AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

THE NEW TRIBE



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BUCHI EMECHETA


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To my students and friends at the Mental After Care Centre in Northampton, where we realize that many mental problems can be caused by people who mean well.

Chapter 1

When Virginia married the young curate, it came as a surprise to her family and friends. It was, in fact, more than a surprise, it was a shock, since Virginia, popularly known as Ginny, was already thirty-four and it had been tacitly accepted that she would look after her aging parents. Mr and Mrs Perkins, retired colonial administrators living in Devon, had had three children, the eldest of whom, Robert, had gone successfully through the middle-class rituals of private school followed by Cambridge, and had gone to seek his fortune in South Africa. Victoria, the youngest and cleverest of the three, had established herself as a television journalist in Melbourne, Australia. Ginny, the middle child, had settled for staying at home – until, that is, her surprise announcement. On the day of Ginny's wedding, Victoria, who was maid of honour, couldn't help exclaiming, 'Goodness, Ginny, to think of you actually getting married!'

Ginny smiled benignly, pretending not to understand. Her husband-to-be, the newly qualified curate Arthur Arlington, was perfectly satisfied with his wife. He was not looking for a clever or outstandingly pretty woman. Ginny's presence was soothing to him, in spite of her habit of nodding unnecessarily.

The fact that he had to leave that part of Devon for a position in the small seaside town of St Simon, had hastened his decision. He was to go there as the local vicar, a big promotion for a man of thirty-nine who had not been long in the profession. He felt he needed a woman like Ginny, sensible and down-to-earth, to help him. Ginny had put up no resistance to his proposal and within a few months they were married and living in St Simon. Arthur felt that in marrying Ginny, he was simply doing God's

will, but to Ginny, her marriage was nothing short of a miracle. Miraculous or otherwise, the new couple settled quietly into their village life.

With marriage, Ginny began to hope that one day she would also be a mother. Though she cherished a vision of herself with three or four children, the reality was that time was going by, and nothing was happening. Her husband Arthur, though a good listener, who knew how to behave with his wife in public, was not a very sexual man. He knew when to pat her back affectionately, when to smile at her from the pulpit and when to open the door of their old car for Ginny. But inside their bedroom, Ginny did not need to be told that Arthur would rather sleep undisturbed. He had thought that would have suited Ginny too, being such a mild woman. It did not, however, take Arthur long to realize that his mild wife had unsuspected depths of passion.

For the sake of peace, Arthur developed a strategy. He anticipated their love nights days ahead, and on such days, he would snooze for an hour or so in the cloister. In the evening, he would take a couple of unaccustomed shots of whisky, and thus fortified, he would do his duty as a husband, even staying awake afterwards to listen to Ginny's pillow talk, which sounded to him like banalities. He was uncomfortable at being subjected to what he regarded as a post mortem.

'Why in the name of God does she want to know whether she was good or not, and whether I love her?' Arthur thought to himself many a time after such nights. Eventually she would fall asleep, the sound of her light breathing filling their pale wallpapered room. Then Arthur would turn over, sighing, 'Thank God it's all over – till the next time.'

Left to himself, he would not have married, but he knew his parishioners would expect it. Also, his parents, who had an expensive house in Cheshire, would certainly have left their estate to a cats' home if they had suspected he was going to live a single man the rest of his life. Besides, he loved his work of

gently guiding, listening and consoling, and considered himself good at it. If going through the motions in the bedroom was the price he had to pay, it was worth it.

After a couple of years of marriage, and without telling her husband, Ginny went to their doctor. She wanted to know if there was something wrong with her. For some time, the doctor could find nothing wrong, and eventually asked to see Arthur as well. At this point, it was revealed that their blood group in both cases was Rh negative, and they were advised not to have children. This was a heavy blow to Ginny. For months, she cried quietly, but openly. Arthur comforted her the best he could, telling her that without children, they would be in a better position to help others. Ginny nodded mutely. There was nothing she could do, but Arthur noticed that she became quieter. 'Oh God, why is marriage such a minefield?' he privately asked himself.

One day, exasperated by Ginny answering every question in monosyllables, he asked, 'Ginny, have you ever wondered why, of all the men in this world, you chose to marry me?'

Ginny nodded. 'And you chose me, and here we are, both Rh negative, and we didn't even know. Honestly, Arthur, I do think about it sometimes.'

From then on, Ginny suppressed her pain. She put on a cloak of normality and did not allow her husband to come too close to the margins of her anguish. If Arthur thought he could now sleep through the night, however, he was mistaken. Instead of leaving him alone, Ginny began introducing little games she had read about in women's magazines into their bedroom to stimulate Arthur out of his dormant position. Many a time, she succeeded in arousing him. Arlington found himself responding, despite his reluctance.

'If our marriage was a miracle, what stops God from performing more miracles?' Ginny asked herself this so often, it became a litany.

Chapter 2

It was a dull morning and Ginny was trying to rouse herself from sleep. Drifting up from downstairs was the aroma of coffee. Arthur had preceded her to the kitchen. Unusually for that time of day, a frantic ring at the door pierced the quiet house. It sounded so urgent that Ginny leapt out of bed and looked out of their bedroom window. She could see Julian, the local paperboy, standing there with his bundle of papers wedged in the handlebars of his bicycle. There was some sort of bundle in the large basket in front. Even from above, she could see Julian was trembling. She heard the sound of the front door opening, and saw Julian take the bundle from his bicycle basket and thrust it at Arthur. She was about to turn away and look for her dressing gown, when what she heard next stopped her in her tracks.

'It's a baby,' stammered Julian. 'I was cycling past the phone booths in town and I heard it crying. I looked inside, and there was something in a Tesco bag. When I looked, it was a baby. I didn't know what to do, so I brought it to you, Vicar.' Ginny wasn't sure if the faint whimper which reached her was Arthur or the baby.

Not waiting to hear more, she tied her blue dressing gown tightly around her, and rushed downstairs. Arthur was still standing at the open door, the baby in his arms, a look of stupefaction on his face. A Tesco supermarket bag was at his feet. Ginny took the baby without a word, wrapping it inside her dressing gown, and backed away towards the kitchen. Julian mounted his bike and cycled off, as if he had just delivered the morning paper.

In the kitchen, Ginny gently unwrapped the baby, who was covered only in a blanket. In a hushed voice she exclaimed,

'Arthur, it's a girl!' Arthur stood bemusedly to one side as Ginny, the baby crooked lovingly in her left arm, warmed the milk he had been going to drink with his coffee with her free hand. She looked as if she had been doing it all her life. When the milk was warm, she dipped her finger into it and carried it to the baby's mouth. She sucked it so eagerly that Ginny smiled. Holding the child in the crook of her arm as she sucked, it looked to Arthur almost as if she was breast-feeding. In spite of his shock, Arthur was moved. He had known Ginny wanted a child, but he had never seen her as a mother. She was so natural with the baby, for the first time he understood what it meant to her.

He ventured gently, 'We'll have to report this to the police. We need to find the child's mother, and a doctor to see to the child.' Ginny nodded, and went on rocking the child and dropping the warm milk into her mouth.

So the authorities were called: the doctor, the police and the social welfare office. The doctor pronounced the child perfect. It seemed she was only a few hours old. Since she needed care and everyone could see how competent Ginny was, she was allowed to look after the baby. They agreed to call her Julia, after Julian, the paper boy who found her. A national search failed to find any trace of the mother, who seemed to have vanished into thin air.

The Arlingtons became the baby's official foster parents, but Ginny was impatient to get started on the procedures for adoption, which she knew were lengthy and complicated. She happily submitted to the succession of in-depth interviews, the endless questionnaires and the personal probing of the social workers. Arthur passively went along with what he saw as his duty. Eventually they were pronounced fit to be Julia's adoptive parents.

To mark the occasion, they immediately christened the child Julia. Ginny was overjoyed, and talked of nothing else to her

friends and parishioners. All her letters to Victoria and Robert were full of Julia's progress. At last she had been granted what she most desired. Another miracle had been performed. Julia brought a joy into their lives which Arthur especially had never imagined. They had lost touch with the social services and almost forgotten she wasn't their natural child. Julia was two, and toddling in the kitchen when the phone call came. Arthur answered. He listened briefly, and replaced the telephone.

'Social services want to see us on Wednesday at eleven.' Ginny was in shock. When she could speak, she whispered, 'What do they want to talk to us about, Arthur?' Arthur was as ignorant as she was. Ginny turned to the little girl, who was playing happily with a plastic bottle top on the floor.

'Julia, you are going to stay with us, aren't you?' she asked, nodding as she always did. The child nodded back, mimicking Ginny.

'Stop worrying Ginny. You'll drive yourself mad. Let's wait and see. They may want to talk to us about something else, you never know.' But Arthur himself was disturbed.

On Wednesday, the social workers came. They wanted to know whether Ginny and Arthur were ready to foster another child, since they had turned out such exemplary parents. Everybody in the room could hear Arthur Arlington's exaggerated sigh of relief.

'My wife thought you were coming to take Julia away,' Arthur explained.

'Take her away? Certainly not, she's your child now,' reassured one of the social workers. 'But this little boy of 18 months could be a brother to Julia.'

'Why us?' Arthur couldn't help asking. As for Ginny, she was silent with shock.

The officer brought out an envelope and gave it to Arthur. He glanced through it, gathering that they had been specifically chosen by the boy's mother because she had followed Julia's

progress in the press. That she could not keep the toddler, Chester, because she had just found out she was expecting twins, and the father was not ready to accept another man's child. As Ginny and Arthur were Christians, she was sure Chester would have a better chance in life with them than he would have with her. She loved her son very much, but could no longer keep him.

Arthur passed the letter to Ginny. Tears welled in her eyes as she read it. 'I don't mind,' she announced impulsively. 'I always wanted a house full of children.'

One of the social workers now spoke. 'Chester's mother is Nigerian. You need to be aware he is a black child.' The room was frozen into silence. Ginny stared at the social workers questioningly. They nodded. Yes, Chester was black. Returning to the letter, she looked at the signature: Catherine Mba. She asked, 'Where is the baby now?'

'He's in the care of Social Services. He's very traumatised by being abandoned, and we feel he needs a home as fast as possible. We wanted to know if you would consider giving him one while his case is assessed.'

'Consider! What is there to consider!' Ginny responded calmly, her protective instincts awakened. So once again, the Arlingtons found themselves unexpectedly parents.

Chester cried a great deal at first, and clung to Ginny, but was obviously well looked after. He was confident and trusting, and gradually settled down. The fact that he was black only added to their feelings of having been specially chosen. 'How could a woman give up this beautiful child?' was a question they both asked themselves.

At the same time, Arthur dreaded going through another bureaucratic probing if they were to adopt Chester officially. He had found it harder than his wife to endure the endless scrutiny of their health, their relationship, their financial standing and their emotional fitness. He was not sure he could go

through it all again. He tried to warn Ginny of the risks in Chester's case.

'Ginny, apart from all the procedures, we can never be sure his mother won't pop up to claim her child at any moment,' he cautioned.

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,' was Ginny's response. Arthur was struck, as often recently, by her calmness and certainty. She was stronger than he had imagined. However, Arthur made sure that every effort was made to persuade Catherine Mba to come forward. It seemed she was determined not to be found.

As the adoption proceedings dragged on, Ginny tried to remind herself they might not be allowed to keep Chester. She dreaded the possibility, as Chester and Julia were already inseparable. She decided to try and keep alive for Chester some memory of where he came from.

As far as Ginny was concerned, Nigeria was one of those dreadful African countries where soldiers kept overthrowing the democratic government, and chaos, poverty and violence reigned. She went to the public library, and for the first time in her life, began finding out a little more. She was surprised to learn that Nigeria was a country of many different languages and peoples, with a rich history and its own traditional way of doing things. As there were no children's books about Africa in the library, she decided to make one. Slowly and painstakingly, she made Chester a storybook based on an African folktale she had read. She illustrated it herself using details she had read about. On the cover she painted green banana trees, and tall, graceful palms, surrounding a mud-walled compound. Inside the compound she painted her own vision of an African village scene, women carrying water pitchers on their heads, men sitting together under a shade tree, and children playing. She read the book to Chester every night until he came to know all the words and pictures by heart.

Eventually, the Arlingtons were accepted by the social services as fit parents for Chester. Arthur sighed with relief the day the post brought the news. 'This is the last time, Ginny,' he warned, as he handed her the letter. 'I can't go through all that again.'

Ginny nodded. With her usual calm she put it into the pocket of her house cardigan and danced around the kitchen holding the hands of the two youngsters. Arthur was yet again surprised by her hidden capacities, at the same time as being amused. Chester was christened Chester Arlington, brother to Julia Arlington.

The children transformed Ginny. She was absorbed in looking after them, and needed less of her husband. As the little marital games she had devised for the privacy of the bedroom became less frequent, Arthur found he actually missed them. Ginny had ignited his passion, only to leave him out in the cold. Now it was his turn to suppress his pain, while Ginny flourished.

When Victoria wrote from Australia, she complained that Ginny had lost sight of everything except Chester, Julia and Arthur, as if they were the only people who mattered in the world. 'But they are in mine,' Ginny said happily.

Chapter 3

Chester could not remember the exact moment when he knew he was adopted. It was like learning to feed yourself. You knew you must have been taught while you were in the cradle, but you could not pinpoint the exact minute or the particular hour. It began as a glimmer and gradually became a solid awareness, established, but somehow imprisoned inside him. However, even at the age of four or five, he felt a sense of unbelonging. He instinctively knew that broaching the subject with his parents

would cause pain, and so he kept silent, but he was sure it would come to light one day. How and when, he had no idea.

Meanwhile, the man he knew as his father was the Reverend Arthur Arlington, who was married to his mum, Ginny. The Arlingtons were like a good strong tree, under whose branches Chester and Julia sheltered. Ginny, in particular, showed great patience with the children, and Chester could not remember her raising her voice to him. So he was unprepared for his first real encounter with the outside world, when he was sent to school. Julia had been at the same school since the year before, and had told Chester so many stories about it that, in his imagination, it had become an extension of Sunday school.

The day he started he was in new shorts and shirt, and a striped tie with matching cap. At first, he faced the new experience with enthusiasm, but at lunchtime he was tired and suddenly wanted to go home. He wanted Mummy, he wanted to sit in her lap and have her read to him. He gave vent to a howl so loud and sudden that Miss Slattery, the teacher, jumped and ran to him. 'I want to go home,' was all he could wail.

Miss Slattery sat on a low chair, took Chester on her lap and consoled him. 'Yes, Chester, you will go home soon. We'll all go home at the end of the school day.'

The other new children, seeing the attention Chester was receiving, gave in to their hitherto suppressed feelings of boredom and homesickness. The class joined in Chester's wailing. In desperation, the teacher dashed to Julia's class to borrow her from her teacher. When Chester saw Julia, he instantly stopped crying and held onto her. The teacher sighed with relief and congratulated herself for her ingenuity. Chester and Julia were allowed to sit side by side while they experimented with crayons. Despite the loss of their chief wailer, the other children continued to cry.

Drawn by the noise, the headmaster came to investigate. As

Miss Slattery explained the problem, he said jokingly to Chester, 'You little devil, you started the uproar, and now look at you, laughing away with your sister!' The teacher smiled but Julia's face clouded. She piped up, 'Chester's not the devil! He's my brother!'

The headmaster and Miss Slattery gave each other a knowing look. Chester felt the change of mood immediately and so did the whimpering pupils. He looked up from his painting and was confused. Julia, however, looked the headmaster straight in the eye and took her brother's hand. Chester was different and Mummy had told her to look after him. No-one was going to pick on him. Chester only knew his sister was sad and cross. He didn't know why, but he felt responsible. After that, the sense of spoiling things for others remained with him for a long, long time and would not go away. Instinctively, Chester understood he had to behave and try not to cause trouble.

A day or two after this incident, Ray Miller started school. He had been sick, and hadn't come on the first day with the other children. As a result, they all knew each other and he felt left out. Ray tried to be brave, because he knew boys didn't cry, but he felt lost all the same. His mother, Mrs Miller, was the school dinner lady, and he watched sadly as the teachers congratulated her on how her little boy was settling down at school. Towards the end of the week, as his mummy left him at the classroom, he could no longer contain himself, and set up a wail for her to return. Chester, wanting to show that he was a big boy, hitched up his shorts, marched up to his distressed comrade and put his arms round him. 'I cried too,' he confided. 'But I don't cry any more. Do you want to colour with me?' They became comrades-in-arms. At lunchtime, Ray's mummy made sure the friends had extra helpings of whatever they wanted.

As the first term drew to a close, the children were preparing a Christmas nativity play. Chester was chosen as leader of the three wise kings. Other children wanted the part, but the teacher

pointed out that the kings came from the Orient, and would have looked like Chester. He didn't understand, but he was proud of the attention, and prouder still of the satisfaction his mother took in making his costume. It was a long purple robe like the one in the Bible illustration, and Chester had to try it on over and over again.

'You're a real African king!' exclaimed Ginny. 'Now try on your crown.' She had made the crown of cardboard, and covered it in gold paper. It was a little big, but Chester was happy to wear it.

'What do you think, Arthur?'

'Oh yes, Chester, you look grand.' Chester looked at his parents admiring him, and felt excited.

On the day of the play, he enjoyed himself enormously in his purple velvet robe and shiny crown. After the play, there were hot mince pies and different kinds of juice. Many of the parents congratulated him on being such a good king. As they left the school hall, Chester ran up to say good-bye to Ray who was dressed as a shepherd, with a crook in his hand. His father laughed and said jovially, 'Chester, king of the Orient!'

On his way home in the dark with his parents, Chester slipped his hand into Ginny's and asked, 'What's the Orient, Mummy?'

'It means the East, where the wise men came from,' she responded.

'What's the East?' he pursued. Ginny was silent for a moment, then she said, 'Africa's in the East. Where your people came from.'

In bed that night, he thought about her words. 'Your people.' He thought the Arlingtons were his people. The sense of unbelonging strengthened.

Chapter 4

Time passed and Chester and Julia were growing up. One day during the summer holidays, the Arlingtons were preparing for a trip to the seaside. It was a hot July day, and there was a sense of expectancy in the air. Chester sat on the kitchen step leading to the back garden and watched Arthur loading a film into his camera. Behind them, in the kitchen, Ginny and Julia were covering the picnic basket with a bright red tablecloth.

'Dad, who's my real mother?' Chester asked all of a sudden.

Arthur stopped what he was doing for a second, and then proceeded very deliberately to wind the film forward, squinting through the lens as he did so. Chester felt his heart beating very fast. He didn't know what had prompted the question, and was afraid of the answer. Arthur stood up and moved towards his wife like a much older person. When he reached Ginny, he stopped and turned to face his son.

'Why are you asking?' he said softly.

'I just want to know who my parents are,' said Chester. 'At school they say I can't be your child because I'm black.' Julia suddenly covered her ears and burst into tears. Ginny held her, murmuring comfortingly, and Chester felt guilty again.

'It's OK Julia,' he said, 'you're white, like them. You're their child, but I'm different.' Arthur's voice was gentle but firm when he told everyone to sit down. 'Including you, Chester. Let's all sit down round the table and talk about this. We were going to tell you soon, but since you've brought it up, we might as well do it now.'

Julia, sitting next to Ginny, sniffed quietly. She was wearing the white dress with red flowers, that reminded Chester of poppies on Remembrance Day. She was as pretty as a little girl in a picture book, but now she sat with her eyes lowered, staring

at the plastic check tablecloth. Ginny looked more serious than Chester had ever seen her, and he was frightened of what he had unleashed. He looked from one to the other. He fidgeted nervously, licking his lips.

'We both love you very much' Arthur Arlington began, covering Ginny's right hand which was lying on the table. Her left hand was holding one of Julia's, so the three of them were joined together. Arthur was not given to much affectionate demonstration, so his caressing of Ginny's hand emphasized the gravity of whatever he was about to say.

'Some children are born to parents who don't want them . . .' he began.

'Or,' Ginny quickly interrupted, 'some parents want their children, but can't afford to keep them.'

'Why can't they keep them?' Chester asked, forgetting he had meant to be quiet and listen. The Reverend Arlington decided to press on with his speech. He had already prepared himself to tell the children that they were not their real parents. He wanted to say that, though they were adopted, they were loved, and had been chosen by them. However he knew the last part was not completely true. He and Ginny had not chosen these children, they had been brought. It made no difference, of course, but he was accustomed to sticking to the facts. He called it telling the truth. He knew too that behind Ginny's calm exterior, she still harboured a fear that one day a woman would materialise and ask for her child back. And how could he tell a sensitive ten year old like Julia that she was found left in a Tesco bag at a telephone booth, on a freezing day, when she was only a few hours old? He dreaded the effect it might have on her. This had haunted him ever since he and Ginny had decided they must tell the children the truth. As for Chester, Arthur knew his outward toughness was self-protective. He knew that Chester needed careful handling, and he and Ginny had tried their best to

provide it. He decided to get it out quickly, however brutal it sounded.

'Julia, we don't actually know who your parents are. Not for want of trying, believe me. Your mother left you in a phone booth, inside a Tesco shopping bag. You were only a few hours old, and a boy called Julian found you on his paper round and brought you here. We fostered you and applied for adoption. The authorities put us through hell before they eventually capitulated and allowed us to be your parents. The battle was worth it and we are very proud.

'Chester, your mother read about Julia in the papers, and when she was looking for a good home for you, she wrote asking us to have you. She felt she couldn't look after you herself, because she was expecting twins, and the babies' father didn't want another child on his hands. She knew we were Christians, and hoped you would get the love you needed from us. She was Nigerian. We tried to trace her, but she had disappeared. The most important thing is that to us you're our children, and we love you both very much.'

Now it was Chester's turn to stare at the tablecloth. Ginny and Arthur waited anxiously, but Chester was lost for words. He sat quite still digesting what he had just heard. He had been frightened of being told he was adopted. Now that he had heard it, he did not quite know what to do.

Julia got up slowly, walked to the kitchen window, and looked outside. 'Can we go to the beach now?' she asked in a perfectly normal voice. In relief, the other three stood up and bustled round the kitchen. The truth was out, and only time would tell what difference it would make.

That evening, as the children were going up to bed, Ginny opened her arms wide to both of them. Julia walked into her embrace, but Chester hung back. Ginny spoke over Julia's head.

'Sometimes we just have to accept what we can't change. I

had to accept that I couldn't have babies of my own. Then I got you, and you've made me happier than anything. I always thought God had performed a miracle, bringing you here.' Chester, seeing a tear slide down her cheek, relented and moved into her arms as well. He felt Arthur join them, and they all held onto each other in silence for a minute. Arthur realised he was praying with gratitude.

Chapter 5

Some time after the revelation about his mother, Chester started to have a recurring dream. Though it usually came at night, it sometimes came during the day as well, and nothing he could do would dispel it. It came to him in fragments at first, but after a while, it acquired concrete images and a definite theme.

It opened in surroundings he took to be an African village. There were several small round thatched huts, arranged around a much bigger one. The grounds of the compound were swept every morning by handsome young men with armlets around their strong upper arms. Encircling their waists were skirts, the likes of which Chester had never seen before. They were full, and on closer inspection he saw that they were made of light pleated material of many bright colours. These young men swept the compound in long clean strokes like people paddling canoes. There were also women, some carrying pots of food, or water pitchers on their heads. People came and went in the compound, including many children, whose happy noise filled the air. Chester noticed however that they were all girl children.

That part of the dream haunted him. Why should there be a compound full of girls and women in strange yet beautiful

clothes going about ordinary daily routines? He could tell that this was not an ordinary place. It was more like a city in microcosm. There were gatemen who collected all manner of foodstuffs from people on their way to the innermost part of the enclosure. Everybody coming from the farms outside had to give them something. They would lay down their offering, make a low bow, straighten themselves, and disappear in different directions.

Chester started identifying this compound as his very own. He didn't doubt its existence, but felt sure it was somewhere waiting for him to come and claim it. He did not however trust himself to tell anyone about it. Sometimes, during quiet afternoons, when he unguardedly drifted into his 'city', a smile would appear on his face, like the smile of an old person remembering childhood. His family would stare at Chester with their brows arched, wondering the reason for this dreamy amiability. They never got the answer.

Some days, he toyed with the idea of telling Julia, and asking her if she would like to come with him when the time came for him to claim his city. Waking up, he dispelled the idea. Ever since the day their father had confirmed that they were adopted, Julia had become more introverted. She had developed a trick of staring into empty space as if looking for something. And then she would come to herself, gradually focusing on the floor as she lowered her eyes. It was impossible to guess her thoughts. Her eyes were like a pair of windows, which, once closed and fastened, allowed no-one to peep into the room of her mind. When, moments later, she raised her eyes, her blank innocent stare would make the onlooker turn away in guilty confusion, as if caught spying.

