

Flying

by Olive Senior

1

HIS FATHER HAD bought him a return ticket, first class at that; but, as the plane banked sharply for its descent, he wondered if airlines reimbursed for the portion unused in case of death. He knew he would never return on that ticket. He was twenty-six years old and he had come back to the island to die. His father didn't know that, although he had recognized he was ill enough to warrant the comfort of first class. He was touched: his father was normally tight-fisted. Perhaps he did know. Perhaps everyone knew. Family, friends, strangers on the street. Everybody knew but nobody wanted to know.

After the long flight, it took his remaining strength to walk to his mother's car; he moved so slowly that she had to slow her pace, though she was in high heels and he towered over her by a foot. He was glad to discover she was a woman without curiosity. She didn't comment on his slow movements, his grey pallor, his thinness; she'd been told he'd been seriously ill with pneumonia

and complications when he'd called to ask if he could come to stay for a while. She'd said yes without hesitation. But now he thought her very casual in her greeting, considering she hadn't seen him for twenty years. When she first sent him to live with his father in Canada, she had kept in touch with the occasional letters and phone calls, but as he grew older the connection had weakened, both of them seeming to lose interest.

But she had said yes when he'd asked if he could come. To him that was the important thing, though he had no idea what he was coming to. He knew of the material changes in her life, but in his mind he still associated her with the simple mountain home he'd left behind. Now — as he eased himself into her Mercedes-Benz and watched her beringed and manicured hands on the leather-covered steering wheel, her beautifully styled hair, and her made-up face, serene and confident, purposefully set straight ahead — he began to understand that in acquiring a whole new life for herself — a well-off husband, three other children — she had no need of him. Perhaps, he thought, she had never needed him; perhaps he had been nothing but an interruption in her life, a slowing down of her upward trajectory, a burden she had shed.

He never knew why she had decided to send him, at the age of six, to live with his father in Canada. Or — his father's version — why she had suddenly consented to let him go, after years of his father's pleading to have him. But even as he assumed a new life with his father and stepmother — for whom he was an only child and on whom, for a while at any rate, they had lavished their affection — he increasingly felt a vital piece of himself had been jettisoned.

2

IN HIS MOTHER'S house — an architect-designed bungalow in a smart new suburb — his stepfather and his three half-brothers

seemed huge and bursting with energy. The boys, all teenagers, had been told he was ill, and were happy to leave him alone, popping into his room to say "Hi" when their mother reminded them of his presence, just as happily dashing off, bouncing their balls in the corridors, shouting on the telephone to their friends. Their father was pleasant and solicitous, but clearly unsure how to deal with him, the child his wife had had when she was seventeen — long before she had dreamed of moving to the city and becoming his secretary, then his wife.

They took to referring to him as "The Sleeper," jokingly to his face. At first he was startled — it seemed such an accurate description of his life — then realized it had started after his mother told them the story of something that happened when he was a child. They were sitting around the dining table, one of the rare days he felt well enough to join them, and it was his mother who brought up the question of his sleeping so much.

"Don't you remember, Jonathan, the day you fell asleep at guava tree root? In the middle of the day, just like that?" she asked.

Everyone laughed, but nervously, as they did when he was around. He kept his eyes on his plate and said no. "What do you mean?" he asked. "What would I be doing at 'guava tree root'?"

He winced as he heard in his voice his imaginary quotation marks around the colloquialism and wondered why he felt such hostility. But greater than his surprise at harbouring such feelings was his surprise at feeling anything at all; worse, at not being able to keep from showing it. More than anything else, he took this to be the true measure of how far his illness was taking him away from what he had construed as his true self: masked, secretive, self-aware.

His mother, whose mind always seemed to be rushing headlong towards another topic before she had finished with the first, didn't appear to notice. Nor did anyone else; it was a household in which nobody seemed to focus much but on their own preoccupations.

His mother surprised him by asking, with a laugh in her voice, "What, don't you remember how you loved guavas?" She turned to the others, looking at each boy's face in turn as if seeking his confirmation of her veracity. "You know the little river below YaYa's house?" she asked them. They all nodded.

"Well, in the old days, when there was plenty rain, the bank was covered with bush and guava trees. Not like now, when it's pure rockstone.

"The joke about Jonathan was that from he was big enough to walk, every day he wanted to go down to the river bank to pick guava. After a while he didn't want anybody to come with him, this is his way of showing us he's a big man, you know, getting up and down that hill by himself." She paused to laugh and threw her head back, showing her beautiful teeth. Then she turned and spoke to him directly.

"I would stand on the hill and watch you, and by now you knew enough to throw away the guavas with worms. That's one thing you were fussy about. You could only eat the perfect guava. I don't know ... It wasn't that you were greedy, more like finicky, but you'd search and search, picking and examining every guava till you found it. The one that was good enough for you. You'd stand there and eat it on the spot, turning it from side to side as you bit into it, chewing it slowly. Then, when you were finished, you'd fill your pocket or your cap with guavas and bring them for me and YaYa. You were so serious about the whole thing, I'd laugh myself silly every day watching you as you scrambled back up that hill, trying not to lose the guavas you were carrying."

