changed by isolated clinicians working in remote clinics,” Yusuf stated. “Therefore, if I am to make a lasting difference, I have to disturb the unholy equilibrium in our society.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

“Well, I believe the time has come to revive Lumumba’s spirit, to enter into Biko’s consciousness, and to crystallize Nkrumah’s dream,” Yusuf declared. “All people are capable of self-liberation when equipped with the proper tools and framework. Henceforth I must set everything else aside until I’ve compiled a practical guide to a Pan-African revolution. It will be titled *The Pan-Africanist Manifesto*.”

“I don’t doubt your abilities,” said Kaye, “but do you think the goal is achievable?”

“I don’t imagine it’ll be easy, but even if it takes a hundred years the project has to start somewhere. Any meaningful change must be preceded by well-articulated ideas. My task is to trigger a paradigm shift in popular opinion. My purpose is to convince my fellow Africans that they are being dispossessed of their birthright, and that others are squandering their inheritance.”

“It sounds as though you have given the matter some thought,” Kaye observed.

“Living in America for nearly two decades opened my mind to some profound truths. For the first time I realized that Africa is kept in its chaotic and fractured state by ruthless exploiters, both native and foreign, whose interests are threatened by an intellectually liberated and politically organized citizenry. Our cowardice under the pretense of preserving peace only emboldens these exploiters to extort us ever more mercilessly. Undoubtedly the majority of Africans are fed up with it.”

“Are you advocating armed revolution?” Kaye asked in a subdued voice.

“We must attain our ends *by whatever means necessary!*” Yusuf declared. “We’ll always lose when we respond to diabolical enemies with timidity.”

“I might finally be approaching a creed worthy of my devotion,” Kaye exclaimed. “I am sworn by love and conviction to join ranks with you.”

“I cannot imagine a better compatriot in the struggle,” Yusuf replied. “Think about it, Kaye. Jefferson and Lincoln, Louverture and Dessalines, Lenin and Castro—

these guys organized their monumental revolutions with barely half the amount of brain cells in our possession. We can accomplish a great deal more, and not just in theory but in practice!”

“You inspire me to recite Bob Marley’s hymn of redemption: *Africa Unite, cuz we are moving right out of Babylon!*” Kaye sang cheerfully.

“This feels like a dream,” confided Yusuf. “I am afraid I’ll wake up to find myself back in the wretched grip of a deadly illness.”

“It is not a dream, darling,” Kaye said in a whisper. “Feel my lips against yours. It is the springtime of love.”

“Come with me,” Yusuf said as he rose to his feet. “I’ll show you where I was born.”

After hiking through dense vegetation toward the beach, the couple came to a clearing in the forest where an enormous baobab tree stood. The opening in its hollowed trunk was covered by a large boulder. It was exactly as Kajiwe had described it. At first Yusuf hesitated, unsure of what he would find concealed within the cavernous chamber. Around the ancient tree everything seemed to have been frozen in time. He carefully pushed the large boulder out of the way before taking a step back from the entrance. Kaye was the first to enter.

“Look,” she said. “Someone must live here.”

“It appears so,” Yusuf agreed.

An old, threadbare blanket lay in one corner, and the ash in the fireplace suggested recent occupation. A knapsack containing baobab fruit and other foodstuffs stood next to a bundle of firewood, as though the owner had left only briefly and planned to return. Two large calabashes and a gourd full of fresh water were set against the wall next to a sleeping mound.

“They left their necklace hanging on the wall,” Kaye observed.

“My goodness! It is her lizard necklace,” exclaimed Yusuf.

“Whose necklace is it?”

“It’s my mother’s. As long as I’ve known her, she always wore it. She was wearing it the last time I saw her,” Yusuf explained nervously.

“That means she is around here somewhere. Let’s go search for her, or should we wait for her to return?”

“She is long gone. Look at the drawings on the wall next to the necklace,” Yusuf said softly.

“That looks like a canoe and a rising sun, and is that a beetle?” Kaye asked.

“Yes, it is a dung beetle. She left by canoe to stake her claim in the valley of sanctuaries.”

“Where is that?”

“No one knows. Only a select few are welcome there, and no one has ever returned. It is a place of rebirth, hence the symbol of the dung beetle.”