Ginny found such times perplexing. It would sound stupid to ask another person why they were avoiding looking at people, staring at nothing or at the floor instead, even though the person happened to be her daughter Julia. Nonetheless, her anxiety

began to grow, and she lost some of her characteristic calm serenity.

Arthur, sitting at the end of the kitchen table and forever making notes for his sermons, missed very little of the goings on. He showed his concern by being gentler than usual with his wife and daughter. As a result, it came as a surprise that he should lose his temper on one particular occasion.

This particular day, the family was having breakfast at the kitchen table, with Ginny trying too hard to make conversation. Chester was lost in his dream city and Julia was gazing at the floor. Arthur as usual was scribbling notes as he ate breakfast.

'That weatherman is no prophet is he? He always gets it wrong. It looks like rain again today. How was your egg, dear?' she suddenly addressed Arthur.

'Fine, thank you dear. I'm trying to put down a few points for my prayers at the Mothers' Union this afternoon.' Without raising his eyes, Arthur continued to scribble as if his life depended on it. Instinctively, Julia lifted her gaze from the floor and caught Chester's eye. They both smiled knowingly.

'Arthur, do you know that Mrs Merton's cousin living in New Zealand died? I meant to tell you.'

'You did. You told me yesterday and the day before,' Arthur said roughly, pushing his chair back noisily and standing up.

'Oh, did I?' Ginny said innocently. In the loud silence that followed, Julia lifted her hand and knocked over her teacup. It fell and smashed on the tiled floor, tea spreading around her feet. Julia opened her eyes wide, dramatizing her innocent blue stare, which made Chester burst into laughter. It was a spontaneous reaction, but he noticed too late that he was the only one who found it funny.

Arthur faced Chester squarely, his face red with rage. He could hardly contain the storm raging inside him. In an effort to control himself, he gripped the edge of the kitchen table and his

knuckles showed white. Straightening up, he asked slowly and deliberately 'And what is so amusing about all this, Chester?'

'Nothing, dad, I just laughed.'

'At what? You just laughed at nothing! People don't just laugh at nothing!' Julia looked troubled, as if she had broken the most expensive plate in the house. 'It's only a cup,' she cried, scrabbling under the table for the pieces. She accidentally brushed Chester's leg, so that he jumped and pushed his chair away from the table. 'She at least is sorry,' Arthur said, pointing a shaking finger at Julia. Chester hung his head.

'I'm sorry, I only laughed.'

'He didn't mean to,' endorsed Julia, knowing full well the part she had played in the confusion, and that Chester would not tell on her. 'It's not the end of the world, after all.'

'Stop it, stop it all of you,' Ginny intervened, shaking her head vigorously. Her voice was trembling, near tears. Chester made a dive for his school bag.

'Oh no you don't! You can clear the table and wash the breakfast things,' ordered Arthur.

'But why, dad? I only laughed. And I'll be late for school,' Chester protested.

'Then you'll tell your teacher that you were late because you were being punished!' Chester put his school bag down, and grudgingly did as he was told. When he had finished, he slung his knapsack on his back, pushed his resentment to the back of his mind and ran out of the house. He caught up with Julia and some of her friends, walking to school.

'See what you got me into,' he said to Julia.

'Get lost, Chester,' Pamela, Julia's best friend, responded belligerently. 'We don't talk to boys.' Now it was Julia's turn to laugh. Chester shrugged, and shot past them on his way to the gym.

'What was all that about?' Pamela asked Julia. Julia in turn

shrugged her shoulders. She put a finger over her lips and said in a stage whisper, 'Family secrets . . .'

'Do you know, you and Chester are starting to be as weird as your mother . . .'

Julia fell silent, and Pamela knew she had gone too far. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it,' she said. Julia shrugged again, and the two girls followed their frosty breath into the classroom.

Chapter 6

Once Ginny and Arthur had acknowledged that he was adopted, Chester knew that he would have to leave home some day. Not that this was a unique step, because he had seen young people in his father's parish leave to work in the city. Some of them even travelled abroad. Sometimes they came back to St Simon to show off their new elevated positions and to see their families. Chester told himself that he would like to be like that one day. But he had a strong sense of something he had to do first. He needed to find out where exactly the city of his dreams was located. Though it felt real to him, he could discuss it with nobody, and he was haunted by it.

Though his parents never made him feel his being adopted was an act of charity, yet he knew he had to be good. Not only was he a vicar's son, he was the only black boy in the community. Nothing was ever said, but he was made aware of his difference by subtle gestures which made him feel that much was expected of him. He had to try that much harder to be accepted, to show what he was worth, and at times he was so overwhelmed by this that he would escape into his 'city' and stay there for hours on end.

If the Reverend noticed anything strange in any members of his family, he didn't show it. He allowed things to take their course, but noticed more than he appeared to. Near Christmas, he was working as usual on a sermon, while Ginny was making another robe for another nativity play. She called Chester to come and try it on, but received no reply. When she called again, Chester ran down the stairs, banged the front door and ran all the way to the Millers' house.

'I don't think he's keen on that part again this year,' Arthur suggested, tactfully. Ginny looked despondent.

'Why ever not! He's always done it. Lots of other children want to be the first king.'

'Yes, dear, but things change. He's getting older,' persisted Arthur.

'But I was up all night making this a really good costume.' She held it up for Julia and Arthur to admire.

'Dad's right. Maybe he doesn't want the part any longer. It's boring having to play the best part all the time,' Julia chimed in.

'It's only three days before the play. He has to do the part this year at least. I know Chester likes to act.'

Arthur shrugged and said, 'Good luck. But giving him an unrealistic dream is not helping him, Ginny.' Ginny looked so wounded that Julia jumped up.

'Mum, it's getting late. Let's go and get him.' Julia and Ginny went out into the night and knocked at the Millers' door. Mrs Miller appeared on a wave of noise and heat from the front room. It was like opening an oven.

'Oh, Ginny, you must be looking for Chester. He's a bit upset. He says he no longer wants to be a king in the play. He wants to be an ordinary shepherd.'

Before she could continue, Julia called over her shoulder to Chester, 'It's late Chester, let's go.' Chester came downstairs, followed by Ray and his brothers and sisters. He spoke with determination.

'Mother, I don't want to be a king any longer. The others call me king of the devils.'

'Never!' cried Mrs Miller, turning to Ginny. 'Children can be so cruel.'

'Not to his face, though,' Julia explained.

'No, but I told him,' Ray said. Ginny was beginning to look as if it was all too much for her. She had never encountered a problem of this kind before, and was at a loss. Unkindness and negative criticism were not part of her personality. So it was Julia who took control.

'Thanks a lot, Mrs Miller. We'd better go home now. Come on Chester.' The three of them walked home in silence. It was accepted that Chester would not be king, and when another boy was chosen to be the leader of the three wise men that year, Ginny said nothing. But at the performance, she could not conceal her unhappiness. She clapped half-heartedly, wilting like a dying rose petal. Chester was given a job backstage, and was happy with his invisibility, even while he felt guilty that again he had ruined others' pleasure. But he was beginning to learn an important lesson – that he didn't have to allow other people to tell him what to do.

To make it up to Ginny, he not only made her an elaborate Christmas card, he decided to buy her a present as well. He chose a diary, with a pretty cover of roses and violets, for his mother to record her appointments. To keep it a surprise, instead of putting it under the Christmas tree, he tiptoed up behind her when she was completely engrossed in the kitchen early on Christmas morning, and gave it to her. Very quickly, to be sure he had her alone, he said, 'I'm sorry about the play, mum. I just don't want to be a king any more.' Ginny, delighted with the present, hugged him.

'It's all right Chester. I just didn't realise you felt so strongly. Let's forget about it and have a happy Christmas. What a beautiful diary! Those are my favourite flowers.' She kissed

him, and Chester glowed. He had done the right thing, for once.

In Chester's mind this incident ended his childhood years. He was still the vicar's son, but he had gained a little independence. Most importantly, he had done it without too great cost to his mother. He hated to hurt her. As for his father, he couldn't be hurt. He was the Rock of Gibraltar.

Chapter 7

With one more year of school to go, it was their last summer holiday. Ray found Chester in the gym, and announced:

'I'm going to the mills to see if I can get a job.' Chester was interested.

'Doing what?' he asked.

'Clearing the shop floor. You sweep up and bring tea from the machine. Stuff like that. Odd job man!'

'You mean for money?' Chester asked, not believing what he had just been told.

'Of course. They don't pay so much when you're still at school, but next year I'll make real money.'

Chester felt a little stupid, as if he was being left behind. But no-one had ever talked to him about getting a job. He didn't know it was possible. As if he could read his thoughts, Ray went on:

'My old man never stops going on about it.' He mimicked his father's voice: "You're a man now. You should be at work. At your age, I'd been in the mill for three years already." He's worried because he's ill and can't work, and apart from Ma working herself to death, they don't pay dinner ladies in the holidays. So they need money.'

'Will you get it?'

'The job? I don't know Ches, but I'm going to try. I'm going to see them as soon as school finishes tomorrow. Wish me luck!'

Ray got the job. Chester was at the Millers' on Friday evening when Ray came home with his pay packet. He watched as he handed it importantly to his mother. Her expression was so proud, he wished he could make Ginny look like that. She opened the envelope, and counted the contents carefully. She took some of the notes and handed the rest back to Ray, who divided it again and put one part in his pocket. Then he shouted 'Thomaaas!' His brother instantly appeared, as if he'd been expecting the summons. Looking innocent, he greeted the two older boys:

'Hi Ches, hi Ray. Didn't know you were back.' Ray gave him the money he was holding, and Thomas whooped and gleefully stuffed it in his pocket. 'Great, now I can get the inner tube for my bike!' He ran upstairs two at a time.

Chester asked abruptly, 'How do you get a job?'

'What do you want a job for?' asked Ray. 'Your old man's the vicar. Besides, he gets money from the social for you and Jules.' Chester was dumbfounded. How come Ray could say that so casually, when he himself didn't even know? Seeing his confusion, Mrs Miller spoke:

'That doesn't mean Chester shouldn't get a job if he wants to, Ray. He wants to work and help out, like you.'

'His mum and dad give him pocket money,' Ray pointed out, more for his parents' benefit than Chester's. Chester was still trying to work out what it all meant, when Ray suddenly suggested going out.

'Come on, Ches, let's go down the pizza. I'm going to treat you.' Outside, the cool of the evening was a welcome contrast to the stuffiness of the Millers' living room, which seemed full to bursting with human activities and emotions. Ray walked with a swing, still looking self-important. Chester said thoughtfully,

'You mean you never got pocket money? I would have shared mine if I'd known. I don't get much, but mum likes us to save at the post office.' Ray laughed. The money in his pocket somehow made him seem older and wiser than his friend.

'It's OK, Ches,' he said, patting him on the back. 'I've got my own.' He did an exaggerated imitation of a sailor's walk. 'You know what,' he said, with kindly condescension, 'I've got the job at the mill, but if you really want to work, there are other places. You could help out at Clinton's holiday place. It's not the real holiday season yet, but they open it for people who haven't got so much money at this time of year. I know, because Ma works there sometimes. She cleans out the chalets after the holiday-makers have gone.'

'Do you think they'd take me?'

'Why not? If there's a vacancy, they surely will. You won't get as much as at the mill, but it'd be a start.' Chester was too grateful to object to being patronised. He wondered why his father had never talked to him about getting a job like Ray's father. Did he think a job was beyond him? He resolved that he would go to Clinton's chalets the very next day.

Chester tossed and turned all night, thinking about the job. He had never expected to go on to higher education, somehow taking it for granted that his parents' responsibility ended with school. But nor had he thought about the alternatives. A job would enable him to pay his way. In his head, a small voice warned, 'Suppose you don't get it?' Now that he had decided, he was filled with fear at the thought of not succeeding, and punched the pillows to drive it away. Something he had read came back to him – think positive, and life will be positive. He wished he could lay his hands on a book on positive thinking, so he would know how to go about it. Catching sight of his bedside clock, he saw that it was past midnight, and decided to try and get some sleep.

At breakfast, Ginny noticed that he had taken trouble with

his appearance and asked, 'Where are you going so early this morning?'

'Who, me? Nowhere in particular. I thought I'd just stroll down to the sea.' Chester was not going to say anything about getting a job until he was sure of it.

'Hmm, it's warming up, isn't it? We'll soon be swamped with holiday-makers,' Ginny responded.

'Yes, the single-parent families arrive this week,' said Arthur. 'I must go down to Clinton's and invite them to Church.' Chester froze at the sound of Clinton's, but Julia was asking, 'Why do they come now, before the holiday season? Why don't they come in July or August like everybody else?' Chester listened attentively. He felt he needed to know.

'Because July and August is the height of summer, when Clinton's make most of their money', Arthur replied. 'They do a cut-rate at this time of year, so less well-off families can benefit.'

'Why must the one-parent families have the not-so-good holidays?' Julia persisted.

'It's better than nothing,' said Arthur, indulgently, smiling at his daughter. Chester gulped his orange juice and forced himself to eat some toast, although it nearly choked him. He didn't want to appear too eager to get out of the house, but once he was through the door, he walked so fast he had turned the corner before Ginny realised he had gone. He squared his shoulders in his bomber jacket and clenched his fists, walking with the determination of a soldier on an important mission. Now that he had made up his mind to get a job, nothing was going to stop him.

Imagine having your very own money to do what you want with! The thought ignited a glow in him which lit up his face. He filled his lungs with the late spring air and started to whistle.

Chapter 8

The Clinton chalets were built on a slope. From afar, the flimsy structures looked precarious, as though they could be lifted by a mild wind and flung into the sea. On coming closer, Chester could see that in fact they were built on firm foundations. Though they faced the sea, they were not as near the water as they appeared from the main road. The gate was closed at this time of the morning, but there was a bell-pull beside it.

Beyond the chalets, the sea was visible, even though it was almost a mile away. Chester could hear the voice of the sea from where he stood, carried on the wind. He pulled the bell uncertainly. The confidence he had earlier felt was fast dissipating in the wind. He pulled the bell again before his confidence evaporated completely.

A dog started to bark. Chester stepped backwards and looked around him. He was sure a dog could not jump over the iron gate. The fuss the dog was making brought a man out of a small chalet in the middle of the enclosure. The man spoke to the dog to quieten it, but it jumped at him, wagging its tail. Even from a distance, Chester could see the man was long past middle age, but his steps were brisk, and so were his movements.

He stopped a few feet away from Chester. 'Yes, what can I do for you, young man?' he enquired. Before Chester could reply, he went on, 'You're the vicar's boy?'

Chester smiled. His confidence rekindled, and his face glowed. He stood up straight, his feet firmly planted on the ground. He laid a hand on the iron gate as he replied, 'Yes sir, my name is Chester.' Chester had learned early the effectiveness of politeness. He could see he had won over the man at the gate. Even the dog now made little barks of approval.

'It's all right Porter, he's a friend,' said the man. He was

small, but his blue eyes were shrewd and piercing like the dog's bark. Chester pressed on before they could be distracted again by Porter.

'I've come to ask if you need someone to work.' He hesitated. 'I mean, if there's a job.' Without warning, his face flushed as he waited for a response. Chester couldn't tell whether the man was surprised by the question. The man fingered his beardless chin and appeared to be thinking. St Simon was not too big for the story of Chester's adoption to be known by almost everybody, even a man like John Fisher who went to church only once a year, at Christmas. He couldn't remember when exactly it had happened, but he knew the boy in front of him.

'How old are you Chester?' John enquired.

'Sixteen, sir.' Chester waited, wondering whether the man would open the gate and let him in, or if he would keep him there forever. John Fisher was wondering where the years had gone.

'Sixteen!' he exclaimed. 'Is it really that long?' He looked at the sky and laughed so that Chester could see there were no teeth at the back of his mouth. A thought went through Chester's mind, that one day, if he were lucky to live long enough, his own cheeks would be sunken like this man's.

The suspense was beginning to tell on Chester, and he had to control his impatience. He put on a toothpaste advertisement smile. After all, he wanted the job. The man seemed suddenly to recollect himself.

'My name is John, John Fisher.' As he stretched out his hand, he realized he hadn't opened the gate. 'Look at me talking to you through a locked gate, like a prisoner,' he chortled good-naturedly, and Chester relaxed with relief. He took a single key from his loose work jacket and opened the gate. Chester had expected a bunch of keys like the one carried by the school caretaker. Fisher patted the dog's head and introduced it.

'This is Porter, the gate keeper. Come in, he's friendly, he just

makes a lot of noise. His bark is worse than his bite, as they say. Have you left school then?'

'No, Mr Fisher, I still have another year.'

'I see, so this is a holiday job. Come into the office.' Fisher led the way to a small chalet, at the left of the gate. It was painted pale yellow, with green shutters. Inside, it was so bright, it was dazzling, and as hot as the Millers' living room. An elderly woman stood at a sink in the corner. She turned and looked at them over her shoulder as they entered. Chester noticed how neatly her hair was piled on top of her head, unlike Ginny's wispy mop.

'Good morning,' she said, without pausing in what she was doing. 'Do you want some tea?' Chester saw that she was laying an assortment of cups on a red plastic tray. He accepted a cup and sipped gratefully, still not certain whether he was being considered for a job or not. He was halfway through his tea, when the sound of a vehicle could be heard outside the gate. Porter, whom they had left scratching in a ditch, started barking furiously. Fisher looked out of the chalet and shouted to the dog.

'All right, all right, it's only the food van. What's the matter with you this morning?'

The woman laughed. 'For a minute, I thought the holiday-makers were here, but it's just the delivery van.'

'A bit early, isn't it?' John asked. 'Maybe that's why Porter's excited. Well, we have to stock the shop.' John gulped his tea and said, 'Come on lad. Let's go and unload the food stocks. Mrs Iverson will be here soon. She minds the shop.'

Chester tried to be as casual as Fisher. He stood up and followed him as naturally as he could. As they were walking to the gate, John said, 'We're expecting the first batch of families later today. You can help while they're here. The pay is £40 a week. It's not a fortune, but it's more than you'll get on the Social. Enough to take your girlfriend out for a drink.' He

laughed at Chester's startled face, his face wrinkling comically and his eyes twinkling. Chester laughed in return. He felt euphoric. That morning he had left home uncertain, and now he had a job! His sense of achievement was overwhelming. He forgave Ray for lording it over him, revelling in what felt like a miracle.

With all his youthful energy, he set to work. He stacked four wooden trays of hot bread on his head, and followed John, who could carry only one, to the back of the office. Here was a little windowless room with a red painted door with a sign saying 'The Market'. They unloaded bread, milk and breakfast cereals. Chester was relieved to find the job easy and practical, just like helping at home or preparing for a church bazaar.

About an hour later, two other workers arrived, Phil and Libby, from another nearby village. Chester had never seen them before, and from what he could gather, they were new to the area. They were older than Chester, in their early thirties, and they knew their work. It struck Chester as they all worked that this had been here all along, just forty minutes walk from home. A place where, instead of sermons and the weather and homework, people talked of painting and decorating, preparing food and securing play areas for children. Normal as it was, to him it was like another planet.

When there was a little break, Chester went to the older lady whom he guessed to be John's wife and asked, 'Excuse me, Mrs Fisher . . .'

'Call me Barbara, love', she responded with the harsh laugh of a habitual smoker. Unlike her husband, she had all her teeth, indeed almost too many for her jaw, and just a little too white for her age. Her hairstyle was stylishly arranged, piled up and held in place with assorted combs. Big gold earrings swung in her ears, and her eyes had a glint of contact lenses. She was wearing the brightest pink trouser suit Chester had ever seen. By contrast, he realised, Ginny looked drab. She was usually in

muted colours, and even when she dressed up for Church, it was in a neat black or navy blue suit with a matching hat. She had only one pair of earrings, pearl studs which had been Arthur's fortieth birthday present to her, but usually she preferred to wear a cross on a gold chain. Chester asked boldly:

'Please Barbara, may I phone my parents to tell them where I am?'

'Of course duck. See how lucky we are! You arrived just as we were looking for another helper!'

Julia answered the phone. Her voice sounded strange and distant as Chester held the receiver to his ear. He tried to imagine the hallway at home, and to imagine how he must sound to Julia. 'You'll never guess, Jules,' he began excitedly.

'Where are you?' Julia broke in. Dad was looking for you to do something for him.'

'Listen, Jules, I've got a job!'

'What!'

'I said, I've got a job,' he repeated.

'Hey, I heard you the first time. I'm not deaf! How? Where? I didn't know you were planning to work this summer! Wait till I tell mum.'

'Just tell her I won't be home for lunch. I'll be back later in the afternoon. We knock off at five.'

'Won't you be hungry? Do you have money for lunch?'

Chester cupped the mouthpiece and whispered, 'I get lunch as part of the job, and Jules, I'll get paid £40!'

'Congrats! Lucky so-and-so.'

'Got to go now. I don't want the sack on my first day.' As Chester put down the phone, Libby called him over.

'Some families are arriving this afternoon. I don't know how many exactly. John was a bit vague, but he said a bus load. We have to get the chalets ready. We'll do it together.' As they walked over to the chalets, Libby said confidentially, 'Let me give you some advice. Always look busy. Don't let John catch

you doing nothing. They are nice but they believe in keeping you busy.' Chester was all ears, and they chatted easily whilst shaking blankets, plumping up pillows, airing rooms and arranging furniture.

One of the best things for Chester was being allowed to eat as much as he wanted of the kind of food Ginny would consider unhealthy. At lunch, he gratefully tucked into fried potatoes, sausages, bacon, eggs and mushy peas, all drowned in tomato ketchup. He enjoyed it enormously, especially as no-one found it remarkable. The others considered his appetite quite normal.

'A nephew of mine ate like that, so we sent him into the army,' Mrs Fisher commented approvingly. They all laughed, including Chester.

'I used to eat like that once,' said John nostalgically.

'Oh yes, and how long ago was that?' his wife asked. They all laughed again. When Barbara brought the custard pudding, Chester had no more room, but John Fisher had two helpings. He took his time, licking both the front and back of the spoon in sheer enjoyment. Afterwards, a couple of the adults lit cigarettes and settled down with coffee and the papers, so Chester decided to walk towards the sea for a bit of fresh air. He had not enjoyed the open air for ten minutes, when a gong sounded from 'The Market'. He looked round and saw Phil waving for him to come back. He ran up the incline from the water's edge.

'Feeling strong?' Phil asked. Chester nodded, and Phil smiled at his enthusiasm.

'Your first job, I can see. It's not bad here. It's just a matter of always looking busy. The old man loves that. He pretends to be tough but he's actually a softy. The first few days are hard work, otherwise it's easier when the holiday-makers start coming.'

'Yes, Libby told me,' said Chester.

'She should know. She's been coming here for three years.

She's a writer and comes here every summer for fresh air and to earn a bit extra. I'm trying to write too, but I've just started.' Chester was impressed. Two writers, and here they were, all doing the same work. Not like the mill, where Ray said there were overseers and bosses. His job was to do the things no-one else wanted to do. Here they all did everything.

An hour later it was getting hot when the first load of holiday-makers arrived, and they all hurried to welcome them. The others knew what to do from experience, and had instructed Chester to choose a family or two and adopt them to look after. A succession of women and children tumbled out of the coach, hauling bags with them. Chester stood a little way off watching, uncertain how to approach complete strangers. He suddenly remembered what Libby had told him that morning about always looking busy.

He was about to start towards the visitors, when a black man descended the coach steps. Chester stopped dead in his tracks. It was the last thing he had been expecting to see. For a start, all the other single parents had been women. Then, not only was he a man, he was a black man. He stood a whole head taller than everyone else, holding two over-active boys firmly by the hand. The younger of the boys had a baseball cap pulled down so low it covered his eyes. The elder boy wore his the fashionable way, back to front, and looked about ten years old. Chester stared in fascination, watching how the man joked with the two boys. They looked friendly and at ease together, and he realised he was envying them. So preoccupied was he, he didn't realise the man had caught sight of him in turn. His face had an identical expression to Chester's – a mixture of shock, delight and curiosity. He smiled widely at Chester and his white teeth gleamed in his brown face. Chester walked up to him and said, 'Can I help you? I'm Chester, one of the helpers here.' The man had to let go of one of the boys to shake his hand.