"Then what happened?" he asked, for it seemed she had suddenly lost interest in the story, turning to offer her youngest a second helping, then shifting her attention to her own plate.

She put down her knife and fork again and smiled, but as if from a distance. "One day, you went looking for guavas as usual. I wasn't at home then, this is after I got the job working with

Father Donohue at the rectory so I was away all day. YaYa was minding you. Poor YaYa, you gave her such a fright I don't know how her heart didn't burst! She watched you go down the hill and start looking for guava. YaYa says one minute she is watching you, the next minute a plane is flying right overhead. She lifted up her eyes to look at the plane and by the time she looked down again, you were nowhere to be seen. She called and called: 'Jonathan! Jonathan!' Not a peep and she can't see you anywhere. She almost broke her neck running down that hill. Her one thought was you'd gone into the water. She started looking around. No sign and now she's shouting out for help, till she finally reached to a part of the bush far from where she saw you. She couldn't believe her eyes. There you were in the sunhot, lying on the ground. Dead to the world. At first she thought something had happened to you, that someone had carried you off and hurt you, but there was no sign of that. Up to this day, YaYa will tell you she can't figure out how you could reach so far and drop asleep in that short space of time. Sleeping so soundly she couldn't wake you. She had to carry you up the hill and put you to bed, though it was the middle of the day. Jonathan, you slept for twenty-four hours straight, sleeping the sleep of the dead. You don't remember?"

The fact that he couldn't remember didn't matter to her or to the others; in the minute it took him to marshal his thoughts for a reply, they had lost interest and were chatting of other things.

When he got his mother's attention again, and asked her to tell him if they had learnt anything about what had happened to him that day, she suddenly seemed unwilling to continue. "No, you never remembered a thing, got up the next morning and came to the table and had your tea same as usual. We asked you, but you didn't know what we were talking about. Of course, you were only a little boy — though it was right after that that the trouble started." She said the last bit almost to herself.

"What trouble?" he asked, pouncing on the word.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, embarrassed about the whole thing. “It had nothing to do with you, just ... trouble ... in the district.”

He would have persisted with his questioning; it was suddenly so important to him he could feel his heart fluttering, but she looked at her watch, said she had to be off, and practically ran from the room.

In a way he didn't mind; her story had left him feeling almost elated. He wanted to sit quietly with it. The story itself seemed trivial, for all the importance she had imbued it with in her telling; he couldn't remember what guavas were. But he held close to himself the image of a child who was so closely watched by two women; a child, he told himself, who must have been loved. He wanted to cherish the story as the first he had heard in which he was the actor, a contour line drawn.

3

THE STORY TRIGGERED a memory not of himself, but of a place; brought into focus a picture of a little stream and its green surroundings, a piercingly sweet aroma and something mysterious and strange hovering just on the edge of the picture.

This vision of the cool, lush riverside kept coming back and helped to dilute his first disappointment upon arrival. There were no forest-clad mountains meeting the sea, as he had seen in the pictures of this tourist paradise; no lush rainforests, but a land that was dried to brownness, the hills bare and scarred from bush fires, the city itself covered in an ashy haze, all seeming as stricken as he was. No rain had fallen for over a year and even the lawns of the wealthy were dried dust bowls, the only colour the brilliant scarlet bougainvillea running riot, an affront.

But from the moment his mother told the story, he had glimpsed an opening in the haze, a window into cool rainforests, the smell of damp earth and mossy coverts. He knew the place

now: it was his grandmother's home in the country, the place where he was born, and where he spent his childhood before he was sent away. He understood for the first time why he had so wanted to return. It was not to be with his mother, as he had thought; it was simply to get back to his grandmother's place.

4

HIS MOTHER HAD promised to take him to see his grandmother, but kept putting it off. Each time he reminded her, she made excuses. Once she said, “YaYa's place won't suit you. You grew up in Canada with modern conveniences, Jonathan. Your grandmother refuse to change her ways. You know how many times we offer to bring her up here to live with us? Or build her a nice house? YaYa refuse to change a single thing in that house. She and all those little old people down there she spend her time with, they're all living backward in time. It wouldn't suit you at all.”

He spent hours lying on the bed with his eyes closed, though he wasn't sleeping. Sometimes he didn't have the energy to get out of bed; sometimes he didn't know why he should bother. But after his mother told the story about the guava, he increasingly felt that he needed to harness what energy he possessed — for what, he was not sure. Perhaps one day some grand final effort would be required of him and he needed to be prepared.

Like something in a story, his grandmother suddenly appeared. He saw an old woman walking ramrod stiff up the driveway, a felt hat jammed down on her head, numerous bulging, wayward parcels badly wrapped in brown paper and tied with string dangling from her hands. He knew immediately who she was. He felt his heart stir, urging him to lift off, to fly straight into her arms. But, before he could marshal his wasted body for the move, she had already entered the house through the kitchen door and, dumping her parcels along the way, walked straight into his room.

"Come, I tekking you to my country," was her only greeting, making it sound as if she lived in another country entirely and not in the mountains of the next parish, some thirty miles away. She began to drag his cases from the wardrobe and pack his clothes. This seemed perfectly natural, though he normally wouldn't have stood for anyone touching his things.