“I am sorry, Yusuf. I am sure that this must be difficult for you,” Kaye said consolingly.

“I would have loved to embrace her one more time, but at least she left a message. I want you to keep the necklace, Kaye.”

“Are you sure? May I wear it?”

“Always,” Yusuf answered. “You are everything to me now.”

“And you will always be everything to me,” she said.

A new day had dawned in the *Kaya* forest. It was not ushered in by the piercing calls of roosters or by the tireless songs of birds. It was without pomp but full of circumstance. The seeds of hope had blossomed anew. Dawn at last had sprinkled its glitter on a new breed of shepherds of the sun, and their ardent minds would flame across the sky in the years to come.

Author's Notes & References:

Translation of Swahili words and phrases used:

- *Baba* is father.
- *Babu* is grandfather.
- *Bwana* is mister or sir.
- *Mama* is mother.
- *Mzee* is a title of respect and deference for a mature, mostly elderly, man.
- *Kijana* is young man.
- *Leo mtajuta* translates into "today you'll get it."

Chapter One:

- "Trailing clouds of glory" is a reference to William Wadsworth's (1780-1850) poem *Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood*.

Chapter Three:

The inspiration for the opening chapters comes from my childhood in the Central Province of Kenya. From a historical perspective, this province is known for championing anti-imperialism resistance in the 1940s and 1950s. The armed resistance, known as the Mau Mau uprising, was the subject of a book by Harvard University historian, Dr. Caroline Elkins. Her book, *Imperial Reckonings: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, was a powerful indictment of British colonialism in Africa.

Like the protagonist, I was well versed in the narrative of the struggle for Independence from a very young age. My teachers were the veterans who had waged the protracted guerilla warfare against a matchless enemy, and the survivors of the notorious British gulags.

My grandfather, and many other men of his generation, saw active combat in the bloody conflict. Unfortunately, the departure of the British did not bring the long-awaited "Uhuru" (liberty) to those who had paid for it with sweat and guts. Most of them died with deep disappointment and despair. Ironically, the families that were closely aligned with the imperial power structure continued to wield enormous political and economic power after Independence. The young nation's coffers and natural resources were plundered with reckless abandon by a new breed of exploiters. To this day, most of Kenya's farmable land is owned by a handful of families.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, like most other leaders of that generation, was unaccommodating to political opposition and dissidence. There were several notable assassinations during his 15-year reign which remain unsolved to this day. These include the assassinations of Gama Pinto, a journalist and political activist, Tom Mboya, a widely-admired Pan-Africanist and formidable politician, and J.M. Kariuki, a populist politician and reformer.

- *The Invictus* is a Victorian poem written by William Ernest Henley (1849-1902). Henley lived a sorrowful life beginning with an impoverished childhood and culminating with complications of disseminated tuberculosis (T.B). He wrote this poem after undergoing excruciating surgeries, which included limb amputation and debridement, to remove T.B-infected bones. His resilience and fortitude outlived his misery to become a fountain of inspiration.

Chapter 6-15:

These chapters are reflective of my boarding school experience at Thika High School. I enrolled at the school in January 1992. Historically, the school was an academically prestigious institution that had produced many prominent figures in government and private sector. Like most reputable high schools in Kenya, it was single gender (boys only) boarding school.

Beside the school's academic reputation, it had a notable history of hazing. The incoming class was received with warmth and hospitality initially. This "grace period" lasted several weeks and it gave the "mono" the emotional space needed to adjust to life away from home. When the harassment started it was brutal and relentless and only ended at the year's end. We did not have a recourse from this bullying. The prefects did not seem too concerned (some even participated) and most teachers were oblivious to it. One was expected to "toughen up" and endure silently like countless others had done. Although it was dreadful in every way imaginable, the experience strengthened the bond of affection and solidarity between classmates. I still keep in touch with some of my friends from those days.

Chapter 13:

- The Christian hymn "*God be with you till we meet again*" was composed by Jeremiah Rankin (1828-1903).
- The hymn "*There is a green hill faraway*" was composed by Cecil Alexander (1818-1895).