'Enoch Ugwu,' he said in a deep, rich voice with an accent

Chester could not place. 'These are Rufus and Thomas.' He lifted the smaller boy's cap so he could be seen. The face that glowed at Chester from under the hat was smooth and clear, with big limpid brown eyes. Chester had the strangest sensation that he was looking at himself. He pulled himself together and offered to show them their chalet. He helped the bigger boy, Rufus, with his duffel bag and led the way.

The chalet was sparkling clean and smelt of rose spray. He was happy that he and Libby had done such a good job. He was proud when he saw the effect on Mr Ugwu, and hurried to show him where everything was. There was a double bunk by the wall and a single bed by the window. The minute they were inside, Thomas flung himself on the bed and bounced in excitement. Rufus clambered up to claim the top bunk. Mr Ugwu looked at Chester, shook his head and smiled. Chester smiled too, feeling as if they were sharing something man to man. Reluctantly he left them to help some of the other families.

When Chester left for home that evening, he had an unaccustomed sense of satisfaction. He was looking forward to recounting his adventures to his family. He went home whistling, just as he had left in the morning.

Chapter 9

The three friends, Chester, Ray and Michael, sat on the low brick wall surrounding the playground. Their backs were to the school, their feet dangling a few inches above the pavement outside. Their long years at school were ending, but they had yet to embark on the next stage of their lives. So they sat on the wall, aimlessly watching cars and passers-by. It was a cloudy

day in early autumn. A few birds flew slowly past them towards the coast, as if, like the boys, they were not sure of their destination. In the distance, the faint noise from the papermill could be heard. The summer visitors – middle-aged Americans in holiday uniform, the Japanese with their cameras – were gone, and St Simon was now strictly for the villagers.

'You know what I've been thinking?' commenced Michael.

'CAN you think?' teased Ray.

'Really, I'm serious.'

'OK, just don't do yourself an injury.' The boys laughed automatically at the worn old joke. Michael punched Ray playfully.

'Don't laugh, it's just occurred to me that my father's nagging me to do better at school was a good thing after all', said Michael.

'Good for who?'

'No, I mean it . . . for me, of course.'

'I thought your dad wanted you to go into the army,' said Chester. He jumped off the wall, thrust his fists into his jeans pockets and stood up ramrod straight like Michael's father. The boys laughed again, and Ray asked:

'So when your dad said you should go into the army, was that for your own good or for the good of the country?'

'For my own good.'

'Yeah?' mocked Chester. He put on Mr Barnett's deep voice and said, 'My boy, the army's the place for you. It'll teach you to be a man.'

'Oh buzz off, Chester. How would you know anyway? I'm quite sure your dad never spoke to you man to man.'

Chester's jauntiness disappeared. He removed his hands from his pockets and sat back on the wall. He stared into the distance, over the tops of the houses, as if in search of something. His friends shifted uneasily. You had to be careful around Chester. He was sensitive, and didn't like jokes about his parents.

Knowing he had put a damper on the atmosphere, Chester attempted to retrieve things.

'Which bit of the army does he want you to do into?' he asked. Michael was relieved to be able to talk about himself again. The army was not a bad option, but he needed to know what his friends thought before he acquiesced.

'Dad was talking of the Military Academy.'

'You mean Sandhurst,' cried Chester. 'You're going to be an officer and a gentleman!'

'I thought only toffs went there. Your dad's ambitious! The vicar will preach sermons about it, we'll never hear the end of it. They'll even tell the holiday-makers about you,' laughed Ray.

'Yes, like this,' said Chester. Suddenly, he was a tourist guide driving an invisible bus and talking to an invisible group of tourists. 'Here is the village of St Simon, well-known for its paper mill, but which has now made a great name for itself. One of its sons just graduated from the Military Academy. You know what that is? It's called Sandhurst and it's famous all over the world!'

'Oh, come on Chester,' said Michael, laughing in spite of himself. 'Tourists aren't dumb.'

'I'm not so sure,' said Ray. 'Some of them think Sherlock Holmes lives at Number 10 and that Mrs Thatcher is the Queen of England.'

'Well, you eat well in the army', said Chester. 'Mrs Fisher said I ate like her nephew in the army.'

'And you get money,' said Ray. 'And somewhere to live.'

'And you get to travel.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Chester saw Julia reach the gate of the vicarage. She knew she was being watched, and she hesitated before going in. She was in a short black skirt and a pink sweater, both of which showed her figure to advantage. Autumn was just about to begin. It was too warm for a coat, but she had a colourful silk scarf slung over her shoulders, and

her pale brown hair fell across the silk. She was young and she was beautiful, and all three boys looked at her admiringly. Chester knew that Ray was sweet on her, but he also knew their parents were encouraging her to go to university. For no reason, he suddenly asked:

'How about you Ray, are you going to Sandhurst too?'

'That's a joke,' responded Ray. 'My father has no connections. He worked at the mill till he got sick, and now he's a self-employed plumber. I wonder where we'd be if not for Ma's job as a dinner lady.'

'For a start, you wouldn't have been so fat when you were a kid,' Chester joked.

Little John Chapman appeared from the bottom of the valley. He was pushing his new bike energetically up the hill. He wore a red, blue and white helmet matched by a red and blue anorak. He reached the boys panting. 'Wow, that's steep,' he puffed.

'Tell me about it,' Chester said in sympathy. John mounted his bike and rode off. The others looked after him.

'He's an only child. He has everything,' said Ray.

'Yeah, that's right and he'll never be fat. He eats all the right food.'

'I had a bike once,' said Chester.

'Yes, I remember. What happened to it?'

'It was stolen at a railway station.'

'Did your old man buy you another one?'

'No, by then I had outgrown it anyway.' From the other side of the slope appeared Mrs Allen and her friend, Mrs Abrahart. Ray nudged Michael and whispered loudly:

'Oh, oh, here come the old Mother Hubbards.'

'I think we're going to have an early snow,' Chester said.

'Why?'

'Mrs Allen's got her woolly hat on.'

'She's getting a bit confused,' Ray replied. As the women approached, the boys scuffled down from the wall and sloped

off in different directions. Ray and Chester walked towards the vicarage, where Julia still hovered at the gate. She was obviously waiting for them, and knew they would come if she waited long enough. As they drew closer, Chester noticed the tension in her usually smiling face. 'Hi Jules,' said Ray, gruffly.

'Hi, Ray,' she responded, her face lighting up. Chester looked from one to the other, and something hit him for the first time. He didn't need to be told three was a crowd. Without a word, he sauntered towards the house. No-one stopped him. He didn't understand the feelings churning inside him at the sight of Julia and Ray together. He told himself, 'After all, she is my sister. Why should I care about her and my best friend?'

He went straight to his room. The house was quiet, including the downstairs room which was used as a meeting place for the parishioners. In the corner was a television, which the Arlingtons watched only for the news. If Chester wanted to watch anything else, he went to the Millers, where Ray and his three brothers had a colour TV in their room. If the big TV at the vicarage was quiet all day and most of the night, the small one at the Millers' was never silent. You could hear it even from the doorstep. When Mrs Miller opened the door, the first thing you saw was her smile. Her teeth were dark and uneven, but the welcoming smile never left her face.

'Hello love.' Everybody was 'love'. Chester smiled to himself, remembered Ray saying crossly to his mother 'One day burglars will come and all you'll say is "hello love".'

She had replied in her candid way, 'There's nothing to steal in this house. The burglars know that.' She was probably right. The Millers' gate was always broken. Their net curtains, nearer grey than white, were badly hung, so that gaps revealed their modest furniture. The house had an aura of makeshift about it. But Ray was Chester's best friend, had been since the first day of school. People knew not to say anything about one while the other was around.

Chester entered his room and walked across to the window. At home, the net curtains were washed regularly and were always bright and clean. Chester lifted a corner of his and looked down at Ray and Julia, still standing by the gate. Again, something hit him as he watched them talking; that the familiar intimacy he had with both of them they now had with each other, and it excluded him. Just a few years previously, Julia would have been too shy to chat openly to Ray. They were growing up, and things were changing fast. Chester felt that somehow he had been left behind.

Julia was shaking her head agitatedly, and gesticulating. It looked as if she was upset. Ray caught her arm and was trying to reason with her, but she broke free and ran headlong into the house. Chester heard her bang the front door. He looked out again, saw Ray still holding the wooden gate, his mouth open, staring after Julia. He made no attempt to follow, but his eye was suddenly caught by Chester standing at the window. He dropped the curtain quickly, but it was too late. Ray looked angry, hunched his back like a wounded cat and marched off, leaving the wooden gate swinging forlornly.

Chester lay on his bed and thought about what he had seen. He imagined a wedding, Julia as Ray's wife, children. He couldn't see himself anywhere in the picture. It came to him forcibly that he had to leave home. He needed to know who he really was, to find a frame he could fit himself into. He thought of the generations of Millers in the St Simon churchyard. He had no ancestors there through whom he could claim a bond with the place. He was only passing through.

He heard Julia climb the stairs wearily, like a woman loaded with heavy shopping. The wall between his room and Julia's was thin, so that ever since they were children, they could guess each other's movements. Chester heard Julia throw herself onto her bed, heard the creak of springs, followed by muffled sobbing. Rage surged in his blood, and he wanted to follow Ray

and beat him for whatever he had said to Julia to make her cry. He had to make a conscious effort not to march into her room and demand to know what the matter was. He sensed that that would be an intrusion, which would drive Julia further away. He lay on his bed, listening to the sounds of her grief, and felt more shut off than ever.

Chapter 10

That night, Chester was unable to sleep. He tossed this way and that, conscious that Julia could hear his movements through the wall. He was tempted to go to into her room and ask for a cuddle, as the two of them used to do when they were young. They would hold on to each other and talk. Once or twice, they had fallen asleep together in one bed. When did that intimacy stop? And why? Looking back, Chester realised that for some time Julia had been creating a little island of privacy for herself. He couldn't be sure, but he thought it might have begun while he was working at Clinton's, last spring. He and Ray had never discussed Julia, but he knew that they had become close. He felt it had happened when he wasn't looking. He had taken refuge in his 'city', hoping that something would happen, but not knowing what. Seeing them together today, knowing they shared a secret he wasn't part of, told him he was no longer part of the circle. He ached with misery at being shut out.

As always when confronted by something he didn't like or couldn't understand, the vision of his city took over. Chester did not resist. In the vision, he was at home in his kingdom, the prince everybody wanted. He had grown up somewhere else,

but his city was there, waiting for him to take possession. The vision that had been haunting him since he was a child of seven took shape before his eyes.

The heat was scorching and it was very quiet. Even the children were silent, playing in the shade of the mud houses. The gateman was snoozing by a pile of yams, corn and bananas. It was the height of the harmattan season, and a hot wind came straight off the desert, bearing a fine dust which coated everything in a layer of red.

Towards evening it cooled, and men started to emerge onto open verandahs. Women began to plait each other's hair in elaborate patterns. There was an air of expectancy. The women were queens, the king's wives. They gave themselves names which reflected their status: 'Oliaku di ya', the favoured consumer of her husband's wealth; 'Oji Ugodi di ya', the key-holder of the king's treasures; 'Di bu ugom', accolade to her husband's life. They vied with each other in claiming the king's favour. One said her husband was her master, another her life. Another claimed to be his beating heart.

Since the king had twelve wives, he did not have the time to waste on disputing these claims. He needed them all, and he collected enough tithes to feed them. The farmers in the village worked on his land and paid a fifth of what they grew on the farm to the king's guard at the gate of the city. One wife however caused him concern. Mpulasi had been chosen for him by his parents. Though she was his first wife, she was always going about in the king's compound looking starved and unhappy. No chief worth his name would like to claim a starved looking woman as his wife. Such women brought the names of their husbands down. Mpulasi just refused to get fat, but he could do nothing about her, because she was his parents' choice, and she had made him a man. All his wives, however, even the younger and plumper ones, had only given him daughters. Above all, he wanted a son.

This evening, the medicine man was coming to give all the queens a special brew to make them fertile, and so they were preparing themselves. When the medicine man entered the courtyard, there was a big fanfare. The king offered him kola and palm-wine, but he refused, saying he had to concentrate on enhancing the potency of his medicine. If he took a drop of drink, or ate a piece of kolanut before he had completed the rituals, his magic would be diluted. Only a medicine man could refuse kola from the king, but the king knew the importance of what he was doing. He so much wanted a son.

The medicine was cooked in a large pot. Each woman stirred it well, then with the wooden ladle, scooped a portion into her mouth, and licked the ladle clean, to make sure she had taken all her share. After swallowing her portion, the king's favourite shouted: 'Oh, I have crunched the male seed with my teeth.' The king's eyes lit up and he smiled and winked at his youngest wife. Then all the women started claiming they too had crunched a seed. The king grew bored and looked away.

'How many seeds did you put in the medicine, wise one?' asked one of the king's advisers.

'One only, to grow into a handsome son to make our ruler proud,' responded the medicine man.

'But all the queens claim to have eaten one.'

'The imaginations of the queens have grown other seeds,' stated the medicine man. He went on, 'They will all conceive, and some will bear male children. But only one has eaten the special seed, the seed of the future king.'

At that moment, Mpulasi's daughter came and whispered to the king, 'My father, you have forgotten my mother, and now the porridge is finished.' The king laughed and all the sycophants sitting around laughed too, without knowing what the king was laughing about.

'Your mother!' the king said aloud.

'Yes, my mother.' She gestured to where Mpulasi sat in the

shadows. The king knew he could not escape, and he beckoned her to come forward. She came and knelt before him.

'Take the pot, scrape it with your thumb and lick it. I am sure you will be pregnant too,' he commanded. The medicine man gave the pot to Mpulasi, who scraped it as she had been told, and handed back the pot.

'Thank you, wise one. It is very hot, just like pepper, and the tiny seed is hard to crunch,' she complained, coughing. The king, the chiefs and the wives all laughed at the idea that this skinny woman should think she had got the seed. But Mpulasi and her daughter did not laugh, and nor did the medicine man.

Nine months later, the queens started giving birth. There was no son. Then the king gave an order that the medicine man should be sent for. He was to be punished for failing to provide a son. When he came, he asked the king if he had slept with all his wives. Once again, Mpulasi was the one left out. Reluctantly, and to the fury of the other wives, the king agreed to sleep with her. When Mpulasi became pregnant, the medicine man knew that her life and that of the baby were in danger. He smuggled her out of the compound and took her to a mission station where her son was born. Mpulasi, knowing the jealousy of the other wives, and fearing for her child, begged the white couple to take him back to their country and raise him as theirs. When he was old enough, they were to send him back to Africa to claim his kingdom.

And so the couple brought the child to England. Before they could get his papers, the car they were driving hit an oncoming train, and they both perished. The baby boy was left with Catherine, their nineteen-year-old house girl who had travelled with them from Africa. Pregnant herself, and not knowing what to do, she read of a kind Christian couple who had adopted an abandoned child, and wrote to them.

Chapter 11

Ginny was in the front room when the door bell rang. The visitor was Mrs Miller, who arrived just as the rubbish collection was going on across the road. The driver, perched on his high seat in the yellow vehicle, gave the impression of waiting in a getaway car for a gang of accomplices in a crime. The grinding of the vehicle and the shouts of the men forced the two women to speak at the tops of their voices.

'Good morning, Ginny. I was going down to the beach to clean up some of those holiday chalets, and I thought I'd call in. I hope you don't mind.'

'No, of course not. Come in Doris', responded Ginny, leading her into the sitting room. In the kitchen, Arthur, Julia and Chester could hear every word. They smiled at each other, picturing Mrs Miller with her rosy farm-girl cheeks.

'They still have some part-time jobs going down the coast!' she announced, settling into a chair. 'They need young men to move and stack the partitions and chairs for next season, if we can survive this one. So windy already!' and she pushed back her windswept hair from her glowing face.

Ginny was silent. She was wondering whether Doris Miller had intended a statement or a question. At the sound of her voice, Chester and Julia decided they had finished breakfast. Arthur remained where he was, working on his sermon. Ginny responded cautiously, 'Really?'

Mrs Miller, who was used to the vicar's wife, knew this meant she could continue. 'Yes, when I went down to ask about the cleaning, the old man told me so himself.' She smiled and leant towards her hostess.

'I was thinking about Chester,' she went on, indicating with her chin towards upstairs. 'You know, they thought a lot of

him when he worked there this summer. He enjoyed it too. My Ray said he met some of his own people who were on holiday there.'

'Yes?' Ginny asked, arching her brow.

'Didn't he tell you?'

'What do you mean, his people?' Ginny asked. 'We are his people as far as I know. I don't know what you're talking about, Doris.'

'Of course,' Mrs Miller said hurriedly, 'I didn't mean it that way. Ahem . . . you know what I mean,' and she gave an innocent smile.

'Do explain,' Ginny invited.

'Well, Chester met this family . . .' Doris tried again.

'I know that, he told us. What about them?'

'I was only going to say that Chester enjoyed their company and that there is this little job going – clearing away the holiday furniture. It's only for a week or two. Ray tells me he hasn't made up his mind about what he's going to do. My Ray has fixed up to work in the fish canning down the coast. Right now, he's helping the fishermen.'

'I hope he doesn't come home smelling of fish,' Ginny laughed.

Mrs Miller nodded. 'He wanted to go and work at the mill like my Bob, but you see they're closing it. They say it's not 'cost effective' any more, and there's no call any more for our young men.'

'Yes, it's sad,' said Ginny, shaking her head. 'But where would England be without fish?' Doris laughed and agreed.

'There wouldn't be an England, that's what I keep saying. But Ray had set his mind on working at the mill. Ah well, I must be on my way. I just wanted your Chester to know there was work if he wanted it.' She rose to leave, and Ginny asked:

'That family you call his people, have they gone?'

'Of course,' Doris reassured her.

'Yes, that's what I thought. Doris, some of the Mother's Union committee are coming here for tea later on – Mrs Allen and Miss Abrahart. I hope you can make it?'

Doris smiled and said gently, 'Thank you Ginny, but I have a family to look after. I don't have time to sit and drink tea.' Ginny was surprised. She had not expected such an outspoken response. Mrs Allen and Miss Abrahart were the self-appointed overseers of the community, but as the vicar's wife, she had no choice but to put up with them. She envied Doris her independence.

As soon as Chester saw the visitor leave from his bedroom window, he came downstairs. 'So Mrs Miller is very concerned about our welfare,' he said airily.

'What did she want, Mother?' asked Julia, who was right behind him.

'She came to tell me about a job going at the holiday place. She thought Chester might be interested.'

'I heard,' Chester said. Unable to hide her disappointment, Julia walked slowly back upstairs. Ginny's and Chester's gaze followed her up.

The Reverend Arlington was still in the kitchen. He looked up as Ginny entered, seeing but not noticing the out of shape cardigan, with one button missing and one edge longer than the other. She put on her yellow kitchen gloves and silently attacked the kitchen sink and the worktops. Suddenly, she stopped and looked at her husband. Without looking up, Arthur asked, 'What now?'

Ginny started to laugh. 'You sound like Chester.'

'I hear his voice frequently enough. What is it? I knew there'd be something as soon as I saw Doris Miller so early this morning.'

'She doesn't always bring bad news, Arthur.'

'What good news did she bring this time then?' Ginny sighed. She faced the sink again, absent-mindedly caressing the work-

top. 'Arthur, do you think people talk about us not being Chester's people?'

'Was that what she came here to say, that we aren't Chester's people?'

'Not exactly. She just implied it.'

'You mean Chester met a black family, and our Doris jumped to the conclusion that they were his people?'

'She didn't put it like that . . .'

'Ginny, there are so many black people in the world. Are they all Chester's people?' Ginny decided to shift the conversation onto safer ground.

'Doris came to tell us that there's a job going by the beach which she thought Chester ought to know about.'

'What about the vocational training?'

'No, this job is before the training. It's only for two weeks.'

'So what have his people got to do with it?'

'Nothing, only that he met them there in the summer.'

'So you and Doris think he'll meet them again?'

'No Arthur, it's not like that.'

'Well, what's it about then?'

A quick step descended the stairs. The owner halted in the hallway to collect a coat and a scarf and opened the front door. Chester's voice announced, 'I'm just going out for a bit.'

The front door closed gently. Ginny looked at Arthur and asked in a whisper, 'Did he hear what we were saying?'

'Probably. You and Doris didn't lower your voices.'

'Oh God. What will he think?'

'It's too late now to bother what the children think. They're grown up, they have their own lives.' They both fell silent. Seeing the conversation was at end, Ginny started humming 'Oh Love that will not let me go'. Arthur forced himself to concentrate more deeply, making it clear that he was ignoring her. Ginny stopped singing and sighed, looking down at her cardigan. 'I might as well go up and put on something decent.'

'Good idea,' said Arthur. When she had left the room, he removed his spectacles, rubbed his eyes and breathed slowly and deliberately.

Chapter 12

A mild sun shone and Chester smiled as he removed the red and black scarf from around his neck. It had been a Christmas present – how long ago? He couldn't remember. He had thought it was colder than this outside, but he was drawn irresistibly towards the coast. He had heard Mrs Miller through the sitting room door. That the two women would like him to get a job was clear. His sitting around the house probably made Ginny uncomfortable. He would take the hint and see if John and Barbara had a job for him.

He thought about what his friends were doing now they had finished school. So Ray was now in the fishing industry. 'Fishing executive,' he muttered to himself. Stupid, who wants to go about smelling of fish anyway. But why hadn't Ray told him? Because he hadn't got the job he had set his heart on? Because of the quarrel between him and Julia?

He followed the gentle slope down to the seaside. On his right, less than a mile from the shore, were the chalets he had worked on in the summer, looking abandoned. The sea and sky were surprisingly clear and blue, and an elderly couple were walking their dog on the beach. Pity to have a day like this in October, when the holidays are over and people have gone back to work. A bonus day, Chester said to himself.

He turned left and looked in the direction of the chalets. A man in a yellow anorak was digging the garden; his profile

knifed against the blue sky. Chester walked towards him. He shouted in familiar greeting, 'Hi John!' John owned a caravan near the chalets. He and his wife had an apartment in the nearby town, but only moved in there when the weather was bad. Otherwise, they loved pottering about round their caravan near the holiday chalets.

'Are you still at work?' Chester called.

'Chester, is that you?' John called back. He straightened himself and squinted into the autumn sunshine.

'You still working, John?'

'Yes, we're those left behind when the crowd has gone.'

Chester thought how good it was to find old people who still wanted to be useful. He told John so, and John smiled. 'What a nice thing to say. Where's the rest of your gang? Ray, Michael and the rest of them?' Chester laughed.

'I guess I'm the one left behind when everybody's gone home from the market.'

John leaned the rake against the wall and asked, 'What's up? Nothing to do?'

Chester squinted at the sun. He nodded at John's sympathetic look and said, 'The trouble is, I don't want to go back to school and all that stuff. I want to go out to work and earn some money. You think that's selfish?'

'Selfish?' John laughed. 'Before the war, our parents virtually pushed us out of doors at fifteen. It was the thing then.' He laughed again. 'In any case there was no room for me at home. Now it would be called 'child abuse', sending a lad that young out to make his own living.'

'So how did you survive, John?'

'Oh, I did odd jobs until I was old enough to join up. A lot of people died, like any other war, but at least we had jobs.' John changed the subject. 'What are you doing here, clucking on about the war with an old man, when you should be out there chasing girls?'

'Chasing girls, at eleven in the morning?' laughed Chester. 'I came to ask if you have any jobs going?'

'Well, yes, I need someone for a couple of weeks. I thought you had all left the area for work. You know Mrs Miller, your friend's ma? Well, she's coming next week to do the sheets and curtains. You'd just have to shift the partitions and do a bit of painting. Make a few rooms nice and fresh for the winter break visitors.'

'Winter break along this windy shore?'

'You'd be surprised. A couple got married here last winter.'

John laughed, humour lighting his wrinkled face. Chester asked:

'Can I start Monday?'

'Yes lad, but mind, it's just a stopgap. You'll have to face your future sooner or later. You can't get by like this for ever. The earlier you get into training, the better.'

'I know, John, but this fortnight will give me the break I need to think about it.'

Chester turned his back on the coast, and hunched his anorak around him. It no longer seemed as warm as it had earlier. He was comforted by the weight of coins in his pocket. His weekend pocket money was still unspent. He had no desire to go home, to Julia moping about the house, while Ginny tried to cover up the silence. Oh yes, Chester remembered, this was a Mothers' Union meeting day. They would take over the kitchen – Mrs Pentrifield, with her endless cups of tea, Arthur's curate with his stories about the parishioners, Mrs Allen, Miss Abrahart and the rest of them. Chester did not feel up to facing them. Instead, he decided on a snack, so he crossed to the other side of the High Street on his way to the City Centre. Across the façade of the museum hung a banner bearing the legend, 'Equiano Week'.