As soon as his mother came in, YaYa commanded her to drive them to her home. His mother began to make excuses.

"Awright, we tek bus," YaYa announced, grabbing up one of the bags. "Come, Jonathan."

He was amused to see that his mother was embarrassed by YaYa and her country voice and ways, for her city-lady voice became sharply pronounced.

"What! You'd take Jonathan on that old country bus?"

"Mi spirit just tell me to come for the boy," YaYa said stubbornly.

As if knowing she could not win this fight, his mother heaved a sigh and parcelled them up into her Mercedes. She drove them to YaYa's country and left him there.

5

IN HIS GRANDMOTHER'S small wooden house, lying in the same room he had lived in as a child — and he was pleased to have recognized it as such before she told him — he idly watched a trail of ants crossing the unpainted board wall and wondered what the ants were saying to one another when they met and stopped. As he had this thought, a funny feeling came over him. It was as if the skin of the earth had ruptured while he stood on the edge, and he had almost fallen. But over the last few months, he had learnt that his body was capable of these warning signals of something off-kilter. Soon he felt all right again.

The land here too was parched, the mango tree outside his window miraculously bearing a few straggling leaves. A single bird

spent much of its time perched in it. He didn't see any other birds and assumed they had died off or retreated to the high forests, for there were no bird sounds. Coming from a geometrically laid out city of high-rises, he was amazed to see how soft the edges were here, how nothing seemed to have been trained or groomed, how no one thing stood out. Everything — from the mountains to the country road and its high banks — wound in and out, twined on or enfolded something else. Even YaYa's little house had long abandoned its vertical lines and settled comfortably into the soil, its foundations masked by the roots of peppermint and leaf of life, thyme and sinkle bible and croton, which she worked to keep alive.

YaYa's house seemed as tiny as she was. He, who in another life had been so proud of his height, now kept bumping into things and hitting his head on the lintels, feeling as if he had grown too quickly and thoughtlessly and uselessly, like a shoot covered in debris, stretching its pale self to reach the sun. That thought made him aware of the paleness of his thin body. He started to sit out in the sun each day, wearing only his shorts until he turned nutmeg brown like his grandmother. That didn't stop him from feeling as useless as the sun-deprived shoot; the yard was as far as he could walk. He smiled every day he heard the shy little boy next door singing at the top of his voice as he herded his father's cows, over and over like a dirge, as if this was the only fragment of song he knew: "What gaan bad a maaning cyan come good a evening, woi."

6

HE WAS AT first embarrassed that he could not help his grandmother, but she brushed aside his protests. He got the feeling that even if he were fit, she would not have handed over to him anything of her daily routine. Part of that routine was walking a long distance

to collect water. He was fascinated to watch how economical she was in using it: a calabash-full served for a bath. But then she was economical about everything. Her hands had never known waste, he thought. How profligate was his life!

It was YaYa's view that the drought was not accidental, but a punishment for the wickedness of mankind. In the old days, she said, people kept the flow of water regulated by making sure that due reverence was always paid to Rivermaid, the guardian of every fountainhead. When angry, Rivermaid withheld her bounty. So in former times of drought, huge processions would make their way upstream to her residence at the source, to offer prayers and sacrifices. YaYa claimed that in the old plantation days, so her Granny had said, the Massa would sometimes allow them to sacrifice a whole ox to Rivermaid, so water would flow to turn the sugar mills again. Her own church members were nowadays the only ones who kept faith with the water spirit. When Brother Jeremiah the Water Shepherd pumped away till the spirit washed over him and flooded the room, Rivermaid triumphantly entered to possess her followers. But Rivermaid had not revealed herself for a long time now, no matter how often the Revivalists travelled in a body to the pool from which the river emerged, to try and contact her. Her displeasure had not lifted despite their offerings: white fowls and rum, all they could afford. Perhaps a greater sacrifice was required.

Jonathan wished he had something to offer his grandmother that would make Rivermaid surrender; he felt guilty that he had come empty-handed and needy. YaYa had taken him on as her burden and he didn't know why, she hardly knew him; but her entire day was spent seeing to his needs. In addition to water, she foraged for the right food, searching for just the right bush to relieve his itch or bathe his aching limbs. She fed him like a child, she bathed him when he was too weak to manage himself, she made it clear she expected nothing of him. He had never imag-

ined or experienced such close attention from another human being. And, just as he began to enjoy for the first time the feeling of trusting someone, of letting go, so he also felt his guilt increase. The guilt he had felt all his life for his inability to commit to unconditional love. He had sleepwalked through school, university, jobs; always without focus, as if he expected to meet his real self along the way. He knew now that everything he had tried was to fill that emptiness: sports, tv, the encyclopaedia. And other things he decided he didn't want to think of. Part of his life lived in the dark.

Now he was hiding the biggest secret. From his father and step-mother in Canada, from his mother and her husband, from anyone he had ever known; revealing nothing had seemed the only way. He didn't want to die abandoned and alone.

His grandmother was different. It was not just her kindness that moved him; he sensed in her a kind of sorrow, of fulfilment suspended, an absence akin to his. He felt a deep responsibility to her that he had never felt for anyone before. More and more he felt the urge to tell her exactly what was wrong with him; he wanted to speak truth, to utter its name. He wanted to tell her that he was a danger to her, a curse. That what he found unbearable was this love that was breaking out in him.