Chapters 17-19:

Moving away from home was a very unsettling experience for me. My culture shock in America was intense and for many months I was morbidly homesick. Although quitting was never an option, I found great encouragement from the community of fellow Africans who had preceded me into the Diaspora. During our occasional get-togethers, we prepared African dishes and engaged in all sorts of mischiefs and arguments—which was a welcome reprieve from the strains of relentless hassle. The world of foreign students, especially those from poor third-world countries, is filled with unique struggles

and optimism. For those who are intellectually inclined, America's highly advanced information system is simply awe-inspiring.

One thing I was exposed to (and very suddenly) in America is racial identity and tensions. For those of us born and socialized into strong tribal identities, the transition is laborious and conscious. I had to retire my deeply-rooted Kikuyu (tribe) worldview as I absorbed a more expansive label. Fortunately, there were many illustrious heroes for my emulation in this new stage of social development. It was a necessary step in my journey towards an identity that encompasses all humanity.

Chapter 20:

My first encounter with the missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) was in Nairobi, Kenya in the early 1990s. That encounter became one of the most consequential events of my life. After my initial hesitation, I came to thoroughly enjoy the intimate lessons they brought to our small apartment in Nairobi. The spirit of these meetings was joyful and inviting, and after months of careful investigation I obtained my spiritual conviction and joined the church with the rest of my family. Less than two years later, I found myself playing the role of the missionary. I served a fulltime mission for the church from 1996 to 1998. Watching the glorious renewal of formerly broken lives was a truly transformative experience. I treasure those memories dearly!

That said, it'd be less than honest to claim that everyone I proselyted became converted. The protagonist's objections against some historical aspects of Mormonism rarely came up during my fulltime mission in Africa. On the other hand, a black Mormon is an oddity in the United States, and luckily most of my non-Mormon friends do not shy away from expressing their searing discontent. While these exchanges have led me to a deeper intimation with my faith, they have also made me examine the historical record more meticulously and objectively. The three letters on this topic summarize years of study and introspection on this important topic.

Chapter 21:

The nursing home is the gateway to the American dream for many newcomers to the country. The interactions between residents and their caretakers are life-altering, and they provide critical lessons on the fragile and unpredictable nature of life and opportunity. On the other hand, no bond is more powerful than the one between sojourners who have been forced by life to surrender every shred of vanity and pride.

Chapters 23-25:

I had the inconvenient habit of indulging an unfunded ambition in higher education. While I was fortunate to excel academically throughout my college years, the struggle to make tuition and cost of living was chronic, and at times nearly debilitating. This struggle peaked during my four years in medical school where the cost of attendance exceeded the yearly salary of many heads of states (no joke). As if that was not trouble enough, there was the constant barrage of "nasty-grams" threatening grave consequences

for any delays in payment. This was the tempo I marched to while bearing the typical medical student's heavy load.

You might imagine my horror when I was informed towards the end of my four years that the school had informed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that I was no longer enrolled. By this act, I had become an illegal alien subject to deportation. In spite of tangible proof of my uninterrupted school attendance, the Office of International Students at the school refused to reverse their decision citing it was not their fault. At this point, I was married and expecting our first child and so the stakes were really high. Simply stated, I was dogged by an unforgettable and unnecessary hell for many months following. Upon graduation, I moved on to another institution for residency where a cadre of outstanding professionals appealed to the DHS and the mistake was reversed. One cannot endure such events without changing in a fundamental way.

Chapter 27-32:

One of the many side effects of immigration troubles are marriages of convenience. This is of course no secret—even Hollywood has produced a few movies based on the issue. Although no one has ever informed me that this was the basis of his/her marriage, the topic is widely discussed and joked about in the émigré circles. No complete story can be written about the interaction between America and immigrants without wandering into the topic.

The concluding chapters depict a fictionalized dialogue between the protagonist and the President of Kenya. This event is set in the early 1990s against a factual background of political turbulence and transition. Kenya became a representative democracy in 1992, and this change occurred in spite of a very spirited opposition from President Daniel Arap Moi who had been in power since 1978. In the dialogue, the president alludes to a failed coup. This coup attempt happened in 1982 when a group of poorly-organized, low-ranking officers in the Kenya Air Force seized power for a period of several hours. They were quickly defeated, but not before altering in a profound way the governing philosophy of the man they had tried to overthrow.