'How come I missed this?' he reproached himself. Normally he knew when something interesting was going on. Then it

struck him – he had missed it because he was no longer at school where such things were announced. He crossed the street again and went up the stone steps into the building. On the noticeboard was a poster announcing a talk: 'The life of Olaudah Equiano.' Underneath, in smaller print was the explanation: 'The eighteenth century African who was sold as a slave, became a free citizen of England and wrote a celebrated autobiography which influenced the Abolitionist Movement.' Checking the date, he noticed the talk was on in an hour, accompanied by an exhibition. He went into the restaurant area and telephoned Julia.

'Hey Jules, come and hear this talk at the museum. There's nothing else to do, and it might be interesting.'

'OK, but how come we didn't hear about it before? Never mind, I'll be glad to miss the Mother's Union. See you soon.'

Chester ordered a burger and a coke, and settled down in a corner with a copy of the day's paper somebody had left on a wicker chair. He flicked through the sports pages, while the restaurant hummed peacefully around him. The quiet was broken by the arrival of a coach load of ladies from Cheshire. It was clear they were having a great day and they wanted everybody to know it. They speculated loudly about the afternoon's speaker as they tucked into the cabbage and cheese hot pot. Chester gathered they were on a cultural visit and had been looking at some of the local churches, before coming to the museum. After the lecture, their next stop was the bingo hall down the main street. They were in such a mood of raucous good humour, Chester wondered how they would be able to concentrate on a lecture. He got up and went to wait for Julia in the corridor.

'One minute it's windy, next one it's fine,' said a voice in his ear. It was Julia, her face flushed from a brisk walk in the open air.

'Were you running?' Chester asked.

'No, just walked as fast as I could. Didn't want to miss anything.'

'What did you tell mum?'

'I told her I was going to the lecture at the museum and she gasped that she'd forgotten to tell us about it.' The Cheshire ladies had left the restaurant and were advancing in a noisy group towards them. Chester gripped Julia's hand and whispered, 'We'd better make a dash for seats.'

Julia laughed. 'They'll probably fall asleep as soon as the speaker opens his mouth.' They filed into the auditorium, and Julia and Chester chose seats near the front. When everyone had settled down, the museum programmes officer walked onto the stage to introduce the speaker. 'We are delighted to have with us this afternoon a distinguished historian from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, close to where Equiano was born. Please welcome Dr Isidore Ogude.' The Cheshire ladies clapped enthusiastically, but Chester sat up with a start as the speaker approached the microphone. A Nigerian! Somehow, he hadn't expected that. He listened attentively as the man began to relate the Equiano story, describing how he was born in the eastern part of Nigeria, among the Igbo people. He had a pronounced accent, but he spoke fluently and captured his audience, including the Cheshire ladies. Chester was amazed to hear that there were many African slaves in England in the late eighteenth century. He knew only that black people had come from the Caribbean in the 1950s, but not that they had been around for a couple of hundred years before that. Equiano was lucky enough to be bought by an English naval officer who allowed him to acquire an education, and he was baptised a Christian. When they heard that his master suddenly sold him to an American slaver, one of the Cheshire ladies called out 'Shame!' Chester was embarrassed, but the speaker didn't seem to mind. He went on talking, describing how Equiano worked to raise

the money to buy his freedom, how he returned to England and became the leading native African abolitionist in London and spokesman for his fellow slaves. He even married an Englishwoman and left property to his children when he died. He published his *Narrative*, '*The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African: written by himself*', in 1789. The speaker held up a copy of the book, with a cover illustration of Equiano. Chester was seized with determination to buy a copy and read it. Equiano was an African, who had been taken from his home in Nigeria, and brought to England. Chester's dream came back to him. He was adopted, and after listening to the talk, Chester was sure he too was from Africa.

When it was over, Chester wanted to meet the eminent historian from Nigeria, but he was surrounded by teachers and pupils from a local school. Instead, he said to Julia:

'Isn't it funny, Jules? One thing happens and it leads to other things you'd never expected.'

'What do you mean, Chester?'

'This morning, Mrs Miller called the Ugwu family my people. Then I went to the seaside to see John about a job, and I was just killing time when I found out about the exhibition and the lecture. Now I have discovered Equiano, and he reminds me of my dream.'

In the cafeteria, he and Julia drank tea and he told her for the first time the details of the dream. She listened in silence, watching his face, and then she asked, 'How long have you had this dream, Ches?' He thought a moment and replied:

'Since the first time I had to be leader of the three kings from the Orient. I guess I was about five, wasn't I?'

Julia nodded. 'So what are you going to do, Chester?'

'I'm going to find the city. It has to be somewhere in Africa. I need to find this woman Catherine and her twins.'

'But dad said Catherine claimed to be your real mother and that your father was probably a 'wandering Nigerian'. That's

what he called him.' Chester looked at his sister. They were not blood relatives, but she was the one person in the world he knew he could trust. He asked her:

'Jules, do you think I'm crazy?' She laughed and squeezed his arm.

'I think you're saner than most people. At least you have a dream. I haven't even got that. I can't go and ask a Tesco bag or a phone booth who left a baby there, eighteen years ago.'

There was a long silence. Chester bit his lower lip as he asked thoughtfully:

'Have you thought about your future, Jules?'

'Not really, but I'm not staying here.'

'That's a shame. If you stay, I will,' Chester said, watching her carefully. She returned his look, but said nothing more. He pulled her up by the hand and they walked out of the museum with their arms around each other. As they went, one of the Cheshire ladies nudged her neighbour and pointed, but neither of them noticed.

Chapter 13

Chester decided not to go to the Millers'. He and Ray had been smoking cigarettes secretly for the past two years, but he dreaded his parents finding out. He did not smoke at home, nor did he want the Millers to suspect. In the absence of his schoolfriends, he had been smoking to fill in the gaps in the day. He knew he smelled of cigarettes. He was concerned he was hiding things from his parents but he lacked the courage to tell them. Their religion put a wedge between him and them. There were many things he couldn't discuss with them. He thought

again of the 'wandering Nigerian', his father. Where was he? Somewhere in Lagos with three wives and ten children? But wait a minute, was he not the son of a king? A son that was wanted, who would go back and claim his kingdom?

Suddenly the front of his head felt as if he had been slapped sharply. He held his head tightly as if trying to stop if from falling apart. He stood there firmly in the middle of the pavement. People passed him on either side, wondering what was wrong with him. The pain passed, his eyes focused again. A light tremor ran through him. It had never happened to him before, and it made him afraid. He walked on to clear his head, not minding which way his feet carried him.

He saw Ray's blond head rising from the hollow, as if surfacing from the valley below. Chester watched him. He had, in a few days, acquired the look of someone whose world had definite, concrete outlines, whilst Chester felt he was still a child, groping in the indistinct. He saw Ray go into his house, and he hesitated across the street, trying to make up his mind whether to follow or not. He no longer minded that he probably stank of cigarettes. He was too desperate for that. He wanted to talk to a friend.

Evening was descending. Outlines blurred and lights twinkled from the windows of houses. The street lights had not yet come on, and he almost didn't see Ray come out on the doorstep, looking this way and that as if expecting someone. Chester crossed the road and said, 'Hi'.

'Hi, Ches,' he cried with genuine surprise. 'What are you doing out there?'

'I was just coming to see you,' Chester lied.

'Carol swore she saw you earlier on. Well, come in anyway.'

'I just wanted to say hello. Haven't seen you for a while.'

'Yeah, I know. I'm working now.'

Chester nodded. 'I know.'

'Look, Ches, I'll put on my jacket and we can go for a pizza.'

'I can't,' Chester confessed. 'I'm not working yet.'

'Let's go anyway. I could do with a smoke. I need to catch up with you!' Before Chester could react, he dashed back into the house and came out, shrugging on his jacket.

The pizza parlour was quiet that early in the evening. They settled onto high chairs at the counter, and Ray lit up. He blew out the match and stared at Chester directly. Chester noticed again how blue Ray's eyes were, and how like his mum he looked.

'Seems as if you've been avoiding me, Ray. What's up?'

Ray pulled on his cigarette and shook his head.

'No, not really. I've just been busy. How's Julia?' he asked abruptly.

'Who?' Chester asked.

'What do you mean who? Jules, your sister.'

'She's fine. We went to a talk at the museum, but she had to go home to help mum.'

'I was going to come over tomorrow. Anyway, I guess the weekend starts now.'

'Yes, TGIF,' responded Chester, using the formula they used at school.

'Did Jules tell you anything, Ches?' Ray asked soberly.

'Like what?'

'Stop answering questions with questions. Has she told you what she's going to do?'

'You mean about her future? I really don't know Ray, you should ask her. Are you two not speaking to each other or what?'

'What do you think about abortion?'

'What are you talking about, Ray?'

'You don't know, do you Chester? I thought Jules told you everything.'

Chester's heart seemed to stop as the implication of Ray's question came home to him. Was that what the argument was

all about? Was that why Ray had had to rush and find work anywhere he could? When he could speak, he asked:

'You mean Jules is pregnant?'

Ray nodded. 'I want her to have the baby. My mum would look after it while she finishes her education and till I get promoted at work. It would just take a few years, and then we could get married.' The word struck Chester like a blow to the head.

'Married!' he exclaimed, unable to hide his dismay. At the sight of Ray's face, he went on hurriedly, 'You two are my closest friends. How come you never told me anything?'

Once more he felt relegated to the margins. Ray and Julia had shared something he had wanted for himself, but knew to be impossible. Even when the opportunity had been there, a sense of obligation held them back. They were brother and sister, and accepted that restraint. Even so, it was impossible to conceive of the future without her, and he had taken it for granted that one day they would leave home and be together. Now Ray had beaten him to it. Julia pregnant! He was stunned by the realisation that she had a life full of secrets he couldn't share. He felt betrayed, whether by Ray or by Julia he could not be sure. For safety's sake, he fell back on the mundane.

'Doesn't she mind you smelling of fish?' The old carefree Ray surfaced. He threw his head back and laughed.

'Who told you that, Ches? I needed something quick, the job was on offer, so I took it. The pay isn't bad, if you ignore the stink!'

'I don't know what you're moaning about. It's a job, isn't it? I don't even have that. Your mum came to tell Ginny, and I couldn't help listening. She dropped the hint about the chalet job with John. I'm starting Monday for two weeks.'

'Good old John and Barbara. I could never work there because my mum was always there. And of course there was the

mill. I was a bit put off when I heard Michael talking about a career in the army, and Patrick and Jules planning for university. I wondered if I shouldn't do something more interesting. But on my first day, I met Mr Powis. He's the skipper, he's been at sea all his life. He told me so many stories about the sea that my mind was made up. Guess what he wanted to do when he was our age? He wanted to be a journalist. Now, after thirty years, he owns so many shares in the company he intends retiring to Madeira in a couple of years.'

'Imagine, he wouldn't have been able to do that as a journalist.'

'He said there were too many of them and not enough paper to go round.' They both laughed.

'He can still write about fish and the weather in Madeira.'

'Yes, but how many of us are going to want to read about fish?' Ray replied.

There was a short silence, and when he spoke again, Ray's bantering tone had disappeared. 'Seriously, Ches, I guess we were both too embarrassed to tell you what was happening. But I need you to talk to Jules, make her have the baby.' Chester shrugged. He was thinking that they had something which he had no part of.

'I'll try and talk to her. I'd rather have waited till she told me herself. But then if she wants an abortion, it's no good waiting.'

'She can't have an abortion,' Ray said fiercely. Chester rose to her defence.

'Look Ray, you have to see it from her point of view. Our old man's the vicar. I'm not saying there was anything wrong in what you two did, but can you imagine her telling him she's having a baby when she isn't married? How do you think he'd take it? He'd probably kill her. And she wants to study. How would she do that with a baby? She's too young, she isn't ready.'

'Come on Ches, whose side are you on? That child is mine. And if you're a vicar's son, surely you know abortion is wrong?'

'Adopted son.'

'Same thing. Would you rather your mother had aborted you than had you adopted?' Ray saw his words had had an effect. He pushed his friend's arm.

'Come on, I'm ordering pizza. I'm celebrating my first pay. What do you want to drink?' As they ate, the pizza parlour began to fill up with families. The noise prompted Chester to tell Ray about the Cheshire ladies, and then about the lecture. By the time they left, they had regained their casual friendliness. But beneath it, something had changed between them.

'Thanks for the pizza, Ray. I hope your mum won't mind you not eating her tea!' said Chester.

'Are you kidding?' Ray cried. 'I'll eat it if it kills me. She's made something special to celebrate my first full adult's pay. That was just a snack.' At his door, they parted, and Chester continued homewards. He kicked an empty Coke can along as he walked, like a little boy. His head was full of his friend's problems. Funny that earlier on, his own problems had seemed overwhelming. Now where had they gone?

When he came in, Ginny called from the kitchen 'Do you want any supper?' Unlike Ray, he was not obliged to eat again, and after the hot, spicy pizza, Ginny's cooking didn't tempt him. Chester walked into the kitchen.

'Sorry to be late. I caught up with Ray and had something with him.'

Arthur and Ginny were drinking cocoa.

'Can I make you some cocoa then?' Ginny persisted.

'No thanks mum,' he responded. He was taken aback when Arthur intervened.

'Chester, have you thought of repeating your GCSE's? You can't get anywhere without qualifications, you know.' Arthur stirred his cocoa. He so seldom talked to him about his future that Chester suspected everybody was feeling uneasy about his staying at home and doing nothing. The only thing he was sure

of was that he was not going back to school, especially now that all his friends had left.

'I'm working at the beach from Monday for two weeks. I'll use that time to decide what I'm going to do.'

'Well, don't take too long. You don't want life to leave you behind.'

'Ray works at the fish-canning place,' Ginny said, as if offering an alternative.

'I know mum, I was with him a few minutes ago.' Chester walked upstairs and paused by Julia's door. Should he go in and ask to talk to her? The strip of light under the door to her room told him her bedside lamp was on. In Ray's family, it would be easy to walk into your sister's room and demand to be put in the picture, but it wasn't like that at the Arlingtons'. They had been brought up to respect each other's privacy.

He went quietly into his own room, where he read through the notes he had made at the museum earlier in the day. Strange that Jules could share that world with him, but not her relationship with Ray. He felt how little he really knew the two people he regarded as his best friends. He had to concede, however, that he had his own secrets from them. His thoughts turned to the lecture, and Equiano, the African slave, and the lecturer who knew so much. Maybe in the future he would read, study and travel like him, but at present, he had a more pressing need.

Chester didn't stay awake for long. In his dreams the Cheshire ladies mingled with Barbara, John's wife. Towards morning, her face got mixed with her husband's and you could not tell one from the other. They were calling after a man in a dark suit who was running as fast as he could towards the sea. John and his wife were breathless from trying to catch up with him, and had stopped and were holding onto each other. The running man turned round and Chester could see that he was black.

'Sorry, son, he won't stop. We wanted him to stop and face up to things, but he kept on running!'

Chester shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Never mind.' The old couple's laughter made them look like grinning skulls. Chester woke up, his head pounding.

Chapter 14

'Aren't you two going to church this morning?' asked Ginny at breakfast. She was dressed in her neat navy suit with a white blouse. Julia was in her dressing gown, Chester in jeans. They had both recently stopped accompanying their parents to church, much to Ginny's distress. Julia responded that she was not up to going to church that morning. She wasn't eating breakfast either. Chester said nothing. He decided to take a stroll.

He walked as far as the end of their short road and watched passively as a few yellowish brown leaves fell on the pavement. A light wind carried them down the slope. He turned and decided to go back. Just then, Arthur and Ginny left for church. He knew that they had not seen him. Through the kitchen window, he saw Julia tidying and washing up, a job she normally hated. Chester knew she wanted to be alone, but he had to talk to her. He went in and shut the kitchen door gently, trying to preserve the quiet atmosphere. Julia looked private, absorbed in putting the cutlery in the right place on the sink drainer. Chester coughed apologetically.

'You think I don't know you're there?' she asked without looking up.

'Well you didn't show it.'

'Ches, I feel bad about mum and dad.'

'Because we didn't want to go to church?'

'I guess so. I don't want to hurt them, but I just don't feel like going any more.'

'Has something happened, Jules?' Chester asked quietly. From behind, he saw her tense, her arms stilled in the sink. When she didn't reply, he ploughed on.

'You seem unhappy. Do you want to talk about it? I'm your brother, remember.' Chester wanted to hug her, make her laugh as he had always been able to do, but her resistance kept him at bay. Recent events had erected a wall between them. She had transferred her allegiance to Ray, and he was shut out. His old sense of insecurity raised its ugly head again. He must leave, but not before he had talked to his sister.

'What are you going to do, Jules? About the baby?' Julia's head shot up like a startled rabbit. Her beautiful face was set, her teeth clenched. She was angry, but Chester knew he could not go back on what he had begun. Besides, the Arlingtons had taught them the art of dispassionate discussion, that nothing was too hot to handle if treated with care and calmness.

'Ray told you didn't he?' Julia said evenly. Chester nodded but said nothing. She turned around, looked at him and came and sat at the kitchen table. She adopted her characteristic pose, staring at the floor.

'I don't know what I'm going to do, that's the whole trouble. I can't think it through without getting all mixed up. If I keep it, I'll have to leave home. That would mean the end of studying. I feel I need to get away and be by myself before I can really make up my mind. Here, I'm completely overwhelmed, by Ray and mum and dad and everything . . .'

'What about mum and dad? You said you didn't want to hurt them this morning by not going to church. Don't you think if you go away without giving them the chance to help you you'll hurt them more?'

'How can I tell them I'm having a baby when they still think of me as sweet little Julia, their darling daughter? It would kill

them. How can the vicar have an illegitimate grandchild? No Ches, I've got to deal with this on my own. I don't know what will happen, but it's got to be my decision.'

'What if you married Ray?' Chester said softly. He had spoken the thing he dreaded most.

'What, me in a white dress on Arthur's arm, handing me to Ray, and setting up home in a terrace house in the village? I wanted more than that, Ches. I had so many plans. I don't want to end up like mum, running Mothers' Union meetings.'

They sat in silence for a while, each busy with their thoughts. Chester was relieved, but still troubled for his sister. Like her, he could see no easy solution. Eventually he asked:

'What are you going to do for money?'

'I saved something in the summer.'

'I start work tomorrow. Could you wait until I get paid?'

'Oh Ches, it's not your problem. You need that money for yourself. And I have to move quickly. The longer I stay the more difficult things become. But thank you. I really appreciate it'

'If you don't want to marry Ray, you should still let him help you. He cares about you, you know. Don't you care about him?' Julia looked sad.

'Yes, of course, but not in that way. It should never really have happened. We were both lonely and bored after school ended. I needed an outlet and he was uncertain about his future. We just comforted each other for a bit. You know that time you were working at the beach and you were full of your African dream and your African family. You shut us all out. I watched you slipping away and I knew then that I could never share your dreams.'

Chester was astonished. It had not occurred to him that he had shut her out, and that he was therefore partly responsible for all this. He had been too wrapped up in himself to notice what was happening under his nose. Cautiously, he said:

'Would you let me take care of you now?' Julia laughed.

'We're brother and sister, remember. We can't be together like that.' Chester bowed his head.

'Well, I still think you should tell mum. There's more to her than it appears, you know, Jules.'

'What does she know about the real world? All she knows is church and arranging flowers and bring and buy sales and looking after dad.'

'She adopted two children. Isn't that something? And one of them was black, too. She may be a vicar's wife, but she doesn't always toe the line. I think she's ready to be our friend now, and you need a friend. You don't have to tell dad, but at least put her in the picture.'

'Do you think she can keep a secret from dad?' Chester thought for a while before answering.

'Look at how she grew up. She was sandwiched between two siblings, both very intelligent, both achievers. For a while it looked as if she would be left at home to look after her ageing parents. She had the sense to snatch a man who didn't mind that she wasn't a great beauty. The fact that he became a vicar was incidental. She escaped from home, and she would probably understand your need to escape. As long as she doesn't feel she's going to lose you. Give it a try, Jules.' When Julia still said nothing, he continued:

'Jules, you need a special intelligence to cope with the likes of Miss Abrahart, Mrs Miller, the Sunday school kids and the rest. Mum may not be a brilliant scholar, but you shouldn't underestimate her.' Chester was surprised at the force of his argument. He had not thought out before what he was going to say to Julia, but somehow it seemed to flow naturally. He had always loved performing, and now he felt he was in a role which required a particular script. His feeling of not belonging had kept him always on the fringe of things, but it had made him a keen observer of other people's behaviour. He was applying this now with respect to Ginny.

Through the back door they could see the garden behind the house. The grass was covered with water droplets, resembling tears trembling on eyelashes. The old pear tree had a few brownish yellow leaves clinging to its black branches which shook in the wind. It stood sentry over the garden, its dark roots like crutches straining in the darkness. Chester felt himself drifting back into his dream world, where he felt safe and in control.

Chapter 15

'Been lovely working with you again, John,' Chester said as he accepted his pay and put it in the back pocket of his jeans. John sniffed, took out his handkerchief and blew his nose.

'Yes,' he managed to say between wipes. 'Winter's coming. You know that means. Time to be like the squirrel, hide and come out when you see cowslips and crocuses and primroses and daffodils.'

'Poetic this morning, John? Must be the sea air.'

'Or something. What are you going to do now?'

'I'm going to be a wanderer, John. I don't know where I'm going next.'

'Has your dad talked to you about your future? He knows lots of people, being a vicar. Good at hiding his feelings though.'

'Oh John, I shall miss you. I really will.' Chester bit his lower lip and looked at the distant angry sea. There had been a frost early on in the morning, not a thick frost, but enough to announce the cold weather soon to come.

'Me and Barbara are going into our flat in a few days. That's

where we'll celebrate Christmas. Come summer, if you're in these parts, your job is waiting for yer.'

Chester nodded, and spontaneously embraced the old man. John had on layers of clothes, but Chester could feel the contour of his shoulder blades. As he walked thoughtfully home, Chester wondered about John and Barbara and their life together. The old man had been in some ways more of a father to him than his own dad. He arrived home still musing, to be met by Arthur.

'It's good you're back, Chester. We knew you were at Clinton's, but we can't find Julia. Any idea where she is?' Chester was startled and temporarily disconcerted by the straightness of his stare. He recovered quickly and protested:

'I don't know Dad. I went to collect my pay from John.' Ginny was in the kitchen, wringing her hands and marching up and down.

'Where could she have gone? I've been back for hours, and there's still no sign of her. I thought maybe she was with you Chester.' Chester opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water.

'Why are you looking for her? It's only seven in the evening. She must be out somewhere.'

'You don't understand, Chester,' said Ginny, collapsing onto a chair. 'She took all her clothes. And that's not all, some of the church funds are missing.'

'No!' Chester cried, genuinely shocked. He hadn't bargained for this. Arthur was staring fixedly at him, as though trying to penetrate his mind. But it was Ginny's pleading eyes that affected him more. Chester lowered his gaze and clenched his fists.

So, that was it! She had done it without even telling him. He wondered if Ray knew. He looked up at Ginny again. She was unable to restrain the tears which poured freely down her face.

'She can't have taken the money. Not my Julia, my little girl. If she needed money, she could have asked me.'

'How much is missing?' Chester asked. The question hung in the air.

'I counted two thousand pounds last night,' said Arthur. 'I was going to pay it into the bank this afternoon, and when I went to fetch it, it was gone and so was Julia.' Ginny inhaled deeply in an attempt to compose herself.

'It's the money we collected for refugees in Eastern Europe.'

'Oh!' was all Chester could find to say. Instead, he went upstairs. He sat on his bed and stared blankly at the window. He noticed the geometrical lines on his quilt cover. How delighted he had been choosing the material six years before. He had redesigned the whole room to match its royal-blue background, repainting the window frames and the old chest of drawers. As his eyes wandered across the various familiar objects on top of the latter, they fell on the mug he had moulded at the pottery class. A note was sticking out of it. Even before Chester picked it out from among the pens and pencils, he knew it was from Julia.

'Sorry I couldn't say goodbye. Thanks for helping me decide what to do. Look after Ginny. You were right about her. Love you, Jules.'

Chester read it again and again. Then panic hit him. Had their father seen this? It was in such an obvious place, they would definitely have seen it had they come into his room looking for him – or for the church's two thousand pounds. Chester tasted bitterness at the idea that they might have thought he was the one who took the money. He felt lethargic and empty and sat there, slumped on his bed until darkness overtook him.