7

ONE EVENING WHEN he was too weak to get out of bed and she had brought him soup, he paused with the spoon halfway to his mouth and said, "YaYa, you know what's wrong with me?"

He was shocked when she said calmly, "Yes, mi son."

"What?" He couldn't believe his ears.

"Jonathan, you don't have to tell me nothing. I know."

He didn't know how to respond. He fell silent.

When he finished eating and she was clearing up, she said:

"You know why this happen to you?"

He shook his head.

"Is because Father teef yu spirit."

"Father?" He thought she meant his own father. The minute the plane had disgorged him in Toronto, he had forgotten everything of the six years that had gone before.

"Father Donohue. Your great-grandmother Tano give you this gift and is your mother make Father Donohue tek it weh. From that, nothing never go right."

"What do you mean?"

"You nuh remember?"

"YaYa, all I remember is living with you and Mom here. Nothing else."

His grandmother looked thoughtful. "Fancy that," was all she said. She pulled the blanket over him and blew out the lamp. "Rest now."

8

IT WAS A long time before they talked again. He had a bad spell in which he thought he would die, but his grandmother's ministrations pulled him through.

One day he said, "YaYa, you're more than twice my age and I am going to die and leave you when I should be the one taking care of you."

She said calmly, "You might reach there before me, that is all."

Now he had got used to her bush baths, she had taken to wetting his head and body from time to time with a foul smelling substance which she called Spirit Weed. She ignored his protests, saying only, "Is to protect you from evil."

"YaYa, you don't understand," he cried out in anguish one day. "The evil is inside me."

"No," she said. "Anything you have only get inside because

something leave you, something they take away. But we can get it back."

"Get what back?"

"Yu rightful spirit."

"How?"

"You don't mind how. Trust them that know."

He wondered who those were. The two old men who were always hanging about, her friends Bro Nebo and Bro Samuel? But even more urgent than that was the question: how could she have known that all his life he had felt a part of himself was missing? He had never discussed it with anyone. And who were "they" who had taken his spirit away?

Sometimes, after listening to her, he felt as if he was rapidly falling backwards into a zone where anything was possible. He wondered if he was hallucinating from his illness or from the stuff his grandmother kept giving him to drink. Whatever it was, it was making him feel better. He was beginning to believe there was something in her bush medicine, in her bush baths and in the bitter tonics she brewed and made him drink several times a day.

She herself would go off into the hills to search for medicine: one day she announced it was time, folded her crocus bag inside her heng-pon-me basket, grabbed her machete and left, returning hours later, the herbs and roots, leaves, berries and bark filling the crocus bag which she carried on her head. He never knew what secret signs told her a particular leaf was ready to be plucked, but precision governed her every action. As he sat on the kitchen stool and watched, she would carefully count out the leaves or berries to be thrown into the pot of boiling water, measure a piece of root against her hand and cut it to the length before pounding it in a mortar. Some items she put in the enamel basin by the window. "That must wait for three day," she would say. Or, mixing several ingredients together she would place them in a dark cupboard. "That take seven day to ripe." By the time she was finished

apportioning each day's harvest, all was accounted for, nothing was thrown away.

Everything, she said, all her knowledge, came from High Massa through her grandmother, Tano, who was born with second sight and became a noted Warner Woman, her mouth a megaphone predicting disaster, her urgent dream messages commanding her to wrap her head in fourteen yards of coolie-red with a pencil stuck in the seventh fold, bind a seven-foot-long cord around her waist with her scissors looped through to cut away evil, take up her Bible and staff in her hand and walk to warn people within whatever radius she was ordered to go, be it one mile or a hundred. Traversing the countryside, through towns and cities, she would stride at a furious pace, except when commanded by inner voices to herald the whirlwind and spin counterclockwise, waving her Bible and staff and loudly proclaiming disaster and devastation on the populace unless they repented and mended their ways. Her message concluded — and the people appalled by the apparition, for many of her warnings came true — she would return home to assume a normal life at her yard, practising her other gift, that of healing.

YaYa would proudly talk of her grandmother Tano and her gift. Then she would seem to run out of steam and get a sad look in her eyes and fall silent, before abruptly busying herself with some task. But one day, she didn't stop talking until she came to the source of what Jonathan had read as her sorrow.

"When she getting old, Jonathan, she want somebody to carry on the work. She want this gift pass down in the family line, for she herself get it from her mother who get it from her father, and he was a real African who come after he learn all these things over there. In Africa." YaYa said this with such pride it made Jonathan smile.

"Well," she continued, "they waiting for the sign now, but time pass and none of Tano children get choose, so she couldn't pass on

the gift. When I come born with the veil they know is I am the one get choose."

For the first time since Jonathan had known her, YaYa, looked discomfited, twisting the hem of her apron between her hands.

"Ai, Jonathan, if only I did know what a precious thing it was," she exclaimed. "But I was a wayward child. Mi parents did hand me over to mi grandmother for training so I live with her and she start learn me, about bush and herb and all the treatment. Same like her, is through dream mi spirit come and tell me what wrong with the patient and what to use for the cure. But see here, is mi waywardness mek me break the chain ... dream never come to me again ... is only a little about bush I member now ... and I never receive the last gift."