His first reaction when he came to himself was to tear up the note. Instead, he folded it neatly into the creases Julia had made, and put it in his shirt pocket. He was self-consciously aware it was the pocket over his heart. Would he ever see her again? They hadn't even said goodbye. He had been thinking of leaving,

and she had beaten him to it. Now there was nothing left to stay for.

He wondered what would have happened if Julia's baby had been his instead of Ray's. It would have been even worse, he thought, because they were brother and sister. Suddenly, Chester hated Ray. He was too upset to be hungry, but nobody called him for supper and the house was ominously quiet. He got out his knapsack, put in Equiano's *Narrative*, his own Bible and his few GCSE certificates. He took out Mr Ugwu's address and copied it out twice, putting a copy each in his bomber jacket and his satchel. Very early the following morning, he crept out of the house. He didn't look back, and nobody challenged him. He knew then that the time for him to leave had really arrived. It made him feel like a visitor who had outstayed his welcome. The pain of this realisation turned his feet to lead. He wanted to be stopped and asked where he was going. He wanted someone to care enough to beg him to come back.

As Chester turned the corner, he looked back once at his own window. Hot tears rolled down his face and into his mouth. Tasting the sweet saltiness, he said aloud to himself, 'God, please make me man enough to stand by any child I father.' He looked back once more and promised himself never to return, not even to thank Ginny and Arthur for raising him. With Julia gone, his part was played out. He was grateful Ginny had had the presence of mind not to go around shrieking thief on the disappearance of the church money. At least she cared for their well-being that much.

Chester made his way to the little local station. As he waited on the northbound platform, he found himself in a strangely tranquil state of mind. At last he was facing the future. Something told him that as far as this part of England was concerned, it now belonged to an irrevocable past. It was less real than the kingdom in his dream.

The train churned through the sleepy English countryside,

towns giving way to a neat patchwork of fields, yellow and sere after the harvest. He wondered what his childhood friends would say when they heard he had gone – Ray, Michael and the rest of them. Old John had known he would leave. He could not envisage his father's reaction, and his mother's he didn't care to. He was testing the uncertain water of new freedom.

Chapter 16

It was the beginning of Advent, and Arthur Arlington was going to preach in the neighbouring town of Birkester. He was taking the car.

'I shan't go to church this morning,' Ginny declared over breakfast.

The house was unusually quiet, the breakfast as sparse as the conversation. In a couple of hours, Arthur would be at the door of the next parish church, shaking hands and smiling. There was nothing left for him and Ginny to say to each other, but in public they maintained the appearance of a devoted couple. Ginny walked towards the kitchen window. She could see that she was being watched, and the neighbours wanted her to know they were watching. The Bowers across the back garden had left on their outside security light, the better to see what was going on. Ginny closed the window. The security light went off. She had deprived them of their morning's free entertainment.

Arthur looked up and said drily, 'Maybe now they'll get up and dress for church. They have good reason to come this morning, pretending to be interested in our welfare. They haven't come to church for ages.'

Ginny sighed, 'God, that people can find life so boring as to

spend their days by their windows just watching how others live. That's why I don't want to go to church this morning, Arthur. All this hypocrisy.'

'But you have to go, Ginny. At least our life is interesting enough for people to waste valuable time spying on us.' Ginny smiled.

'As if we were royalty.' She left the window, came back to her chair and poured a fistful of muesli into a glazed bowl made by some of the children from the Sunday school. Despite its ridges and uneven edge, the bowl had a kind of natural elegance. It was part of a set presented to the Arlington family in recognition of Arthur's twenty years service to the community. When he had received them he had gracefully announced:

'Now my family have bowls for breakfast.' Arthur actually insisted on their using these roughly glazed bowls with uneven edges every morning. Even when they had visitors, they were brought out. They had been washed and wiped so frequently that they had acquired a special shine of their very own. A curate who had recently stayed two nights had remarked that their house did not feel like a vicarage, but like a real home. He had especially admired the hand-made breakfast bowls. Before Arthur could explain how they were acquired, the curate had gone on to comment on the value of such handicraft in a mechanised age. Ginny had just smiled and offered him the cereal.

Arthur got up, gave Ginny a peck on her forehead and went out to put on his religious collar. He was saddened by the coldness between him and Ginny, but he was unaccustomed to talking about his feelings, and did not know what to do about it. Although he had known her for so many years, he found that she frequently surprised him. Despite her lack of formal education, she was astute in her judgements, and often understood things more clearly than he himself did. He relied on her for

this, and was therefore at a loss now she had withdrawn from him. On an impulse, he went back and kissed her again, this time on the mouth.

'Arthur!' exclaimed Ginny, laughing. He wasn't sure if she was embarrassed, and he went out hastily to the six-year-old Vauxhall Cavalier in the parking lot. It was spotless and perfectly maintained. As he drove away, he thought of Ginny facing the congregation alone, knowing she was the object of speculation and discussion. He hoped the police would come up with something soon.

After Arthur's departure, Ginny sat at the table thinking. When last had her husband kissed her twice at the breakfast table, let alone in that way? Since Chester and Julia had left, her life had collapsed in on itself, and nothing she did made any difference. She was haunted by memories of how the children had come to her, and she often woke at night, thinking she could hear them crying. Slowly and mechanically, she got into her winter Sunday clothes: Black Watch tartan skirt, black jumper and plain black court shoes. Looking at herself in the mirror, she added the pearl ear clips Arthur had given her for her fortieth birthday.

Ginny did not like wearing hats, and did so on sufferance, but today was so cold that she took out a black beret she had bought on a family holiday in Germany, two years previously. Arthur had wanted to see East Germany before it was completely rebuilt. They had gone to Leipzig and Magdeburg, looking at churches and old empty buildings. It was actually Jimmy James, Arthur's assistant, who had advised them where to go. To Ginny, in spite of the quaint villages and magnificent buildings, the whole country had been cold and empty as if all the inhabitants had gone somewhere else. The taxis and roads made her think of documentaries she had seen about poverty in the third world. She had been so chilled in the windswept open

concrete space of one churchyard she had had to buy the beret to keep warm. She remembered Julia teasing her about it, saying she looked like a soldier on duty.

At the thought of Julia, a tremor ran through Ginny. 'I'm sorry I can't help you more,' she thought sadly. 'But Arthur is everywhere. He knows when I breathe and practically what I'm thinking. But I know you're sensible and you know I think of you. But why did Chester leave when you did? Perhaps, like me, he wanted to help you and felt rejected when you left. That boy thought he was responsible for so many things. He never gave me the opportunity to talk to him the way I talked to you before you left.' The first church bell rang and Ginny hurried through her dressing.

The church was on top of the hill, and Ginny was puffing slightly as she entered. On mornings like this, she wished she were just an ordinary member of the congregation. If she moved to a different pew at the back, it would signal misery, and she would be the object of insincere sympathy. If she sat in her usual place at the front, the innuendoes would revolve around her arrogance and haughtiness. Either way, she had to deal with the entire congregation knowing her business and discussing it.

Mrs Abrahart greeted Ginny kindly as she sat down, and whispered a question to which she already knew the answer: 'No news?'

Ginny shook her head. Mrs Allen, in the same pew as Mrs Abrahart, was not satisfied with that. She actually came and sat next to Ginny, the better to see and interpret her reactions. Ginny simply stared blankly ahead and registered nothing. She had become practised at going into a trance-like state which protected her from other people.

Jimmy James, the young curate, would be preaching today as Arthur was away. He was notorious in the parish for declaring his support for homosexual ministers. Since then he had been an

unending source of gossip and intrigue for the villagers of St Simon. However, he had proved a hard worker who had made himself so indispensable that Arthur had come to depend on him. Very few new entrants into the profession would come to a place as remote as St Simon and he had finally been accepted, at least superficially, by the congregation.

On this Sunday, he was talking, as he often did, about his trip to the City of David, and the journey along Via de Rosa, his impression of Capernium and experiences in Nazareth. But the unspoken theme was the sudden disappearance of Chester and Julia, along with the church collection fund. It hung in the air, and filled the church to near suffocation.

Ginny put her hand deep into her church bag, and produced a packet of boiled sweets. She kept them handy for meetings of the Women's Guild or the Christian Fellowship, when they helped to distract her from her boredom and irritation. She slipped one of the sweets into her mouth, savouring the minty freshness. Jimmy James went on expanding and contracting his argument, his arms in his voluminous cassock opening and closing like a huge black moth. He concluded his 'message' with a long prayer and left the pulpit.

Ginny took a long breath and offered a silent prayer of her own. 'Thanks be to God for that . . .' She looked around the inside of the church once more and noticed that, as Arthur predicted, it was fuller than usual. And another thing struck her. The church was not as run down as before the advent of the young curate. He had persuaded Arthur to paint parts of the ceiling turquoise, enlivening the usually dingy interior.

Arthur returned quite late, having had business to attend to after the service. He was exhausted, but there was something he had decided on during his lonely drive back to St Simon. During supper, now a quiet affair, he announced: 'Ginny dear, don't you think we should take a break? I mean, go away for a while?'

Ginny was about to sip some hot broth, but she gently put the spoon back into the bowl and asked with astonishment: 'What made you think of that Arthur?'

'Well, the children have gone, but it seems to me we have to go on living. We can't live the rest of our lives just waiting for them to come back. A change would be good for us.'

'Where would we go?' asked Ginny.

'There's an ecumenical mission to Berlin next month, and participants are being invited. We could take a week's holiday and drive back across Europe.'

'All right,' said Ginny, without enthusiasm. 'What was the other thing you had to tell me?'

'I've wanted to tell you I was sorry for having told Bob Miller about the missing collection money. It's just that he's the parish treasurer, and I didn't see how I could keep it from him.'

'Yes, that was a pity.' Ginny lamented. It had been a bone of contention between them, Ginny maintaining they should wait and see what happened before announcing the loss, which she knew would be attributed to the children.

'But who else could have taken it?' Arthur asked, puzzled.

'I don't know,' Ginny replied, 'but my children don't steal.'

'Oh, for God's sake, Ginny. Bob Miller came to take the cash to the bank, and what was I supposed to tell him?'

'All right, all right.' Ginny's voice rose. 'But I just wanted a chance to pay it back. We can afford it out of our savings, and nobody would have been any the wiser.'

To placate her, Arthur offered: 'All right then, we'll tell the church we misplaced the money, and now we've found it again. And then we'll go away for a couple of weeks and let the whole thing die down. Agreed?'

'Really?' Ginny's eyes danced. 'So the police don't have to know? Telling them would be like washing our dirty linen in public. It would be like announcing to the world that we had

failed in raising the children we adopted. As you said Arthur, they've probably left home for good and two thousand pounds was not too much for us to pay to see them off on their journey. And Arthur, you should stop the police from looking for them. They'll come back in their own good time, but not if they think they're accused of theft. Don't you see, Arthur?'

And as if on cue, the phone rang. Ginny picked it up and listened for a moment, before covering the receiver and mouthing to Arthur: 'It's Julia.' As she and Julia talked, Arthur could see that she was looking and sounding progressively happier.

She handed the receiver to Arthur. Julia rattled on breathlessly, giving Arthur little time to put a word in. 'I'm sorry dad, I just had to leave. I'm fine. I'm with Uncle Robert. There's no need to worry about me.'

'How long had you been planning this?'

'Sorry dad, I'll explain later. The important thing is, I want to go to college here in Manchester. I'll talk to you soon, my money's running out . . .' The line went dead.

Arthur put the phone down and said to Ginny, 'I just don't understand why she couldn't have told us all that before. Did she say anything about Chester?' Ginny shook her head.

'I told you they'd let us know where they were in their own good time.'

They finished the rest of the meal in silence. In the living room afterwards, Ginny sighed and came uncharacteristically to sit next to Arthur. He was on the sofa, and she sat very close. Arthur noticed that she seemed to have relaxed for the first time since the children's disappearance. All her former agitation seemed to have left her completely. Instinctively, he encircled her in his arms.

'I know you weren't really keen on my pressing for the adoption of the children,' Ginny said mournfully.

'At the beginning, yes, but I grew to love them. And I'll be hurt if Chester doesn't permit us to be part of his life. I think of him as my son.' Absent-mindedly, he stroked Ginny's hair.

'But you never showed it, Arthur. You didn't allow him to know you cared.'

'Oh, Ginny, you were so full of him. You never gave me a chance. You remember when you used to spend hours reading to him from that African folk-tale you wrote and coloured for him specially? It was impossible to get between you. You shut me out completely.' Ginny smiled, looking into the distance. She nodded.

'Chester loved that book. He ended knowing the words by heart, even before he could read. I wonder what happened to it.'

'And why doesn't he phone, to let us know where he is?' Arthur persisted.

'He will when he's good and ready. Maybe he wants to find his real mother without involving us. A lot of adopted children do that. They need to fill in the missing parts of their story, and then they come back to the people who cared for them when they were little.'

They went to bed early. All the winter stiffness of Arthur's long drive thawed. A peaceful stillness filled the house. At last, a long bleak period was suddenly over.

Chapter 17

It was a cloudy evening as Chester arrived at his final destination. A short walk from the station, and he found himself in a side road, at the end of which was an open air garage. The

man lying on his back under a battered blue Ford was his friend, Mr Enoch Ugwu. Standing by the car, his hands in his pockets, was Rufus, his elder son, now slightly taller than Chester remembered him.

Chester stood still, watching them from a distance. He felt an intruder. Leaving St Simon, he could not allow himself to anticipate rejection. Now his impulsiveness was staring him in the face. He felt he had no right to impose his needs on this man, who was raising his two boys alone. He was stung by a pang of indecision, and felt himself shrink. His heart beat faster, and to fight off the doubts that were about to defeat him, he started mechanically to recite 'The Lord is my Shepherd . . .' When he got to 'the valley of the shadow of death', a car passed between him and the blue Ford, obscuring it from view.

As the road cleared, Rufus turned his head and saw Chester. He pulled off his cap and ran towards him, shouting:

'Dad! Dad! Chester's here! It's Chester, dad!'

Chester crossed the narrow road, and Rufus ran into his arms. He was overwhelmed at his reception. Mr Ugwu came out from under the car, wiped his hands on his overall and took Chester's hand, covering it in both of his and shaking it vigorously. Chester fought away tears. Enoch Ugwu's teeth flashed, his smile dazzling in his dark handsome face. Chester was unaccustomed to such a lively display of affection. The warmth of it made him feel shy, but good at the same time. Father and son showed him to the house where they lived.

The living room lacked the luxury and softness of the Arlingtons'. It was not poor, but the furniture didn't match, and looked as if it had been acquired haphazardly. Next to a big expensive looking leather settee and matching chairs that looked as if they belonged in a waiting room, were small wobbly side tables that might have been picked up from an apprentice carpenter. The carpet was a rich red with a thick pile, but the curtains were badly hung, as if they were pleading to be brought

down. As for the television, it was the biggest Chester had ever seen. When it came on, he actually jumped from his chair, the voice of the announcer was loud, and the image so large. The newsreader's eyes appeared to be looking straight at him, and Chester felt he was actually in the room. Mr Ugwu laughed at Chester's surprise. 'It's nice, isn't it?' he asked, still laughing. Chester nodded. In another corner, he saw a matching sound system.

'Wow, Mr Ugwu, you must be making good money in your garage business.'

Chester was not normally so forthright, but he felt he had entered a new world. He had never been in the home of a black family, and he liked what he was seeing. The vicarage was old, and smelled of leather backed hymn books, damp woollen clothes and boiled vegetables. Everything was old and all the furniture was dark, upholstered in grey velvet, with maroon cushions matching the velvet curtains, which were the same colour as the velvet on the pulpit.

At the Millers', the only other house Chester knew intimately, the furniture was cheap, but there was an air of cheerful chaos which made it comfortable. There was no need for pretence, and Chester felt at home there, eating chips with his fingers out of their paper wrapper, while watching television. The place might have smelt like a fish shop, but children loved it and felt at home, so there was always a stream of friends visiting Ray. Mr Ugwu went in to the kitchen and sent Rufus out with a plate of assorted biscuits and a jug of orange juice.

'Later we'll eat real food,' promised Mr Ugwu, 'but let's manage with this for now. I hope you like biscuits?' Chester nodded. He was famished, and joined Rufus and Thomas in attacking the biscuits. The boys were full of questions about the holiday camp. They wanted to know how long he was staying, and if he would still be there when they returned on Sunday.

When Chester could put a word in, he asked, 'Where are you going anyway?'

'To mum's. I really don't feel like going today, dad. Why do we have to go and stay two nights?'

'It's the law, Thomas. You have to go to your mother every other weekend, you know that. I'm sure your mum and Uncle Paul will do something special with you.'

'That's it, dad! He doesn't like to hear our voices, so he makes sure we go somewhere noisy, so we don't have to talk,' grumbled Thomas.

'Shutting your mouth sometimes is not a bad idea,' said Mr Ugwu.

'Can we stay this weekend with Chester, please? Mum will understand.'

But Mr Ugwu raised his voice, ordering the boys to eat their snack and get ready to go to their mother's. Chester couldn't help being a little shocked. He wondered if it was right to raise your voice like that to your children. Instead of adopting a position of adult superiority, Mr Ugwu was just as involved in the argument as his sons, who were shouting back, telling him that it was not fair they should be sent away whilst he monopolised Chester. Despite the noise, Mr Ugwu made sure they changed their shirts and washed their faces.

'Is that what real fathers do? Chester wondered aloud.

'That's what I do with these two. They won't shift otherwise. I can't use psychology with them. You see that younger one, Thomas, if I don't watch out he can set fire to the house just to see whether it would burn. Your father never raised his voice to you?' Chester shook his head.

'Maybe because he's a white man. My father in Nigeria used cane and sometimes belt on us. The mere mention of Papa would make you behave. I don't beat these two, well not often, only once when they refused food because I didn't make their beds as their mother used to. Then I started to take them to the

gym to box every Friday, and now they can beat me!' Mr Ugwu laughed again. Chester too started to laugh as he remembered a story Mr Ugwu had told him at the holiday resort.

'Have they decided against being boxers and marathon runners now?'

'I don't know what they've decided on exactly, they're always changing their minds. I have to watch them, because their mother's preoccupied with her new boyfriend, Paul, and doesn't notice. I'm making sure they're doing their school work. Rufus was so glad when, at the age of twelve, he could write a long letter to his grandparents in Nigeria. I felt happy too, but I could do much better when I was that age.'

Chester was silent. There had been no pressure on him to work hard at school either. He had done his tests simply because he was at school. That extra parental enthusiasm Mr Ugwu showed towards his children during the summer holidays had been lacking in his upbringing. Somehow Julia had just happened to show more interest in her studies than he did. It was when they started talking about her going to university that he had known what he might have missed. He didn't let it bother him, telling himself he could top up his education whenever he wanted.

'I passed GCSE in Mathematics and Woodwork,' Chester suddenly informed Mr Ugwu.

'Maths and Woodwork? An African in the UK, you'll end up sweeping the streets with those qualifications!'

'You call me an African.'

'Yes, you are a Nigerian!'

'Dad, dad, we're ready!' Now that Rufus and Thomas had made up their minds, they were raring to go.

'Chester, you're staying the night, aren't you?' Mr Ugwu asked. Chester nodded gratefully.

'There's the shower and there's the kitchen. Eat anything you

want but leave the chicken and fish. I'll cook them myself, so you'll have a taste of Nigerian soup.'

'Mr Ugwu, how do you know I'm a Nigerian?'

Mr Ugwu laughed again. 'Is that your problem? You are one of us, that's all. Let me take these boys to their mother. I'll be back later.' Another impatient shout came from outside, and Mr Ugwu dashed out to his sons. They all packed onto the front seat of a white van and roared off. Rufus was still talking to his father.

In the bathroom, Chester could see the absence of a feminine touch. A huge zinc bath tub stood in a corner, its metal feet exposed. It was heavily painted in white gloss, so hastily done that Chester knew it was Mr Ugwu's handiwork. He must have used car paint. The pipes coiled under the zinc tub were like huge intestines. The floor was covered in a thick brown linoleum. On the window hung large white blinds, and the window frames were coated with the same heavy, white gloss paint, as was a home-made shelf opposite the bath tub. By contrast, the ceiling paint looked dingy, while the walls matched the dark brown lino. The shelf was like a junk shop, a jumble of bicycle spokes, football caps and assorted kids' sports wear. Underneath there was a jar containing what looked like worms. There were rags of different colours, used for wiping cars, the shelf, or perhaps just abandoned. A slipper protruded from a shopping bag which had been thrown down next to the worms. On the wall above the shelf was a mirror, and on a little shelf below it, a collection of toothbrushes, in assorted mugs of blue, yellow and brown.

Chester did not fancy going deep down into the huge zinc bath. Between the washbasin and the bath was a brass pipe high on the wall. Part of the brown lino had been cut to make room for a square of tiles with a drain at the centre.

'So this is the shower,' Chester thought to himself. It looked

as if Mr Ugwu had built it all by himself. He was surprised to find, however, when he turned on the water, that the shower was very effective. He now saw the advantage of the lino, as the water just drained into the plug hole on the floor. Very, very practical. One could sing or jump about here. One did not need to be too careful not to splash water on the velvety green carpet on the floor. Yet, the place smelt clean and dry, despite the chaos of the shelf.

The towels were of rough colours, brown and blue. No delicate pinks and or pale yellows. It looked more like a recreation centre changing room than a bathroom in someone's home. No need to look for a mop, it was right there beside the jumbled shelf. Chester was mopping the bathroom floor when Mr Ugwu returned. He emerged from the bathroom, and told him:

'I was admiring your bathroom, sir, Mr Ugwu.'

Mr Ugwu laughed. 'I had nice tiles on the floor, before they came, but Thomas kept falling. The last fall was so serious, that I dug out all the tiles, and put in that rough non-slippery lino. I don't understand why he insisted on using the bathroom floor for skating.'

'You like having them with you, don't you?' Chester asked.

'I like having them? They are my life.'

'Mr Ugwu, don't you miss having a woman around?'

'Chester, the vicar really tried, teaching you to call people 'Mr'. Are you sure he's not a Nigerian?' Chester laughed, thinking of Arthur and his formal English ways.

'No sir, he's a white man.' They both to laugh again.

'By now a typical English boy would have started calling me Enoch.'

'Oh, is that bad, Mr Ugwu? I was going to ask you, well . . . not er . . . er really,' Chester added hesitantly.

'White people think it's a mark of friendship to address you by your first name, even when they're younger than you. We

don't like it. It's bad manners. You address people older than you formally, however close you are.'

'Some people even call their parents by their first names,' Chester offered tentatively, watching Mr Ugwu's face. He was stepping carefully, unsure of how free he could afford to be with this kindly older man.

'Exactly what I mean. How can you discipline a child who calls his parents by their first names. The Bible says "honour thy father and thy mother . . ."'

Chester sighed. 'What would you like me to call you, Mr Ugwu? You see, I have nobody at the moment and I would be pleased if you could help me. I need a place to stay, and I'm prepared to do anything I can to pay my way.'

Mr Ugwu laughed. 'Well, call me Uncle. Uncle Enoch. In my country that's how a young person addresses someone older but familiar. I like Uncle. As for helping you, I will do my best. Life here is a struggle for the black man. Tomorrow you can go and register at the job centre. Meanwhile, you can help me in the garage and in the home. You've got your GCSE in Maths, so you can coach Rufus and Thomas, as if they were your real brothers. By the time they've mastered everything you know, you'll be ready to move on. First teach them the tables. We learned them by heart in our day, but modern teachers don't encourage it. I find I use them all the time for everyday calculations.'

'Thanks, Mr Ugwu, er Uncle Enoch. I'll be glad to do what I can. It's almost as if you'd planned it!'

'No, not really, but I guessed from the way you talked to me at the chalets last summer that you were finding your life there too constraining.'

'You're right, Uncle Enoch. I didn't know how to change things, but now I feel I've made a start.'

'It's not going to be free. I'm a Christian, but I can't afford charity. As soon as you start getting any benefit, or earn money,

you'll pay for your keep. As I said, it's hard for black people to succeed here, but we can still help each other. I watched you work with that old man, and I was impressed. How is the old man by the way, and his wife?'

Chester's face lit up. 'You remember them? That's our John. He's still there, and fighting fit. And his wife Barbara.'

'Yes, they're a strong couple, to be still working at their age. Have they got any children?'

'Yes they have, but they refuse to rely on them.'

'Every culture has its own silver lining. If our people saw old people like that working, they would mock their children so mercilessly that they would force their parents to leave work and live off them.'

'Not John and Barbara. They always pay their way. And do you know, they're even putting money away for their funerals? And saving for when they're too old to work.'

'Hm, so what will their children do for them? How will they say "thank you" to them for being their parents?' Mr Ugwu shook his head sadly. 'And here, when people die, their lives aren't even celebrated.' Chester felt as he had on his first day at school, completely ignorant and all at sea. It was a world away from Arthur, Ginny, Julia, Ray and the rest of his friends.

Mr Ugwu, despite his strength, was a lonely man. He loved to talk and joke, and he laughed readily, even at his own jokes. Chester felt he had travelled from one extreme to the other. Arthur Arlington had not much of a sense of humour, and hardly ever made a joke. As for laughing, maybe in his next reincarnation. He rarely made eye contact and physical affection was reserved for special occasions. Enoch Ugwu, on the other hand, sought out your face constantly, as if trying to read your thoughts.

'Come into the kitchen and learn how to make chicken stew with tomato puree – the first step to being an African in England. Chicken and tomato puree are very cheap. If you can

make chicken stew, you'll live; the door to life is open to you and you'll be on the road to success!'

'All by just knowing how to make stew, Uncle Enoch?'

'The way to a man's heart is through his belly,' Ugwu replied. Chester was impressed by the ease with which Mr Ugwu marshalled the ingredients of the stew. Hitherto, he had assumed cooking was always done by women. He had never seen Arthur lift a finger in the kitchen, and the idea of a man actually liking to cook was new to him.

'Apart from chicken and tomato, do you add anything to it?' Chester asked with interest.

'Oh, yes, Nigerian stew is very rich and tasty. We add black pepper, chilli pepper, onion, oil, partminger, garlic and we even put in salt fish if we feel like it. We don't mind mixing meat and fish.'

'You know Uncle Enoch, you remind me of John.'

'That wise old man? To a Nigerian, that's a real compliment!'

Chapter 18

Chester could not believe he had spent almost a year in Liverpool. He never forgot the day he landed at Uncle Enoch's garage, hurt, humiliated, rejected and lost. Time had dulled the pain, but the memory stayed with him. Thinking about it all, he felt grateful for the strict upbringing he had had at the Arlingtons, as it helped him to accept the discipline he found himself under. Mr Ugwu had soon realised just how green Chester was, and, though he treated him like a younger brother, he kept him almost too busy. Whenever Chester baulked because he felt he was being over-exploited, Mr Ugwu would start quoting from

his reservoir of Biblical sayings. He had a thousand and one of them to call upon and throw at Chester at the appropriate time. Chester tolerated it because he had no choice. If he wanted to make something of his life, he had to accept the lessons he was being required to learn. And Enoch Ugwu never tired of giving Chester the benefit of his experience.

'I am the fifth child of my mother. My father was a good Christian, a lay reader, you know what that means?' Chester shook his head.

'Well, lay readers are the vicar's dogsbodies. They read the lessons when the vicar is away. They check the church collections, and arrange for the Wednesday class.'

'What's the Wednesday class?'

'I thought you were raised by a man of God!'

'I was, Uncle, but we didn't have Wednesday class in St Simon.'

Mr Ugwu loved to play with his sons, acting different parts and getting them to join in. 'You Thomas, you Rufus and Chester, sit here,' he said, getting out a big writing pad and pretending to take a register.

'When I call your name, you say "pirezenti, twenty naira".' Ugwu called several names they did not recognise, and then he bellowed, 'Chester Iloefuna Arlington!' Chester stared.

'You should say "pirezenti, twenty naira".'

'Yeah, but who is Iloefuna?'

'You are. Every Nigerian has at least three names.'

'What does Iloefuna mean?'

'It means "your community will not be extinct" in Igbo language.'

'Suppose I leave my community, how will the line continue?'

'Your father's line is not extinct now because he had you, didn't he? It makes no difference that he can't see you, the ancestors know who you are. For God's sake Chester, be an African for a second and stop asking questions. Just listen to

your elders, right?' Rufus and Thomas started to laugh, and Chester grinned.

'OK,' he said, pacifying Enoch Ugwu.

'You see, now we have lost the storyline.'

'No we haven't,' Chester said. 'You were telling us about Wednesday class. We are the class and you the lay-reader.'

'Dad, what does "pirezenti" mean?' Rufus wanted to know.

'That's how a Nigerian would say the word "present". We like to Nigerianize English words, especially in the villages. We do that to make the words our own. And twenty naira is like saying twenty pounds . . . So, Chester Iloefuna Arlington!'

'Pirezenti, twenty naira,' Chester cried. Mr Ugwu ticked the folder in front of him. He then stretched out his hand for the money.

'What! Do I have to give you money? I thought you were only telling us a story.'

'Yes, I know, but let's do it properly.' Chester took out a five pound note from his shirt pocket and put it on the table.

'Rufus Adimabua Ugwu!'

'Pirezenti, twenty naira!' Rufus placed a 10p coin on the table.

'Thomas Nkencho Ugwu!'

'Pirezenti, but I don't even have 10p. Your dad must be a thief, taking all that money from people,' Thomas pointed out.

'The money was for the running of the church. Every Wednesday people had to pay something, otherwise the church would not work.'

'Well, I have no money!'

'OK, you'll pay next Wednesday.' Chester and Rufus started laughing.

'Funny sort of church,' Rufus remarked.

'But your dad gave the money to the bishop, didn't he?' Chester said.

'We didn't have a bishop, but we had a pastor and a beautiful

church. We enjoyed worshipping God on Sundays, even if all the money went to the pastor. A labourer is worthy of his profit. That's in the Bible too,' Ugwu pointed out.

'Something like that, yes' Chester agreed.

'It's not just the church. Many things in Nigeria are done that way. You make a gain from everything.'

'Even from God?' piped up little Thomas.

Chester's mind went to the two thousand pounds that had gone missing from the Arlington household. He dismissed it from his mind, thinking they must have sorted it out by now. Obviously, they had decided he was not the thief, or they would have come after him. Nonetheless, it hurt that no-one took the trouble to seek him out, even though he did not wish to be found. But when people talked of home, his mind went back consistently to St Simon.

He was working in the garage, collecting a small allowance from Social Security and had enrolled in a local college to read English, Maths and Computer Science. He still loved working with his hands, so he didn't mind his apprenticeship at the garage, especially when, after a few months, Mr Ugwu started to teach him how to drive. He wanted Chester to be able drive the boys to their mother's every two weeks, as he did not like going there himself.

In general, Chester felt comfortable. He had a room on the ground floor, and they all shared in the cooking. Chester had come to love the peppery Nigerian stew, and had learned to make fufu with ground rice and to eat it with his hands like the others. It was very different from the kind of food he had been brought up on. Occasionally, for a change, he would eat at the college cafeteria.

Two years after he left St Simon, he took Rufus and Thomas to their local leisure centre, where they played all manner of games including basketball and football. When they got there, the place was still locked. It was a cold, windy Saturday

evening, and Timothy, the part-time caretaker, was nowhere to be found. The young boys complained loudly in their disappointment. Chester himself enjoyed playing with the centre's music system, dancing and drinking Coke with the older boys who brought the little ones. On this occasion, a plump lady had brought along her eleven-year-old son, and was waiting with Chester and the boys outside the centre. They began to chat, and she told him her name was Suzy.

'I'm Chester,' he responded.

'Well, Chester, why don't we two make a delegation to the social worker who's supposed to be in charge of this place? It's no use our paying all that council tax and them putting up this building and no reliable person to take care of it. It's worse during the day, especially during holiday times. Tim comes in whenever he feels like it. That's not good enough if you ask me.'

'He drinks, mum, that's why,' said the son.

'Keep quiet, Mark. You don't really know if he drinks,' she giggled. More children came and started kicking the iron security bars. A few threw stones at the door, and Suzy intervened.

'OK kids', she said. 'Chester and I are going to see the Council on Monday. Let's just give up and go home now. We'll sort it, all right?' Chester agreed.

'Till Monday then.'

At home, Chester discussed it with Mr Ugwu, who encouraged him to go. He complimented Chester on taking responsibility, and promised to clean out the garage himself in the morning, a job Chester normally did.

Monday morning was mild and sunny. Because he was not required at the garage that morning, Chester slept late. He felt like a boy bunking off school. Though he was young, he wallowed in the luxury of a quiet house and having a little rest. He started to think that, though he was grateful to Mr Ugwu for teaching him motor mechanics, he did not really want to be a mechanic. He would not, however, have much choice if he did

not work hard at his studies, which were already taking most of the little money he got from the social services. Meanwhile, he would learn what he could from Mr Ugwu. He was already driving the van with an L-plate, and in a few months, when he had saved enough money, he would take his driving test. He was beginning to feel proud of himself, though the pride was tinged with pain at having nobody to share it with. Though he was nearly nineteen, he would have liked to be able to tell his parents about his new accomplishments, to dazzle them with his technical knowledge and impress them with his practical know-how.

Chester got up and put on a white shirt and his best sweater, which he had bought himself last Christmas. The sweater was warm, maybe too warm for October, but he knew he looked good in it, along with his best jeans. He cleaned his heavyweight sneakers and checked himself in the mirror. He looked clean and well turned out, and, if he were to be honest, he was good-looking too. The hard work had given his spare frame muscles, which showed even under the sweater, and the close-fitting jeans hugged his long legs snugly. His skin, freshly bathed and oiled, shone, and his springy hair was cut fashionably low. He left the house feeling confident in his ability to impress.

Suzy was waiting for him on the pavement outside the Council offices. They passed through the glass doors, and were directed to a bright open plan office on the fourth floor. At one end was a glass partition containing a small separate office space, and next to it a couple of easy chairs where they sat down to wait.

Chester looked around. He had never been inside an office building before, and was struck by the air of orderly efficiency. So this was what an office was like, everyone getting on with what they had to do without being told. One woman was working at a computer, another sat at a nearby desk writing by hand. A male clerk passed by with a pile of what looked like video tapes. No-one talked, but occasionally, the telephone

inside the partition would ring and a voice would talk into it behind the glass divider.

A young woman approached them and asked, 'Would you like coffee while you're waiting?' They both accepted, and Chester found himself imagining Julia in such an environment, working quietly and efficiently at whatever she was doing. Eventually, the voice behind the partition ceased, and a phone buzzed in the main office. The young woman whose phone it was invited them to go inside.

Looking back on this moment later, Chester often wondered what he had been expecting. A middle-aged man in a suit, perhaps, or an older woman with grey hair, like a head mistress. The one thing he had not expected was the sight that met them. A young woman rose from behind the desk as they entered, and stretched out a manicured hand to Suzy. Chester was too amazed to take in more than the fact that she was tall and slender, with a confident voice and manner. The chief source of his amazement, however, was the fact that she was black. It was only when Suzy nudged him that he realised it was his turn to shake her hand. He sat down in a daze.

The young woman said brightly, 'I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting. It's always like this on Mondays. My name is Esther Willoughby. What can I do for you?'

Suzy did most of the talking, explaining what had happened at the leisure centre, and describing the children's reactions to being let down. Esther listened attentively, before she in turn explained the reasons for the situation. The leisure centre had been minimally staffed while it was being expanded, and when that work was complete, they would be looking for two full-time workers. For now, they needed a reliable evening worker who would open the centre at 3 p.m. and close at 10 p.m. to allow young people to use the present facilities.

'Tim, the present worker, is only a sort of caretaker. He has another job, so he can't take any responsibility apart from just

opening and closing the place. It's a problem, but we haven't been able to find anyone to do it.' Chester seemed to wake up from his stupor at the sound of her words. Without really thinking, he said hesitantly:

'If you need a part-time worker, I could do it.' He had been silent throughout the conversation till then, and Esther had directed her attention at Suzy. Now she turned the full force of her enquiring gaze on Chester, and he felt hot all over. She seemed to be appraising him, trying to get his measure. He squared his shoulders and sat up straight.

'Really?' she asked. 'Do you have any experience with youth work or sports? Chester found his voice, and spoke more confidently.

'I've just left school, and I used to play a lot of sport. I'm used to kids because I live with two, and I already take them to the centre every Friday. I'm pretty sure I could handle it.' Esther Willoughby put on a managerial manner, arching her brows and nodding knowingly.

'And are you available for those hours?' she asked. 'They're what you'd call unsociable hours for a young person who might rather be out with his friends.' Chester was tempted to tell her he didn't have any friends. Instead he kept his tone even, and replied:

'I'm studying part-time in the evenings, and I need the money. If I got the job, I'd switch to being a day student.'

'And who would take care of the children?' she asked.

'Children! What children?' Chester was taken off-balance.

'I thought you said you brought your boys to the centre.' Chester suddenly relaxed and laughed out loud at her misunderstanding.

'They aren't my children,' he said. 'They're more like my nephews. I'm staying with the family and I help to look after them.' Esther smiled, and something more than professional interest was in her voice as she asked:

'How old are you, Mr Arlington?'

'Almost nineteen.' She looked surprised.

'Hmm, I gave you a couple more years than that, but you did say you had just left school.'

'Because he's so tall,' said Suzy, giggling like a school girl.

'All right', said Esther, 'Let's give it a try. Becky will give you a set of forms to fill in on your way out. We'll have to interview you, but I don't think that'll be a problem. By the way, what are you studying?'

'I'm trying to get some more GCSEs,' said Chester. 'I've just got Maths, English and Computer Studies, but I want the chance to study more later.' He was trying very hard to sound casual, but Esther was not deceived.

Chester was elated as he and Suzy left the Council building. Suzy was nearly as excited as he was, her plump face crimson with pleasure. She could not have been happier if she had got the job herself, and congratulated him heartily. Chester, in an uncharacteristic moment, took the soft face in his hands and planted a kiss on her cheek.

'Thanks a million for taking me there, Suzy,' he said, as they parted. All the way home, he revolved what this new step would mean.

'Who would have thought it possible? Only this morning I was worrying how to wriggle out of a mechanic's job without hurting Uncle Enoch, and now God has sent me this.'

He felt tired and at peace, crawled under his quilt and slept until it was time to go to college. He decided against telling Mr Ugwu until he was sure he had got the job. He went back with the forms the next day, and Esther saw him immediately. She went through the forms with him, and at the end she said:

'I've spoken to the director of Social Services. He will interview you on Friday morning at 10 a.m. If you get the job, you can start right away if you like.'

'Just like that?' Chester asked, unbelieving.

'Hmm, it's only part-time leisure centre attendant, not prime minister of Great Britain!' Chester laughed again with relief and pleasure.

'Thank you Miss Willoughby.'

'Oh please, we're not in school! My name is Esther, and I'm looking forward to working with you.' She got up and shook Chester's hand. 'Good luck on Friday. Drop in afterwards and let me know how it went. As I said before, if you get it, you'll have the chance to become a full-time worker in time, and you'll be trained.'

'Thank you Esther.' He hesitated before he asked the question that had been in his mind since the previous day. 'If you don't mind my asking, how come you're in charge here?' Now it was Esther's turn to laugh.

'I'm not the boss, I'm just the co-ordinator. I got the job because I have a degree, so I'm qualified. I graduated last year. This is my first job, so I know how you feel.'

Uncle Enoch said it was hard for black people to succeed in England, Chester thought. But Esther was young, black and successful. She didn't look much older than Chester. It seemed Mr Ugwu didn't know everything.

Telling Mr Ugwu about the new job was not easy. Chester didn't want to appear ungrateful, after all he had done for him, but he knew this was the break he had been waiting for. Mr Ugwu was philosophical about it however, though he felt like a parent whose child was about to fly the nest.

Chester softened the blow by increasing his contribution towards the household expenses. What they had promised to pay him as a part-time worker was two and a half times his Social Services allowance. He noticed that Mr Ugwu treated him with more respect, as did the boys. He had learned a lesson, that it was always better to work than wait for a handout. Another thing he discovered was that as a day student, he was entitled to a grant. It was not much, but it meant he would not have to pay

for his tuition. It was Esther who alerted him to this. She waited until he had had time to settle into the job before she ventured to ask:

'How are you going to cope with evening studies if you're going to be here?' Chester shrugged.

'I'll manage. I can study at the week-ends.'

'You said you'd consider being a day student. You should investigate it – the good thing about it is that you don't have to pay fees.' Chester was all ears. He hadn't imagined being able to get money to study.

'Really! But how?' Esther laughed and said:

'Come with me. Let's give it a try.' She led him to another section of the building. Walls and screens divided department from department like a child's Lego construction, in fresh youthful colours of orange and green. They arrived at an office labelled 'Education', where Esther introduced Chester to a young man sitting by the door. Chester had another surprise when he realised the young man was the secretary.

'Chester has been attending night classes, but he's working for us now at the leisure centre and he wants to apply to finish his college studies as a day student. I'll leave him with you,' she concluded, and disappeared. Chester was left alone with the young man, who motioned him to sit down. He didn't smile, but reached for a stack of forms in tray on the desk and began to fill it in while asking Chester questions. He was polite but not friendly, and Chester realised that not everyone in the office was as warm and informal as Esther.

'You're a bit late,' he said when the form was complete. 'You should have applied in the first week of term. This will take some time, and you'll have to continue the evening classes till it's approved. We'll notify you when your application's been processed.'

'I'm sorry,' said Chester. 'I didn't know what I had to do to be a day student.'

'It's all in the regulations,' said the young man, handing him a booklet. 'You should have been given one of these when you registered.' He said nothing more, and Chester gathered he was dismissed.

After a long wait, Chester got a place as a day student. He was told it would take another month for his grant to come through, but he was overjoyed. The grant would cover tuition, with a little extra for transport and books. He had never felt so lucky in his whole life. The day he got his first pay, he decided he was going to be an African as Uncle Enoch had taught him.

Chester went to the city centre the Saturday after he was paid. He bought Uncle Enoch a tight-fitting woollen hat to protect his balding head from engine oil. Also it was getting colder and colder and there was little heating in the garage to avoid fire. He bought two of the latest football caps for Rufus and Thomas. He also bought a large pizza, and, after much thought, a bottle of whisky. He wanted Uncle Enoch's blessing, and he thought the way to get it was a bottle of Johnny Walker.

Chester had arranged to take time off that evening, so as to be there when Uncle Enoch came in from the garage. He set the table as he had been taught at home, and invited everyone to sit down. The family stared at him expectantly.

'Aren't you going to make a speech?' joked Ugwu. Chester looked so serious, he couldn't help smiling. Chester theatrically dipped his hand into his shirt pocket and brought out a piece of paper. Rufus and Thomas looked at each other.

'So he really is going to make a speech,' Thomas remarked. Chester squared his shoulders, cleared his voice and said:

'Thank you all for having me.' He sat down abruptly, and they all laughed. He presented the caps to the boys, who immediately put them on, and the brown woollen one to Mr Ugwu. 'To keep your head warm,' Chester smiled. Then he gave him a gift-wrapped packet of cigars and the bottle of whisky. He brought the pizza sizzling from the grill and put it in the

middle of the table. He was about to serve it, when Mr Ugwu stopped him.

'Wait-o,' he said 'we have to pray and make offering to the ancestors.' He opened the bottle of whisky and poured a little on the ground, while thanking the ancestors for giving Chester life, and for leading him to a new job. He prayed to them to look after him and after his own family as well. He begged them to strike all their enemies dead. Then he poured a little of the whisky into a glass and passed it to Chester. Chester had never tasted whisky, nor anything stronger than an occasional half pint of lager or a glass of sherry at Christmas. He drank a bit and felt its unnatural heat in his chest. It made him splutter and he was about to set it down and sip it gradually. Uncle Ugwu would have none of that.

'Drink it up like a man!' Ugwu spoke so seriously that Chester obeyed without asking any questions.

'Next time people give you the drink of invocation, you must down it in one gulp.'

'I'm learning to be an African,' Chester said, his eyes red.

'You are an African. As long as you're a black man, you're an African.' With that, he helped himself to a large whisky and his eyes dilated with pleasure. The boys had Coke and played their records as loud as they wanted. It was their luck the old couple next door were hard of hearing. Chester sat at the table with Mr Ugwu.

'You know uncle, I didn't know that I could get a job.'

'Why ever not?' Mr Ugwu asked.

'Because you said it was so hard for black people to succeed here.' Enoch Ugwu laughed.

'When I said it's hard to succeed, I wasn't talking about jobs like part-time caretaker. You've done well, but don't be satisfied with that. You can still do better.' He meant it kindly, but Chester was deflated. Only the warmth of Johnny Walker kept him afloat.

Chapter 19

Some months later, Enoch Ugwu took the boys to visit their family in Nigeria, and returned with a new wife. His family would not hear of him living alone and had insisted on his marrying again. They had performed all the initial ceremonies in his absence, so that all that was left was the marriage. On his return, he decided to take the family to visit St Simon's holiday camp once more.

'But you're not a one-parent family any more, Uncle,' Chester pointed out.

'Yes, I know, but I applied for a place before I went home to bring Jo. Besides, it would be nice for her to see some of England before she settles down.' Chester nodded. He stole a glance at the new girl. Even to him she was a girl, thin and flat with heavy eyelids which made her look sleepy. She always called Enoch 'sah', and curtseyed when she handed him anything. Chester was at first baffled and then amused, but Mr Ugwu regarded it as normal.

Where before they all helped out in the house, she had taken over all the chores. She cooked, cleaned, washed and ironed, and seemed to take it for granted that was her job. Though Chester tried to talk to her, he could not get much out of her. She treated him with the same respect as she treated Mr Ugwu. The only sign she gave of her personality was the constant playing of the radio, which was always tuned to a music station and played at full volume. She knew how to get all the foreign music channels, and frequently sang along even if she didn't quite know all the words. That livened the house up during the day. When Thomas and Rufus returned from school, their own brand of music boomed from their bedroom. Whenever Chester wanted to talk to Jo, he had to shout.

'Have you ever seen anyone in love with the kitchen sink?' Chester asked Esther one lunch time in the staff canteen, where they now met regularly.

'In this day and age? No,' Esther replied, biting into her cheese roll.

'Well, our Jo is. She fills the sink with warm soap suds and dips her hands in it whilst singing along with the radio.'

'Does she seem happy?' Esther asked. Chester nodded.

'Then what's your problem?'

'I just feel, you know, she should be enjoying herself more.'

'Enjoying herself doing what? Give her time to get used the place. It must all seem very strange to her. So don't you go and start giving her ideas. Mr Ugwu won't thank you for it.'

When Enoch said he was taking his family to St Simon, Chester was pleased on Jo's behalf. He readily agreed to look after the house.

'Just enjoy the fresh air and introduce Jo to my part of England.'

'You'll have to go home for a visit yourself one day,' Ugwu remarked tentatively. Chester nodded.

'I will Uncle, but I have some things to do first. I want to get more GCSE's and train as a leisure attendant manager. And I want to visit Africa. Don't forget I'm a Nigerian.'

'Oh, is that what they say they call it, leisure attendant manager?'

'I love the job uncle, whatever they call it. I just love it. It's becoming busier and busier, and the kids are asking me to open the centre during the day.'

'They will want that, those lazy children who ought to be in school.'

'Most of them have left school, and have nowhere else to go. The building is quiet and unused in the mornings. I have lots of ideas of things they could do, but I can't do anything about them till I'm trained.'

'You'll soon need another assistant.'

Chester nodded. 'I know, uncle.'

Chester wrote a short letter to John and Barbara, in which he promised to see them in a while. He cautiously asked of his parents, not forgetting Julia. He bought a box of gift-wrapped cigars for John, and a set of embroidered handkerchiefs for Barbara. He watched the Ugwus' departure with a pang of regret.

They were soon home, saying how much they had enjoyed the sea air. Their praises of St Simon were so high that Chester became nostalgic. When he could eventually get a word in, he asked of John and Barbara. He noticed the small hesitation in Mr Ugwu's response. Jo looked sharply at her husband then jumped up from her chair, announcing as she made her way to the kitchen, 'I'm going to make tea. Will you like some sir, and Chester, will you take tea?'

'Thank you, Jo. See, you now make tea all the time, like an English person!' teased Chester. Ugwu laughed heartily.

'You remember when she first came and tried to teach us that people drink tea only at breakfast?'

'And at 4 o'clock,' she shouted from the kitchen.

'See, she's already answering me back. So bold,' Enoch complained. He then went quiet and assumed a serious air, lowering his voice to suit the gravity of what he was going to say. Unusually for him, he did not look Chester in the eye.

'It's now three years since you left St Simon?'

'Yes, uncle.'

'Many things have changed in that time. Barbara now comes to help only at the end of the holidays. Your friend's mother, she's even bigger and noisier now. But I'm sorry to tell you that John has passed on.' Chester was unable to take it in.