"What was that?" he asked.

"Yu wi see," she said. "Maybe it pass down to you, for after me, it was you in the family get choose." He began to ask about this, but she continued, "Then again, maybe the gift was meant to pass away. Maybe the world too change up."

He knew it was no point pressing her, so he asked what she meant by her waywardness.

"It was a hard life," she said. "Nothing but work and studiration. I mean study with Tano for I never get no schooling like the other children. All I learn to do was count and measure. Tano was very strict. And I used to see all the other little children around playing and I envy them so much. For I was really a small child, you see, but I had was to behave as if I was big woman. Everything strict, strict. No joking and laughing. Maybe I did come without conviction for I envy those other children so much, my heart was not really in it and more and more I neglect my duty. When Tano die, the Yard die from neglect, for there was nobody to carry on. I forget everything. I get married, have my daughter. I wanted was to live like other women." She shook her head. "No wonder everything just fall away from me."

"What's 'everything' YaYa?" he asked gently.

"You don't see?" she asked in surprise. "Mi husband. Mi daughter — mi only child. Mi precious grandson."

She said it so passionately that both of them stayed silent for a long while.

"Well, mi daughter, now ..." she finally said, musingly. "You see, I make a big mistake with her, big mistake. Though maybe it all work out for the best. For you see her there now in her big house, driving her big car, looking so please with herself, how else that would happen if we never hand her over to the nuns to get education? Mark you, I never did want to take that step. It never seem right for our family. Is her father. Him see what they doing for the young people around, how so many learning to better themselves and right away he want that for her."

YaYa paused and stared into the distance, wiping her face with her apron and letting out deep sighs before she continued, "Deep in my heart I didn't feel right about handing her over, but I never go against my husband. And I have to say they did teach her a lot, all the things I never know so I couldn't give her and they send her off to boarding school and she there getting along good, learning shorthand and typewriting, plenty subject, studying for her exam. We expect the nuns protecting her, how we to know she sneaking out to meet this man? Big man old enough to be her father? Well, at least at the end of the day he do right by you Jonathan, him own up to him responsibility. She never even know him is married man with wife in Canada till she tell him she making baby."

Jonathan said nothing, drinking it all in.

"That was a disappointment all right, and then mi husband go and die just before you born," YaYa continued. "But you know what?" she asked, smiling for the first time, "When you born into mi hands was the happiest day in my life, mi heart just rejoice, for you born with the caul, same as me. When I see that, I feel seh

Tano forgive me, she never desert the family after all. Is through you, Jonathan, Tano send back the gift."

The gift! Jonathan lifted his head in anticipation, expecting to hear the mystery revealed. But YaYa simply continued with her story.

"Mark you, for a long time I don't sure. So I watch and pray for guidance. Is only when you four — five, that day after you fall asleep down by the river that I sure. It was right after that you start to prophesy. Just like Tano."

"The day I fell asleep?" He was alarmed at how fast his heart was beating.

"You mean you remember?" His grandmother seemed excited.

"No, Mom told me about it. YaYa, you know what happened to me that day?"

"No, but it was right after that you predict Thomas's death."

One day, said his grandmother, he was standing with her out by the road, talking to a neighbour, when Sawyer and his assistant Thomas came by. They greeted everyone as they passed and the boy suddenly screamed, "No. Thomas don't go!" and rushed after the pair screaming and bawling and trying to hold on to Thomas. Everyone was surprised at his behaviour for he was normally a quiet, well behaved boy, but he wouldn't stop screaming even when his grandmother gave him a few good slaps. Sawyer and Thomas went on their way, shaking their heads.

Later that evening there was a great commotion and they rushed out to see a tremendous crowd of people coming down the road, carrying a makeshift stretcher and the body of Thomas lashed to it.

"What happen?" YaYa asked.

"Thomas get into accident with the saw," they said.

"Him dead?"

"Yes."

YaYa told Jonathan she went inside the house, feeling strangely

troubled. By that time he was in bed, fast asleep. She stood looking at him for a long, long time. When his mother came home and YaYa told her what had happened she begged her not to tell anyone.

"It's just coincidence," his mother had said.

"Yes," said YaYa.

In the aftermath of the funeral and mourning, nobody remembered the boy's strange outburst until one morning when, instead of drinking his cocoa, he lifted his head, looked at the wall for a good long time, and then said, "Mrs. Williams dead."

"What you say?" asked YaYa.

"Mrs. Williams dead."

YaYa looked at him. She asked him, gently, "Son, how you know Mrs. Williams dead?"

He looked at her without answering.

"You sure?" she asked, and he nodded. Later that day, YaYa heard Mrs. Williams had dropped dead that morning. She told his mother, who again begged her to say nothing.

But the third time the boy predicted a death, there were witnesses and before the corpse was cold, the news had spread. People began to gather in their yard to look at him and discuss the matter. Since YaYa wasn't the one wanting to hide the boy's gift, she chatted freely.

"Well, he is his great-great-grandmother Tano's child."