'What do you mean, passed on?'

'He's dead. He wasn't a young man, you know. He was over

eighty.' Chester sat there, transfixed. This was his first encounter with death.

'Poor Barbara!' he thought aloud.

'Yes, poor Barbara. All those young people who came to work with John will miss him too. Things have changed, but the chalets are still nice if you have very young children and not much money.'

'Did Mrs Miller tell you where Ray is now? We started school at the same time, and we've been best friends ever since.'

'Hmmm,' Mr Ugwu said, 'We all know Mrs Miller. She comes to tidy and take away the laundry, but she has a problem – she talks too much, and you can't get anything in.' He stopped, and Chester waited, but he said nothing more. Chester had the feeling he was holding something back, and found himself leaning forward expectantly. Enoch caught Chester's eye and looked quickly away. Chester was puzzled, but at that point they were distracted by Thomas, asking for digestive biscuits. Jo and Enoch turned their attention to persuading him that it would ruin his appetite for supper.

'I must go and write to Barbara at once,' Chester mumbled, picking up his cup of tea. Upstairs, however, he opened the Sunday paper instead. He needed time to assimilate the news of John's death, and didn't know what to say to Barbara yet. He immersed himself in an article about archaeology in Egypt. He was not, however, so submerged that he couldn't hear the lively argument going on downstairs. Thomas was insisting on digestive biscuits and trying to persuade the adults that he would still be able to eat supper afterwards. Chester wanted a quiet place to mourn the man who had treated him like a son. He felt the house where he had lived for three years was crowding him out. He was glad the caretaker's flat at the leisure centre was finally ready. He was due to move in the following weekend.

A week later, Chester was rushing to the Ugwus' to collect his

sports shoes, which had been left behind in the move. Moving house and attending classes had exhausted him, and he was late for opening time at the centre. As he turned the corner into the street, he heard Thomas calling to him. He had his school bag slung across his back, and his school tie wound around his fingers like a boxer's bandage. Chester waved back but did not stop, since they were heading for the same place, and he was in a hurry. He put his key in the keyhole, but turn as he would, the door would not yield. He knew that Jo had gone to her hairdressing classes, and would not be back until later. In confusion, he pushed, turned and twisted, but the lock was firm.

Thomas came up, puffing from running, and cried, 'Hi, Ches.'

'Hello, Thomas, I can't get the door open, what's up?'

'That's why I was calling you. I have the key.' He took out a newly cut key and unlocked the door. Chester stared at Thomas. The wind felt cold all of a sudden, and suspicion gathered in the pit of his stomach. Thomas did not appear to notice anything wrong, and explained happily:

'Dad got new keys cut last Saturday. Why don't you come in, Ches. You wanted something, didn't you?' Chester shook his head.

'I don't want anything, and I don't need to come in. I'll see you soon.'

'Can Rufus and I come over next Saturday to help you tidy up?' asked Thomas, innocently.

'That would be great,' Chester said, with a frozen smile. Instead of going to the leisure centre, Chester went straight to Enoch's garage. A green van was parked outside with the engine running, its exhaust pushing out clouds of acrid black smoke. The van's owner stood beside it, waiting for Enoch to finish his business with another customer.

Enoch in his overall and woolly cap, was watching a customer write out a cheque as Chester walked in. His height and the

muscles acquired through exercise caused Chester to give the impression of greater confidence than he in fact possessed. Underneath, he was sensitive, and easily hurt. Enoch Ugwu could tell from the way he walked that he was in pain, but he ignored him and concentrated on the customer. Chester slouched onto a bench and played piano with his fingertips.

'Tomorrow at 11 a.m.,' Enoch told the customer.

'Can't you make it ten, otherwise I'll lose a day's pay.'

'I'll need to test drive it, Mr Thorne. You don't want to take it and have to bring it back five minutes later, do you?' Mr Thorne acquiesced.

'All right then, 11 a.m. Bye for now.' He took his briefcase from his car and left. Douglas, the new apprentice, was at the back of the garage doing something to the battery of a white Peugeot. Enoch went to put Mr Thorne's cheque into the file, and then he went to attend to the owner of the green van. He collected what he was owed, and the van driver got back in and drove away, to the relief of all of them. Enoch now turned to Chester and asked, 'Any problem, Chester?'

Chester stared out at the darkening evening. The roofs were tinged with the orange glow of the dying sun. Enoch noticed Chester's eyes were rimmed with red. He lifted his hat, scratched his hairless head and pulled the hat back on. Sitting down next to Chester on the filthy bench he asked again, 'What is it, Chester?'

'I trusted you.' Chester's voice broke. Enoch looked alarmed. 'Whatever is it, Chester? Tell me, my young brother.'

'You went on holiday to St Simon and Barbara and Mrs Miller told you I stole £2,000 from the church and you believed them. How could you, uncle? You changed the door lock as soon as I moved out. How could you?' The ghost of a smile lightened Enoch's face, which was smudged with oil.

'Chester, Chester, look at me. Look me in the eye. I didn't say

anything to you because I didn't believe a word of it. I know how people talk. I told my family not to repeat it either. Who told you?'

'Why should I tell you, when you didn't trust me enough to ask me yourself?'

'I'm sure it's one of the boys. Wait till I lay my hands on them, I'll beat them.'

'No uncle, you're not beating anybody, not your sons, not your wife Jo,' Chester's voice was slow and tired.

'So it's Jo then,' Enoch went on. 'Hmm, women, they cause too much trouble.'

'I say it's not Jo!' Chester raised his voice. 'If you didn't believe them, why did you change the lock? You must have known I would come to the house. What was I supposed to think?'

'Jo lost her keys at the supermarket, and it was necessary to change the lock immediately. It cost a lot of money, those keys aren't cheap,' responded Ugwu. 'You weren't there, so I couldn't tell you. I wasn't expecting you round before the weekend, I'd have given you a new key then.' Chester almost sobbed with relief. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. Enoch could not look at him, but he patted his shoulder reassuringly. Secretly, he was relieved to have this out with Chester, even though he knew the boy was not a thief. There was still a mystery to be resolved.

'I'll tell you what happened, uncle!' went on Chester. As he told his story, he filled in gaps which had been there from the start, and Enoch realised how little he had really known the young man who had lived in his house for so long. Chester had been like a poor woman tying a lappa which was clean, but faded and full of holes. He had been hiding these holes, so people would not know his inadequacies. Whenever any new friends tried to come too close to him, he would turn the good side of the lappa outwards, not encouraging them to look

further. This man Ugwu had been like a big brother, almost a father. He felt at last he could allow him to see the holes of his spiritual poverty. Enoch Ugwu listened until the day died, and they walked home in the early dark.

'The ghosts of the past, how they haunt us,' Ugwu remarked after a long silence.

'It's true, uncle,' Chester said in a lighter tone. He felt relieved to have unburdened himself. Despite there never having been any attempt to find him, Chester had never been able to dispel the feeling of having fallen under suspicion. He had carried a weight almost as heavy as actual guilt, and all the heavier for being kept secret.

'What are you going to do about it?' Enoch asked by the door. Chester shrugged his shoulders.

'What can I do? I'll never go back there. Either they didn't care enough to trouble themselves to look for me, or they were just glad not to have the embarrassment of my presence any longer.'

'But you're innocent! You have nothing to be ashamed of.'

'Yes, but I'm black. That's enough to make me suspect.'

'Your adopted parents are good Christians, decent people. They didn't look for you because they probably wanted you to have your freedom. I'm sure they must have suffered when you left.'

'Then why did they allow the wrong story to percolate the neighbourhood to such an extent that the likes of Mrs Miller could believe it and have such confidence to repeat it to you?'

'It's not quite like that, Chester. As soon as Barbara saw us, she remembered you, and of course one thing led to another. I'm afraid I didn't deliver your letter, neither did I give the presents. It didn't seem the right moment to reveal that I knew where you were. I thought it would be better to wait till you could do it in person. I smoked the cigars and gave you a father's blessing, thinking my family would never tell you.' They

both laughed. Standing on the doorstep, the two black men, one older and roughly dressed for work, the other younger and taller, in jeans and a light jacket, could have been brothers sharing a joke.

'I have to tell you one more thing. Forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts God has given us. If you know how to forgive and forget past hurts, life itself can be paradise. I have had to learn this with the boys' mother. I thought I could never forgive her for what she did, and it made me very unhappy. Now I have accepted it, and look at me – already married again!'

'You're happy with Jo, aren't you uncle?' Ugwu nodded.

'All women are hard work, but it's better to be with a woman from your own people. It makes life easier for us African men. Remember that.'

'My mother, Ginny, used silence to divide and conquer in the household. My dad thought he was in control, but she was really. With her silence she could heal as well.' Ugwu nodded.

'You should see her sometime. Underneath that same silence, she probably holds the key to the missing money and to many of your childhood memories.'

'You think so?'

'Well, she is the only mother you have. And if you don't settle with her, you may never trust any woman in your life. I'm not joking. I've seen men go through life hating women, because they looked down on their mothers and found it difficult to forgive them for something in their childhood. For all you know, she prays for you every night.'

'What are you two doing out there? Aren't you going to come inside?' Jo's voice reached them from inside the house.

'Uncle, I thought she wasn't supposed be demanding,' teased Chester.

'Ah, we're still going through honeymoon.'

'Thank you for listening, uncle. I'll think about contacting Ginny sometime.'

'Yes, you do that. The man who underrates women does so at his peril.'

'I always knew she wasn't as powerless as she made us believe.'

They opened the door and stepped into the warmth and noise of a family home. The unmistakable aroma of egusi and palm oil hung heavy in the air, an enticing African fragrance. Chester saw that Enoch Ugwu was at peace with the world, and took his leave.

'Uncle, I have to go. My things are scattered all over the apartment.'

As he turned to go, he hesitated and said, 'Uncle, it wasn't Jo who told me about the stolen money. If you want to blame anyone for letting me know, then blame yourself. You gave it away by what you didn't say.' Once more, the two men laughed with complicity, and Chester stepped out into the night.

Chapter 20

Jimoh was a 32-year-old Nigerian who had escaped from the detention centre where political refugees were held pending the granting of asylum. The story of his escape was an engaging yarn full of twists and turns, amusing enough to glue a large audience of listeners to their seats. And what was more, the story changed with each telling. One time, he claimed he had swum all the way from Sicily, another time that he had hidden in the toilet of a cargo boat all the way from Lagos to the Teeside dock in Middlesbrough. But the most striking and often repeated version was when he claimed he had actually been accompanied into England by a security officer who had arrested

him on the ferry crossing from Ireland, but lost him as soon as they got to England.

'How can a security officer lose you, Jimoh?' Chester asked, the first time he heard this story.

'Because I'm black, and you know white people can't see black people. I piled my clothes on the back seat of his vehicle, and when he got out to show his papers, so did I. He came back, got in and just drove off.'

'So he thought you were still in the back seat?' Jimoh nodded and laughed uproariously.

It was Enoch Ugwu who had brought Jimoh to the leisure centre and suggested he might get casual cleaning work there. Jimoh had resourcefully looked for Nigerian names in the telephone directory, found Enoch's address, and come to the garage. Enoch had taken him in for a couple of nights, but could do no more for someone who had no mechanical skills. The three of them had sat in Chester's flat discussing tactics.

'Are you sure you have no criminal convictions?' asked Enoch, who had had experience of illegal immigrants before and was justifiably cautious.

'Me, a criminal!' Jimoh cried. 'I am Christian, man of God. I get wayside church near Benin.' Jimoh spoke good Nigerian English, but frequently lapsed into pidgin when he got excited. Chester found the way he spoke fascinating, and secretly began collecting pidgin expressions.

'I may not know much about Nigerian names, but isn't Jimoh a Moslem name?' Chester asked.

'Dat one na true,' said Jimoh. 'Me sef, I be born again and I get Christian name: Jeremiah, but when I dey leave Nigeria, I tink say I no for use that one for travel.'

'Well,' Chester said, 'I think I can ask Esther to employ you as a cleaner, cash-in-hand, as no more regular workers will be taken on until the extensions are finished. But I'm putting my job on the line, so you'd better not let me down.'

'Ah ah!' Jimoh looked pained. 'You go see, Jimoh na good worker.' Unfortunately, it did not take Chester much time to discover this was not so. He would cheat and cut corners, but he was a good talker, and Chester was entertained and fascinated by him. One day Jimoh told him, 'I get wife and two pikin, one baby for back, one big boy im name Friday.'

'Friday! Why call him Friday?' Chester had read Robinson Crusoe at school, and remembered his slave was called Man Friday. It didn't seem a very appropriate name for an African to give his child.

'Because he dey born for that day. Friday na Christian, Jimoh na the same thing for Moslem. You know say our names all get meaning.' Chester remembered the name Enoch had given him: Iloefuna. He hadn't paid much attention at the time, but now he had a Nigerian family, it seemed almost prophetic.

One day, Chester was moved to tell Jimoh his dream. He had told no-one since Julia, but there was something about Jimoh that made him feel he would take it seriously. Jimoh did not laugh. Instead he said:

'Na your spirit wey dey tell you something. Igbo people dey call am your *chi*, and Yoruba people say your *ori* dey strong. *Ori* na destiny, you for choose your own before you fit enter this world. You are lucky. Your spirit dey watch over you. Make you no ignore am. Some people fit pay plenty money to see the vision you're seeing free of charge.'

Thereafter, whenever they stopped work for a break, Jimoh would bring up the topic. He talked about it so much that Chester found himself reminding him that it was his dream, not Jimoh's. But he had a mounting sense of some impending decision that would have to be taken. It was about going to Nigeria. He felt Jimoh's arrival was a sign that it was time for him to go, but a number of things were bothering him. One of them was Esther. Since Jo's arrival, he had found himself accepting offers of food whenever he went to her office to collect

the keys at 3 p.m. That, and the breaks he shared with Jimoh at the leisure centre, made it possible for him to skip the evening meal, and offered him more time for revision. As a result, his college work was improving.

He also had to make up his mind whether to go for the three months training immediately after his exams and become a full-time worker. When his results came out he had done better than even he had anticipated, and he knew the time was fast approaching for him to make his decision.

'Congratulation and celebration,' Jimoh sang out of tune as he arrived for work the day of the results. Jimoh did not drink alcohol, but he brought kolanuts and two cartons of orange juice for them to celebrate Chester's success. He performed an elaborate ceremony, offering a long prayer to Allah, and then to the Christian God, and finally to the ancestors. He broke the kolanuts and gave a piece to Chester. While he chewed the bitter nut, Jimoh said, 'Now you are a Big Man, you can help your brother.'

'How can I help you?' asked Chester.

'The spirits of your kingly ancestors are guiding you. Many times I wonder why I came here to work, and now I know I was brought here to meet you.' Chester's steady gaze told Jimoh that he commanded his complete attention.

'So what do you want to suggest?' Chester asked.

'I get idea,' Jimoh said excitedly, biting off another piece of kola as if it were chocolate while Chester struggled to swallow his. 'You for get a job on a ship going to Nigeria. My wife go come meet you for Lagos, then you can stay in Benin area for as long as you like. You go see that your kingdom.'

Chester laughed, but he was excited. Perhaps it was true that Jimoh was a messenger, sent to assist the long-lost prince in finding his way home. Jimoh, mistaking his laughter, got up from his chair, bent his head to one side, and wearing a cloak of debasement, shuffled towards the main hall to start mopping.

'Eh, Jimoh, come back. I'm not laughing at you. It's a fantastic idea, but what do I do for money?' A smile returned to Jimoh's face, and he came back and sat down again.

'No problem,' he said. 'You take job for ship. I fit help you get that job in no time at all. You work on the boat and you get a free ride to Eko, Nija, my country, *abi* yours too. And when you get there, my wife will meet you. So, why the wahala?' Jimoh was persuasive, and Chester was already halfway convinced, when Jimoh made his next suggestion.

'To make things easy for you in Nigeria, I will lend you my passport. That way, no-one can make wahala for you. You go be Jimoh omo Garuba, proper Nigerian man. And me, I go be Chester Arlington. With your papers, I can work at McDonald's and make more money. I'll do three jobs at once. Then I can go back to my wife and pikin.'

'But that would be illegal,' protested Chester in alarm.

'My brother, give breast to a baby, or give baby a breast, in the end the mother's nipple is in the baby's mouth. I go help you find your kingdom, you go help me feed my family. *Abi* you be good Christian? If I stay in Nigeria for the next fifteen years, I will still be nothing. But if I work hard here for one year, I will have enough money to build a four bedroom bungalow. I will sublet two bedrooms and live in two and me and my family will be OK for the rest of our lives. And I will just enjoy life with no more worries,' Jimoh said, rubbing his flat chest and smacking his lips noisily like someone who had just tasted a delicious seafood pepper soup.

'You have worked all this out, haven't you?' Chester asked, impressed in spite of himself. 'And how would I get back into the country?'

'Easy,' Jimoh sang again. 'You join another ship and they go bring you back to Liverpool. I go be there waiting for you. I know all the crew of the cargo boat *Sisi Eko*, see? So no problem, I go talk to them to bring me on the boat, and I go

give you your passport. Then I go home. And you will come back a king or a prince.' Chester sighed.

'I always wanted to see Africa. I just don't want to lose my job here.'

'Which job, this one? It is yours till kingdom come. That thick-madam, I mean your girlfriend, she go see it's here waiting for you. Because you no just dey do this for me and my two starving children but you dey do it for yourself. Because if you no dey find out where you came from, you fit go crazy. No be so?'

Chester did not commit himself on that occasion, but he gave the proposal a great deal of thought. It began to seem less preposterous as he listened to Jimoh elaborating on the plan. Jimoh omo Garuba might not be a good floor mopper, but he knew a good deal about the workings of people's minds.

Chapter 21

Chester felt he deserved a rest. He sat on an orange plastic chair, and put his feet up on another, pretending to read the *Advertiser*. The click-click noise of youngsters playing ping pong mingled with the slow clack of snooker, but Chester's mind was far away, and he didn't notice Esther's arrival. She came in stealthily, cat-like and stood in front of Chester, half-hidden behind the newspaper. She admired the long legs which were all she could see, the muscles pressing against his Levis. Over everything hung the smell of disinfectant. She smiled at his isolation in the midst of noise and confusion. For some time now, she had given up trying to hide her feelings for Chester. She had struggled at first with their obvious differences – age, education, relative status. She had

stopped feeling embarrassed that he was only a leisure centre attendant, and three years younger than she was. Now she just saw him as a dreamer, who was working to make his dream a reality. His idealism was an antidote to her own cautious pragmatism, and she appreciated it all the more for that. Chester put the *Advertiser* down, and smiled.

'You think I didn't know you were there?' he said by way of greeting.

'I don't know how you do it, Chester,' she replied.

'Do what?'

'Create such a pool of silence in the middle of all this.' Chester pushed away the chair he had been resting his feet on; it made an irritating noise on the green tiled floor. He showed her what he had been looking at in the *Advertiser*.

'I'm applying for a job on board ship,' he explained.

Esther tried to cover up her dismay. 'What ever for?' she asked.

'I thought I'd try something new.'

'But you hate being cooped up. How will you cope with being stuck in a boat for weeks on end?'

'Because of where it's going. I want to get to Nigeria.' Esther raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders, with both her palms turned skywards like a prophet in prayer. She could not keep the sarcasm out of her voice as she said:

'Oh, I see, you're looking for your roots.' Chester's face clouded, and Esther felt she should explain.

'You don't seem ready to accept reality, Chester. We don't belong in Africa, we're British. Black British maybe, but this is our home now.'

'You're patronising me.'

'I'm sorry, Chester. I didn't mean to. It's just that all that roots stuff is so dated. Look how black people have changed the face of British culture. Don't you want to be part of that?' Abruptly, she changed the subject.

'Anyway, I nearly forgot why I came. Next Monday is August bank holiday. I wondered if you'd be free to come down to London.'

'Hmm, what's going on there?' Chester's voice was cautious.

'The chance to see some African kings.'

Before Chester could make up his mind whether Esther was mocking him, she added quickly, 'Have you been to Carnival?' Chester of course had not.

'I last went with my mother when I was in my teens. I hear it's grown huge, and brings people from all over Europe. I thought you might like to see the other face of black Britain.'

'All right, I'll come. I'll see if I can get Jimoh to cover for me.'

Esther brightened and asked, 'How are you finding him?'

'Jimoh? He's OK, I suppose. He's not keen on the job, but he needs to earn some money. I have to keep prodding him.' A piercing howl came from the snooker table, followed by loud banging. Impulsively, Chester kissed Esther on the cheek, and dashed out of the room to sort out the mayhem.

Esther took the hint, left the building and went out to the car park. She strode across the tarmac towards a big, powerful car alone in the lot. Even from a distance, she derived satisfaction from the sleek lines and shiny paintwork. It had caused a lot of raised eyebrows when she had bought it, but it was what she wanted. As she told her mother, she hadn't studied all those years and worked hard for nothing.

'When am I going to enjoy myself, mum? When I'm in the grave?' Esther laughed richly to herself as she recalled her mother's shocked face. She was still smiling as she eased out into the traffic.

Facing the road, her thoughts re-focused on what Chester had said. 'He wants to get a job on a ship going to Africa. Poor man. He doesn't realise how huge Africa is. He probably thinks Lagos is like Liverpool or London. He's chasing a dream, but nobody can convince him it's futile.' Esther shrugged her

shoulders. Why should she bother? Maybe the reality of Africa would wake him up and make him accept his life as it was. Why, for example, did he find it so painful to accept the fact that he was raised by white adoptive parents?

Her manicured fingers caressed the rich black leather of the steering wheel. She flicked on the local FM radio station, which was playing a current reggae hit. She sat back, relaxed, and swayed to the rhythm as she drove.

Chapter 22

The *Sisi-Eko* was about to dock in Lagos, after weeks at sea. They had called in at many ports as they made their way slowly down the West African coast. After Liverpool and Tilbury, Freetown and Takoradi were a revelation. Chester could not get over the fact that he was on African soil as he wandered about, drinking in the sights and sounds. Above all, he was struck by the fact that everywhere he went he saw only black people. All through his childhood, he had been the lone black in a sea of white faces. In Liverpool, he found he had little in common with the majority of the blacks he met, apart from the Ugwus and Esther. Culturally, he had to admit, he was more English than anything. But here in West Africa, he became part of the background. In the bars and markets he visited, people took it for granted he was African.

Arriving at the Lagos Marina, therefore, Chester was already filled with a sense of homecoming. What struck him first was the excitement which had infected his shipmates, the majority of whom were Nigerian, from the moment *Sisi-Eko* left Takoradi. They drank, sang and even set off fireworks in their elation at

reaching home. Some, like Omo Olowo and Cash, were leaving the boat for good.

'We are going home,' they told Chester.

'Don't listen to them,' Anjou, another shipmate, warned him. 'When they say they're going home, they're only going there to spend the money they have just made. They'll be back when it's all gone.'

'Which one you dey?' challenged Cash, who had heard the tail end of Anjou's sentence. Anjou laughed and changed the subject. He had done this trip many times and knew that once you were near Nigerian shores, you had to be extra careful what you said, especially if the texture of your hair proclaimed you an Asian. Unfortunately for Anjou, though his nickname was Ghandi, he had never in his thirty-odd years been to India. He was born in Mauritius, to parents whose distant ancestors had been Indian. He had fair skin and dark shiny hair. He and Chester stood against the ship's rail as the shore came slowly towards them. Despite the noise and the undisguised chaos, Chester felt he was entering a picture in a long-lost storybook. Cash's voice interrupted his reverie.

'You wan rest here forever? You no wan commot from *Sisi Eko*?'

'Yes, of course,' Chester replied hurriedly.

'You remember wetin I tell you. If you lost, come for Ajegunle. Just ask for Cash the Sailorman. Dat na me. No other woman pikin fit answer to that name except me – Cash the Sailorman. Understand? But no problem, I sure say Jimoh wife go be there dey wait for you.'

Chester kept close to him as they disembarked, just in case Jimoh's wife was not there. He checked his backpack to make sure his passport was accessible. Cash laughed.

'Wetin you dey check, Ches?'

'My passport,' Chester said.

'Where you think you dey, enh? *Abi* Heathrow or Liverpool?

This na Eko, and we na seamen. We get freedom to come and go. All custom officers know us. They just let us pass, jeje, no worries. Understand? Ah, ah, look yonder, that na Mowunmi, Jimoh wife. Good woman, I tell you she go come!'

'Where? Where?' Chester asked, as excited as Cash. Cash pulled Chester by the hand, and somehow they were on the dock. Cash looked at Chester and advised:

'If you no put that passport away, somebody go snatch it from you, somebody whey need am more than you.'