Jonathan heard how after that, his mother came home every day in tears having to force her way through a crush of people to get into her own house. She cried, for she didn't want a son who had second sight or anything that seemed out of the ordinary. She was ashamed when YaYa talked of Tano and such things she knew Father would have described as the work of the devil. But she couldn't stop the flood of people and the talk, and soon their house became a shrine with folks coming from far and near to see this amazing prodigy. They tried to ask him questions but the little

boy only yawned and said nothing. His gift was one of foretelling death — nothing else could be cajoled out of him. The predictions came spontaneously, or so it seemed, usually too late to prevent the fated occurrence.

YaYa was in her element, appointing herself gatekeeper and regulator. She put the boy to sit on a huge cushion in the armchair so that he could be seen. She dressed him in white from head to toe. She made him a turban of silk. She never charged money but she accepted gifts people brought, mostly food until there was so much she gave most of it away to the needy.

This went on for some months. YaYa kept waiting for something else to be revealed, for his gift to be converted into a force for healing, for that was their family calling. She should have expected it, she told Jonathan now, the day his mother came home and would not look her in the face as she told her Father was coming to take the boy. He was possessed of devils which had to be cast out. He would stay at the rectory till God's work was done. The priest would come for the boy in his car at night so as to avoid the crowd.

"You remember anything Jonathan?" YaYa asked hopefully. But, like everything else, he had no memory of it. "I never know what that man do to you, the time he have you there," she said, sounding very old. Then, angrily, "I don't care what anybody say, when them send you back, you not the same boy. Is like everything just drain out of you. I will never forgive your mother for letting you go. Never! I forbid her, but she was stronger than me for she threaten to leave and take you. I know they would help her. It was me against them. What I could fight with? When they had you there, they wouldn't let me through the gate when I say I come to bring you soup and clean clothes. I stand there in the road in the broad daylight and bawl the living eye water. You see, it come to me that if I wasn't so wayward and did stay with Tano and learn what I was put in this world to learn, it wouldn't go easy so. For I would have power, you see. But I was frail as a lamb. And I never

have a soul to help me. You know the hardest thing? I never know that she would still send you away. Oh I was blind!"

As she talked, Jonathan was overcome by a memory of blackness, of flying black clothes, of language cutting the air like a sword, he felt something escaping from him with a hissing sound, and then a feeling of falling, falling into a tunnel, into a kind of blankness. He must have fainted as he recollected this, because he came to and found himself crying, a deep and desperate sobbing for something lost.

9

JONATHAN REALIZED WHAT had happened to him, and he began to understand his grandmother's insistence that his sickness was absence, not presence — not something added but the result of something that had been taken away. She believed that if something had been taken, it could also be replaced, but he was not so sanguine. None of this knowledge made him feel that his illness could be cured. Not even the best doctors in the world were holding out that possibility. She compelled him to retrace his steps, to fit together the puzzle of his life.

He began to wonder what really had been taken from him by the exorcising priest, for he did not consider the ability to predict deaths a particularly valuable gift. There must have been something more, something he had received as a bounty. His grandmother clearly had no knowledge of this, but he felt that the loss was greater than any of them had imagined.

More and more his mind wandered to that day by the river when he had fallen asleep, for whatever had happened there was the key. Whenever he tried to picture the scene, something always hovered on the edge of his consciousness, just as it had when his mother had told him the story. "It will come back," voices seeming to come from the air kept saying. "It will come."

10

DESPITE ITS SADNESS, YaYa's story added to Jonathan's growing understanding that he was part of something. He was born not alone, as he had always felt, but had fallen headlong into history.

He began to fade away. One evening YaYa lay on the bed beside him and cradled his head on her breast as if he were a little child. He couldn't help himself; he started to cry. She hushed him and crooned a song, and then she told him a story.

"Now," she said, "I will tell you of the gift. The gift I might have had if I was not a wayward girl. The gift that maybe Tano passed on to you." The ultimate gift in the family, she said, the gift to the chosen ones was the ability to fly.

He had to laugh.

"Hush yu mout," she said. "Don't laugh at things you know nothing about. All the great ones know how to fly. Like Tano. In fact, once upon a time, all the ol' Africans that come here could fly. But once they touch ground, too many things happen to make them forget. Them foot stick too fast in the snare that set for them. Only a few, the few that remain faithful and true, could still fly back."

"Fly back where?"

"To Guinea."

"YaYa!"

"That is just what they call it, but is really the place where you meet again with the loved ones who leave you behind, the ones we call Ol'People. Ol'People turn into spirit already and spirit don't touch salt. In the old days, only the ones who don't touch salt could fly."

"That rules me out then," he said smiling weakly, humouring her.

"In this modern age, is hard to keep strictly to the rules."

"YaYa, this is a serious matter. You just can't bend the rules to suit yourself!" he burst out, genuinely shocked.

"Look at you, how little you weigh," she said, feeling his ribcage, lifting up one of his arms for exhibition, and laughing. "You like a little bird. You don't think you getting ready to fly?"

He laughed, loudly this time, his laughter turning into a cough. By the time she brought him a drink, her mood had changed. She seemed angry.

"You don't have to believe. But I know what I know," she said as she turned down the lamp and left him.

His shoulder blades started to itch.

11

THE NEXT MORNING he woke up feeling too ill to get out of bed. In the evening, the old men arrived as they did every night now. Bro Nebo and Bro Samuel, his grandmother's friends. They came into his room and greeted him gently, scrutinizing him, before shyly touching their caps and retreating to the veranda. Tonight, he could hear their murmuring voices and that of YaYa seeming to come from very far away, coming and going, music that soothed. Later, YaYa came into the room with a small calabash full of a dark and viscous liquid. By now he had ceased to ask about anything she gave him and he swallowed it, trying not to gag.

"Jonathan, Brother Nebo bring this specially for you," she said. "It take a long time to make. Is not something to drink any and every day. We feel the time is ripe."

"For what?" he wanted to ask, but his senses were already fading.

"It will give you spirit. Whatever you are to be, will be."

12

HE CLIMBS INTO the forest-clad mountain. Thick creepers hanging from the trees entangle his every step, the bush of the undergrowth tearing at his feet. He finds it hard going, but makes progress,

hacking his way through with his machete, feeling strong. The forest is damp and cool, the way he has always known it to be. At first the task of cutting his way through is pleasant and he enjoys feeling his strength; but, as the day wears on, he begins to tire and sweat profusely. The trees seem to be moving farther and farther apart, allowing the full heat of the sun to pour down on his bare head. He is dying of heat and thirst and there is no water. He becomes tired and discouraged. He no longer bothers to look where he is going, though he continues to hack away. He cannot stop; he is impelled to go on, to what he has no idea. Suddenly he is through the bush and into a clearing and it is so sudden and unexpected, his happiness so overwhelming, he starts to run. Blinded by the glare, by the sweat in his eyes, he fails to see what's ahead. Carried by his own momentum, he trips and falls into what he recognizes is an open grave. In that same instant, he sees himself lying in the grave. He is overcome by his terror, by horror, by the feeling of the fibres of his body dissolving, his bones flying apart. He comes to in a space that is empty and desolate; he knows it to be the place of death, of total aloneness, of total silence. He is scrabbling to hold on to the ground that is falling away but he cannot anchor himself. He is floating, floating up and up in the silent empty world with no sense of time until he sees emerging out of the blankness of the far distance a white mountain with deeply serrated edges. Standing on its summit is a woman, her head wrapped in red. As he comes closer to her, he sees she is extending both hands, imploring him to come. He understands this is where he is bound to go. He feels himself floating toward her as if flying, until he crashes head first into an invisible barrier. He plummets, stunned. He lifts himself painfully, and tries again to strive upwards, only to be beaten back. Though thrown down each time, he continues to struggle. The woman beckons, and he knows he has to crash through the barrier to float freely toward her, weightless, as if his body does not exist, his

only sensation a dot of bitterness on his tongue that is spreading, from his tongue to the inside of his mouth and upward across his face, awakening each muscle by turn. His senses awaken too; he is hearing a sound, a kind of humming coming from the universe itself.

He opens his eyes to find Bro Nebo bending over him with a feather which he dips into a little calabash and applies a green liquid to his tongue. He feels the taste of it moving into his throat, spreading downward. Each capillary, each vein, each artery awakens as it is touched by the bitterness. As the sensation spreads throughout his body, like a slow-moving stream, each place touched by the liquid in its turn comes alive, not with a rush but slowly, like a counterpoint to that humming sound outside of himself that is coming and going, coming and going until his entire body is revived.

And in the very instant the last atom of his body is replaced, his tongue comes alive, uncontrolled. He is startled to hear what is pouring out of him in an endless stream; he hears himself giving voice to his most secret, his deadliest thoughts, his desires, his fears, narrating his every action, no matter how hidden, revealing even to himself his thoughts about his mother, his father, of all those he'd wronged, his wasted life. It all tumbles out, uncontrolled, his tongue a runaway train speaking of his illness, his battles with it, his distress, his fear of dying, finally naming it aloud, shouting its name, waiting for the echoes to come back, shouting it again, until the whole world is possessed by the sound which consumes everything and there is nothing left to say. He ceases to form sentences or words; he is reduced to babble, to retching and coughing up the remaining bits and pieces till finally he lies absolutely exhausted with nothing left to be expelled. Only then does Bro Nebo hold up his head and make him drink something that tastes like clear, fresh, pure water.

13

HE COMES AWAKE in his bed and hears, faintly from the veranda, the humming and murmuring of his grandmother and the old men coming and going, before he falls into a deep, refreshing sleep.

14

HE AWAKENS NEXT morning with the feeling that something momentous took place during the night, something that involved him. What, he has no idea.

His grandmother enters with a basin and a washcloth and no expression on her face.

"YaYa, what happened last night?"

"Nothing, mi son." She carefully puts the basin and the washcloth on the bedside table and leaves.

Jonathan turns his face to the wall and watches a line of ants. Something comes in a blinding flash: he knows what it is now, knows what he lost so many years ago as a child. The morning after the incident down by the river, he had awakened with a precious gift: the gift of understanding animals. He is sure now, sure that he had looked at the ants and had understood their every word, and he realized this was the source of his ability to predict. The animals had told him. He saw the day he stood on the road with his grandmother, and Sawyer and Thomas walked by. A bird in a branch above had looked him straight in the eye and said, "Poor Thomas, what a sorry day today," and he had his vision of the tree falling. That was what had made him scream out, "Thomas, don't go."

Lying in bed now, he remembers. He recalls how the gift had seemed so natural and ordinary, it never occurred to him to tell anyone. How after his long sleep, YaYa had teased him and asked him what had happened, and he had taken his mug of cocoa from

her and said "Nothing." He recalls the so-called predictions that had come through this gift, and how the morning after spending time with the priest, he had awakened to a sense of utter desolation.

He had been shut out from a place of unsullied joy. The door into enchantment, into companionship, had briefly opened and then cruelly slammed shut. He had fallen into nothingness.

Some of that devastation washes over him now. Here he is twenty years later and the ants on the wall still talk to each other but he overhears nothing, and the bird outside his window might be chattering in Greek for all he understands it. And it comes to him that YaYa too needed to be released from the burden of suffering she had carried most of her life, her own sense of loss — that he had been sent to fill the emptiness in her life just as she had relieved him of his.

He senses that she knows, as he does, that they are almost at the end of the story. All that is left is to find out exactly what happened by the river that day. For it was there he had received his gifts. He runs through his mind the story his mother has told him, how each day he would go and search for the most perfect fruit he could find. Had he found something else that day? He looks outside. "Come, come," the bird seems to be saying through the window. "Yes, go," the ants seem to be urging. His shoulder blades itch and the whole world feels as if it is stirring, alive with sounds he has never heard before.

15

JONATHAN FEELS SURPRISINGLY strong as he gets out of bed, pulls on his shorts and a shirt and sandals and walks into the kitchen.

"YaYa," he says, "I am going down to the river."

She doesn't seem surprised. She hugs him tightly, then lets him go. "Walk good," she says.

He takes the walking stick he has been using and starts his slow

descent to the river. Because of the drought, his every step dislodges earth and stones, which roll down the hill ahead of him like heralds. This is the first time he has found the strength to walk to this place, though he had wanted to do so from the very start of his visit. He finds it bears no resemblance to what he had imagined. It is parched like the rest of the land; instead of water, the riverbed is nothing but a dry gully filled with stones. The lush grove of guava and underbrush is gone, in its place a few straggling trees bearing hard green fruit, some blackened on the tree, the few ripened ones studded with worm holes.

But he doesn't feel discouraged. Something is there waiting for him, just like the first time, something pulling him on, wanting to be found. And since he doesn't know what really happened the first time, he starts his search for the perfect guava.

He sees no sign of it on any of the nearby trees, but as he walks on the bankside, the golden glow of one, high on a tree further down the gully, beckons him. He turns back for one last look up at the house and sees his grandmother standing on the hilltop, silhouetted against the skyline, hand shading her eyes from the sun. He waves, but she does not see him; she appears to be looking at something in the sky. She vanishes from view as he takes the plunge deeper into the gully.

The thought comes that she never told him how she knew that people with the gift could fly. For if they could fly, wouldn't they simply take off and never return? How could anyone know what had actually taken place? He remembers his grandmother telling stories of Tano's grand funeral, saying nothing of when Tano had flown. But by the time he has pushed farther up the gully bank the thought has slipped away, like his body, which seems to be dissolving, leaving him light and carefree as a child.

He gets nearer to where he thinks he has seen the guava and is surprised not to find it on that tree, though he immediately catches a glimpse of it farther on. He is not sure it is the same fruit — this

one seems to be bigger and glowing, more inviting. He pushes on, feeling the excitement of chasing the object of his desire that is now, finally, within reach.

He plucks the guava from the tree and examines it closely. It is the most perfect fruit he has ever seen. Before he bites into it, it floods his senses with its fragrance; his ears come alive with the buzz and murmur of the universe. He is not surprised to see perched on the branch above his head the bird that has been outside his window — the same bird, he is sure, from his childhood.

He takes the first bite of the guava and chews very slowly, savouring it, the first solid food he has eaten in days. He happens to be facing the hills and, after a few bites, notices without surprise that they are becoming transparent, until he is able to see right through them into the other hills beyond and on to the highest mountain range. Above those, he sees the rain clouds assembling, can almost feel the drops on his face, hear the flood-water drumming down the gully, see the jubilant dance of Rivermaid triumphantly entering his grandmother's church to possess her followers.

A feeling of lassitude, of contentment, of great joy begins to steal over him as he consumes the fruit. When he comes to the last piece, he holds it in his hand for a very long time as if contemplating a final and irrevocable step. He feels a momentary twinge of regret as he pauses with the fruit halfway to his mouth.

It is then he becomes aware that out of all the sounds, one has clearly emerged, insistently demanding his attention. He looks up and recognizes it as the voice of the bird, a voice that must have been speaking to him for some time, for it is rather irritable and scolding, like that of a cranky old woman. He chews and swallows the last piece of guava and feels uplifted, as if he has sprouted wings. He laughs, for he realizes he clearly understands every word the bird is saying.

It is urging him. "Hurry up. Rain is coming. Let's go."