'Don't they have to stamp it or something?' Chester asked. Cash was losing patience. He shrugged his shoulders.

'Where you go find the stamp? And if you find am, they no get ink. Wetin you go do, go Liverpool again?' Raising his voice, he called out to a woman with a baby strapped on her back, looking lost in the crowd.

'Mowunmi! Mowunmi! Come, this na Chester, your husband friend. Me, I dey go. Good luck, my friend.' With that, Cash disappeared into the crowd, glad no doubt to get Chester off his back. Chester was face to face with the young woman, who looked even younger on closer inspection. She made a slight curtsey and said in a gentle voice:

'Welcome sir, welcome. How de journey?' Chester thanked her fervently for coming. She reminded him a little of Jo.

'Come sir, make we go. My husband brother dey outside by the car! Otherwise they fit steal am. Wharf na so so confusion.' As she was talking, she hoisted one of Chester's bags onto her head. Chester, embarrassed, tried to take it back from her.

'It's not heavy,' cried Mowunmi, setting off down the wharf. Chester shouldered his other bag and followed her. The baby on her back slept soundly through it all as they pushed their way through a jostling crowd to the gate. Outside, Jimoh's brother, Karimu, came towards them, arms open and welcoming, looking the spitting image of his brother. He made Chester feel at home immediately.

'Welcome, welcome. Brother say this na your first time in Nigeria. Make you no worry, this na your home. Every black person, whether he dey for America or for England, he must visit Nigeria before he die. Because when he enter heaven, God fit ask him say, "Did you go to Africa?" And if the person shake his head, God fit send him back to be a fowl or a goat in his next life!'

Amused, Chester remarked, 'The Nigerian tourist board should employ you!'

'Ah, those ones, they no fit employ me. They no know wetin go good for them.'

Chester was glad when Karimu unlocked the car and they all got in. He had started to feel slightly faint, and black spots were dancing before his eyes. As he sat down, they cleared, and he realised it was the heat. He had never felt anything like it. It was suffocating, like trying to breathe under water. Rivulets of sweat ran down his back, and his cotton t-shirt clung to his skin. His hands felt clammy and twice the size they normally were. The physical sensations – heat, sweat, difficulty breathing, noise, dust, smells – all merged together in a feeling of strangeness, as if he no longer belonged in his own body.

Karimu was driving in a way unlike any Chester had seen before. There seemed to be no rules, apart from the fact that all the cars drove on the right. There was no lane system, cars just overtook each other at high speed and took whatever position on the road was available. On the opposite side of the multi-lane highway, Chester saw cars mounting the pavement to get round an obstacle rather than waiting. He had the sensation of being in a fairground, in a mad game of dodgems. He realised Karimu was speaking to him:

'For now, we dey go Festac, then tomorrow we take you to our place, near Benin. My brother don tell me your story, how the ancestors call you come Nigeria, find your kingdom. In Benin we get one big Oba, wey dey call Akenzua. He is a good

man, he went to school. You for visit him and tell him your dream. Maybe he fit interpret am. Maybe you be him son, self, you never know. I, Karimu, go help you go anywhere you wan go. Just remember me when you find your kingdom!'

In the mad swirl of traffic, with so much hectic life rushing past the window, Chester for the first time was seized with doubt. How could he find his kingdom in such a vast and chaotic country? He had never speculated where in Nigeria he should start to look, but it appeared Jimoh had decided for him. He supposed Benin was as good a place as any to begin his quest.

Chester was pleasantly surprised by Festac town when they arrived there some half an hour later. Compared to the districts he had glimpsed from the highway, it was a neat and orderly suburb, with well-built houses and blocks of flats. It was to one of the latter that Karimu drove, and they trailed up several flights of stairs to an apartment belonging to another family member. As he stepped through the door, Chester had the impression of people everywhere. The place was so crowded, the already humid atmosphere seemed to close in on him even more, and he almost panicked. There were so many children in Jimoh's uncle's house, Chester wondered whose they all were. They did not restrain their curiosity, several of them coming to sit with him and ask 'wetin you bring me from England?' At first he was embarrassed, feeling he should have thought of bringing presents. He felt Jimoh should have warned him. He hunted through his pockets and came up with two pens and a packet of chewing gum, which he distributed to the delighted children. When Karimu said he was going to buy drinks, Chester offered to pay. Karimu came back with a crate of Coca Cola and another of Star lager. Josiah, one of the bigger boys, explained to him that when he returned the bottles, he would get his deposit back.

Sure enough, before they left for Benin the next day, the same

young man came to ask, 'Mr Chester, wetin you wan mek I do with the bottles? I for take them back and collect the 250 naira?' Karimu answered for Chester:

'What is 250 naira to a prince who is going to claim his inheritance?'

Mowunmi protested, 'Na wa-o, but that be plenty money now.' Karimu cut her off by starting the engine with a roar. He commented to Chester:

'When money talks, it is women who listen.'

A pit of uneasiness was beginning to dig itself into Chester's stomach. He wasn't sure what Jimoh had told his people about him. Did they think he was rich? Uncle Enoch had warned him to be careful, but he hadn't said of what. Chester in turn had not told Enoch about the passport swap he had done with Jimoh. He had believed Jimoh when he said that the customs officers were not too particular in checking the details of seamen arriving with the ships in Liverpool. He had, furthermore, been so swept up in Jimoh's vision for him that he had relinquished all control to him. Now he felt that somehow his fate was in the hands of this stranger, Karimu.

As if to accentuate the precariousness of his position, Chester found himself next to a door secured only by a piece of wire. He looked for something to hang on to should the door fly open, but there was nothing. As they left Lagos, the scenery changed and became lush and green. They passed through Ibadan, a large bustling city that seemed to go on forever, and headed out onto yet another highway. As Karimu drove, he avoided pot-holes and overtook other cars at breakneck speed. Chester tried closing his eyes, but decided he felt safer with them open.

Mowunmi sat serenely in the back with her baby at her breast. The child's large dark eyes drank in the world, as its mouth worked on the nipple. Chester wondered if he had ever been attached to his mother like that. He hardly ever thought

about that other mother, the one who gave him away. Seeing Isiaka with Mowunmi, he speculated about how he could have so completely forgotten someone to whom he was this attached in the first year or so of his life. His dream told him he was smuggled out of Africa, but it didn't show him his mother's face.

Chester started noticing the number of roadblocks at which they had to stop for police inspections. The strange thing was that nothing was inspected. Karimu kept an envelope in the dashboard, full of fifty naira notes, and he would simply hold out one of them as they approached each group of policemen. One of them would take it, and wave them through. Chester asked Karimu if it was some sort of a road toll.

'You no get policeman for England?' asked Karimu.

'Yes, but they don't collect money from drivers,' responded Chester.

'You mean you just drive from one town to another an you no give dash to anyone?' Karimu asked incredulously. In the back seat, Chester heard Mowunmi giggling.

'Every policeman working on the road takes bribe, otherwise they won't let your motor pass,' she said in explanation.

'Robbers join the police force, so they can steal from road users,' Karimu said.

'Robbers in police uniform? And doing it openly! Unbelievable!'

'Na true, my brother. We get plenty robber for this Nigeria,' went on Karimu.

After several hours, they reached Benin. From his reading, Chester knew it was the seat of an ancient kingdom, but had no idea if it corresponded to his dream. From what he could see on his way in, it was another dusty, ramshackle city, with shacks built of lumber-yard scraps and rusty corrugated iron sheets. It did not look promising as the place where he would claim his kingdom. Eventually, larger concrete block houses started

appearing, with green lawns and some with satellite discs. They passed a sign on their right saying University of Benin, and Chester was startled. He had not known that Nigeria had its own universities. He had taken it for granted that everyone was poor and uneducated.

They reached the town centre and passed a large market. Many of the houses were painted orange, and there were even orange towels hung on a line for sale. They turned off the main road and entered an untarred road of reddish mud. Houses here were rickety and he began to see the reason for colouring things orange – it was the same colour as the mud road, and presumably the dust when it was dry. They stopped at last outside a house which looked unfinished, with unplastered concrete and no doors or windows. They parked alongside the open drain which ran in front of the house. The smell from the drain hit Chester so hard he felt sick. Definitely, this was not his kingdom, nor anybody else's. He had relapsed into a shamed and insulted silence for some time, but now he felt he had to ask where they were. Karimu laughed, relieved that he had finished driving for the day:

'This na brother Jimoh's house. This na lucky house because na from here he begin preach and after some time he get one piece of land, where his church dey. You go soon see am.'

Inside the house, Chester was shown to a poky room with one window, packed with all manner of household utensils, pots, plates and basins all stacked on top of each other, and a pile of suitcases containing cloth for the market. There was room for a bed, and Chester was so exhausted that he sank onto it without comment. He longed to breathe clean, unpolluted air and sleep without having to worry about mosquitoes. He looked at his new friends with deep respect. That they could live in a place like this and not only survive, but find the energy to look after a stranger, was incredible to him.

Mowunmi appeared with a plastic bucket of water for his

bath. The bathroom was an enclosed shack outside in the yard. All around, Chester could hear people speaking in a language he did not understand, to a constant background of music from a radio playing somewhere. He thought of Jo, Uncle Enoch's wife, singing while she did the washing up. Chester stepped gingerly onto the concrete floor of the bathroom, and put down the bucket. He wondered how he was supposed to scoop water over himself, and noticed an empty tin on the windowsill. He found he was able to use this quite effectively, splashing himself with water before using soap, and then rinsing off afterwards. After the bath, he felt a great deal better, and ventured into the larger front room of the house. Here it seemed much cooler, with a huge ceiling fan humming in the centre. Karimu greeted him and explained:

'When we came in before, there was no light. Now light done come, so we get fan.'

Mowunmi brought boiled yams and vegetables, which they ate with a small amount of peppery stew. They were in the middle of the meal, when two visitors came in and were immediately invited to eat. They greeted Chester and asked after 'Brother Jimoh'. One of them joked that Brother Jimoh had forgotten them because he was there in England, eating bread and butter and going about with white women. The image of Jimoh in his green overall, baseball hat and plimsolls came to Chester, and he laughed out loud at the contrast between their image of him and the reality. For no reason he could fathom, Mowunmi too laughed, catching Chester's eye.

'See,' said Karimu, 'Mowunmi is happy because when Brother Jimoh go return, he go fat and smooth like you.'

'I'm not fat,' Chester protested. 'I'm 6ft 2in and I weigh 14 stone.' As he said it, he became aware that he was the tallest and heaviest person in the room.

'You get body pass all of we,' Mowunmi said clearing away the plates. Chester did not argue. He had noticed people staring

at him everywhere he went, and had wondered why. He realised it was simply that he looked different, not just his clothes, but his whole physique. He was accustomed to drinking milk every day, but since he had arrived, the only milk he had seen was a tin of powdered baby milk Mowunmi had for Isiaka. Instead, it was becoming habitual for Karimu to say after every meal, 'Brother Chester, bring money, make we buy something to wash the meal down.' Chester complied, expecting cups of tea or coffee, but soon realised he was the excuse for buying bottles of full-bodied Star lager. After tasting it twice, he came to look forward to it as the best part of each meal. And he suspected it was safer than drinking the water.

Chester relaxed and was dozing off in his chair, as the conversation went on around him in the Edo language. Suddenly Karimu shook him awake to tell him:

'This na Latifu. He owns the car which we use to come Lagos for bring you here. He wants to know when you go pay.' Chester had not been expecting this.

'How much?' he asked drowsily. The amount they were asking for in naira was more than double what Jimoh and Cash had told him would last him a week. At this rate, the cash he was carrying would not go very far.

'When are we going to the palace?' he asked after he had paid Latifu and his friend for the use of the car.

'Tomorrow!' everybody in the room except the baby seemed to reply in chorus.

That night, Chester slept on the bed in the small room, with Karimu on a piece of foam rubber squeezed into a space on the floor of the same room. Breakfast consisted of a milkless white corn porridge they called pap, accompanied by *akara*, hot spicy fried bean balls. Karimu then announced he was going to take Chester to the palace, and he should bring whatever he had as gifts for the Oba. Chester took out some items he had brought with this in mind. He had taken it for granted that Jimoh and

his brother would have done all the ground work. That was the deal when he agreed to the passport swap. Rather than waiting till he arrived back, Chester had persuaded Jimoh that he should send the passport by courier to him in Nigeria once he had used it to get himself a well paid job. For the first time, it occurred to him to wonder what he would do if the passport did not arrive. The idea that he might actually not be able to leave Nigeria caused him to panic, and he gripped Karimu like a child.

'Which one you dey?' the latter asked in alarm.

'I need a painkiller,' said Chester. 'Where can we get some aspirin?'

'Ah, you get headache? We go find pharmacy.'

It took some time to find the aspirin, as Karimu explained that many of the tablets they saw being sold by street vendors were actually made of talcum powder. Eventually, they found a 'good' chemist with genuine aspirin tablets, but had to look for a bar where Karimu knew they sold clean bottled water. The taste of the tablets when he finally took them, however, told Chester that even these were fake. They tasted of chalk. After all this, they set off for the palace.

◆

Chester knew better than to expect something like Buckingham Palace, but he was not prepared for what he found. A broken road sign pointed them towards the palace and the museum. It looked at first as if they were the same thing, but Karimu was taking him to the old part of the palace. Karimu was simply acting under orders from Jimoh, and had only a vague idea what Chester was looking for. If, however, he turned out indeed to be a relation of the Oba, it could only be good for Karimu. So he willingly escorted Chester on his bizarre mission.

As they came to the outer wall of the palace, Chester had a moment of recognition. He felt he had seen the red mud wall

surrounding the compound before, and where else but in his dream? His heart raced in happy anticipation. An old man was half asleep in a hut near the gate. Surely this was the gateman. It took a long time to wake the old man and to present their reason for wanting enter the palace grounds. Karimu explained that Chester was a visitor from far away, who wished an audience with the Oba. He told him he had come from the country of the great Queen Elizabeth, to greet the king of Benin. The old man remained expressionless, as he gazed at the two of them. They were in striking contrast, Chester tall and well built, in a pair of pale linen trousers and open shirt, Karimu slimmer and shorter, in the loose traditional wear known as *buba* and *sokoto*. Eventually the old man asked in Edo:

'In England, is it the custom that any passer-by can have an audience with the Queen?'

'No,' replied Karimu, respectfully. 'We have come to ask your permission to approach the chiefs so they may approach the Oba on our behalf.' The old man looked unconvinced, and Karimu continued:

'This man is my brother from overseas. He has been called by the ancestors to come home, and he thinks Benin is his home. The spirits have spoken to him in a dream, telling him he must come to this place and see the Oba.' Chester was uncomfortably aware that they were slowly attracting a crowd of onlookers. One of them was a young woman carrying a bundle of firewood on her head. Again he felt that he had seen her before. He felt that he was on display, and wished they could leave at once. The old man said indifferently:

'Come back tomorrow.' Karimu bowed from the waist and said:

'We would like to offer you this gift in return for helping us.' He motioned to Chester to hand him the bag of assorted items he had brought, dipped into it, and brought out a bottle of schnapps. The gateman got up from his mat and accepted the

bottle expressionlessly. Then he gestured for them to come inside the mud-walled compound.

Chester was again surprised at how basic everything was, considering it was the palace of an important king. Apart from a group of clay pots in the corner, there was nothing in the way of decoration. The ground was trodden hard, and surrounded by huts with corrugated iron roofs. As everywhere else, curious children stared at them. Being presumably used to visitors, they did not bother to crowd around them. Chester noticed they were all in western clothes.

Chester wanted to ask where the king's councillors were but his tongue seemed to be tied. The gateman led the way, carrying a carved walking stick, which he held like a staff of office. Chester nudged Karimu and whispered, 'How many wives does the Oba have, to have so many children?'

Karimu gave Chester such a warning look that he understood he should stop talking. His head hammered, the aspirin seemed to have had no effect at all. At that juncture, a young woman carrying a basin on her shoulder came out of one of the huts. She was wearing a single lappa tied above her breasts and reaching to her ankles. She stopped for a moment to inspect them, and then went into another hut at the other end of the compound. Her dress and hair style were identical to those of the women in his dream. He could not resist asking Karimu who she was. He spoke to the gateman, who passed on the information that she was one of the young queens. He added something, which Karimu translated.

'He say you no for look the Oba wives.' The gateman made a melodramatic gesture, suggesting eyes being dug out of someone's head. Karimu moistened his lips, and Chester could see his nervousness. They stopped in front of a large building in the middle of the compound. It had a verandah with carved wooden posts and wooden chairs and stools, which reminded him of his dream. It looked like where the men came to sit in the cool part

of the day. The gateman gestured to them to wait on the verandah, and disappeared inside the building. Karimu whispered, 'That gateman, he wan taste your schnapps.'

Karimu sat on the ground with his back against the wall, and fell instantly asleep. At first, Chester too was grateful to sit in the shade and rest. It was a strain, not understanding the language or what was going on, and he was tired, and his head still ached. After a while, however, he began to get restless. He envied Nigerians their ability to sleep wherever they found themselves. Karimu looked perfectly relaxed, and showed no sign of waking. Chester, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly thirsty. He had drunk nothing since the bottled water with the fake aspirins, and longed for a cool Coke. How long were they expected to wait? What if the old man never came back, or came back three hours later? It felt as if at least an hour had passed already. What on earth could he be doing? Was all this just to show them who was in charge?

Suddenly, Chester could bear it no longer. He had not come all this way to wait around while some old idiot drank schnapps at his expense. He stood up and looked around the compound. It was midday, and even the children were inside, sheltering from the fierce sun. He decided to investigate. An open doorway led from the verandah into the interior of the building, and Chester stood on the threshold and peered inside. It was too dark to see anything, so he stepped into the room. After the merciless glare of the sun outside, he was temporarily blinded. As he became accustomed to the gloom, he began to make out objects in the room.

On the floor were animal skins, some of which appeared to be leopard, others possibly monkey. There were also snake skins on the walls, along with animal heads and wooden masks. The blind eye holes and gaping mouths of the latter made them look fearsome and grotesque. It was cool inside the room, but there was an overpowering smell which Chester didn't recognise,

almost as if something was dead and decomposing. In the corner of the room, Chester now noticed something that looked like a sunken bath filled with brown water, in front of a platform with a high bed covered in animal skins. In different parts of the room were calabashes strung with cowries.

Chester had seen enough. He was seized with a strong need to get out of there and breathe freely again. He stepped back across the threshold, to encounter a completely different scene from the peaceful one he had left just a few moments ago. The gateman was standing just below the verandah, flanked by two fierce looking men who were naked to the waist. Behind them stood a group of women, all of whom had the same basket weave hairstyle he had seen on the king's wife. They were all talking animatedly. When the women saw him emerge, they raised their hands to the sky, shouting what sounded to Chester like 'Okome!' Karimu was awake, and one look at his face told Chester that something was wrong.

The next instant, the two muscular men advanced and took him by the arms. Tall and strong as he was, Chester felt their iron grip and did not attempt to struggle. The gateman spoke angrily to Karimu, who dropped to his knees and started to beg, putting his palms together as if in church. One of the women left the group and started to pull at Karimu's *buba*, and he allowed her to drag it over his head. Seeing him half naked, the other women started to laugh. Karimu, suspecting that he had averted danger by being comical, grabbed Chester's holdall and emptied it on the ground. All eyes were on the contents that lay in the dust, and an excited chattering began among the women. Karimu spoke under his breath:

'I hope they no wan sacrifice us again. I hope they go accept your gifts instead.' Chester had the distinct impression of having lost touch with reality, when a cultured voice spoke from behind him:

'I see we have visitors,' said the young man who had

appeared. As soon as he spoke the women curtsied, murmuring respectfully, and started moving away. The woman who had taken Karimu's *buba* dropped it on the ground. The gateman bowed and did a great deal of talking. The young man listened gravely, before gesturing to the two guards to let go of Chester.

'You two are very lucky,' he said. No outsider goes in there uninvited. That is the Oba's throne room. Next time, you must get proper permission. If I had not come along, things could have gone out of hand.'

He turned and spoke rapidly to the gateman, who evidently instructed the guards to pick up the bottles, cloth and other items, and replace them in the holdall. The young man beckoned them to follow, and led them to another part of the compound. He saw Chester staring at the modern buildings which up to now had been invisible.

'This is the part of the palace where we live,' he explained. 'The old palace buildings are now used for ceremonial purposes only. The elevated section of the room you trespassed into is the king's traditional throne. You are alive now because Baba said he prevented you from wandering any further. No person born by a woman is allowed there, unless invited by the king.' Chester stared at the young man, uncertain how seriously to take him. Karimu, on the other hand, was taking him very seriously indeed.

'Are you the king's son?' Chester asked tentatively.

'Yes I am. I will show you how to leave the palace by a back gate, so none of the chiefs will see you. They could still demand compensation for the abomination of trespass. I would go straight home if I were you. Anyway, there would be no point staying. The king is not here, he's gone to England for medical treatment.'

Chester and Karimu took him at his word. Once home, Karimu informed Chester of the practice of capturing young men who would be buried along with members of the royal

family. As far as Karimu was concerned, there was no question they had escaped with their lives. He was too relieved to be as angry with Chester as he might otherwise have been, but Chester was left in no doubt that he had transgressed. He was dazed and confused at where his dream had led him.

Chapter 23

The reconditioned Peugeot that had brought them from Lagos decided to give up the ghost, just as they were to visit Jimoh's church. After the usual breakfast of pap and *akara*, Karimu had tried to start the car. It coughed and spluttered, jerking like an old lady preparing to tackle the dance of her youth, then stopped. It let out such a horrid smoke and stench that Chester started to cough too. He began to wonder what type of petrol this was. He had noticed its smell when they were driving from Lagos to Benin. Now that the car was stationary, the air was dense with the pungent smell. He took out his handkerchief and covered his nose.

Karimu put his hands on his hips and cried, 'Who do you think you are, Chester? Michael Jackson? Boh, take the rag from your nose. You look like say you dead, with cloth over your face like that. Abi, you no get petrol for the UK? Well, this na the same.'

Chester removed the handkerchief, wondering when they would get to the church to pray for him to find his way to his kingdom. He was by now feeling so low and defenceless that he was prepared to clutch at any straw.

'So we walk. The church no far at all. Come, make we dey go by the post office, maybe you get news today.'

There were two letters for Chester, one from Uncle Enoch and the other from Esther. Their arrival made him feel he was not abandoned. Even though there was nothing from Jimoh, and still no news about his passport, he felt reassured. He knew he would be missed if anything should happen to him. He put the letters away to read later.

As they walked, Chester thought over the previous day's incident. He had come to claim a throne he had seen in a dream, in a kingdom he had envisioned as highly sophisticated and well organised. What did he find? The king himself had gone in search of medical care to the very country he had left behind in search of this one. What about the medicine man of his dream? Could he not have cured the king? And where was the dream going to lead him next? Karimu seemed confident the church would provide some answers, though Chester could not see the connection. Karimu had explained:

'Many people bring dreams to our church. Dream na God's way of speaking to us, na only to interpret am. We get many, many dreamers for this Nigeria. Lucky man na the one wey get friends to help him realise his dream. Because you see those mad people wey dey walk about? They no get people to believe them. But if you get money, people go listen to you, and your dream go be reality.'

Chester was uncertain as to the meaning of this little speech, but if it was intended to boost his morale, it had the opposite effect. He too was like a mad person, forced to follow Karimu because he had no other choice. His passport had not arrived, and he had not found what he came for.

The journey led them away from the main road, from one bushtrack to another. He realised that if Karimu was leading him into danger, there was no way he could find his way back in this bush. There were nothing but cassava farms as far as he could see. The sun was beating down on him, and his heart pounded. Karimu turned round and called:

'Come now, my brother! You no dey tire already? That stupid *jaga jaga* car no even last five minutes. All these motor mechanics na rogues.'

'The car couldn't have come this way, anyway,' Chester commented, dry-mouthed.

'No be so, my brother. We always use to come with car.'

'Well, in that case, no wonder it's packed up.'

They arrived at last at a clearing, where Mowunmi was roasting corn on a coal pot propped on a pile of bricks over an open fire. Nearby was a footpath leading somewhere, as a few pedestrians came and went.

'Come buy and eat the corn of life,' she was calling out to them. As she saw Karimu and Chester approaching, she was overcome by embarrassment for a moment. She stopped turning the corn, smiled apologetically and said, 'Welcome.'

'This is the church,' Karimu pointed out proudly.

If the palace had been a disappointment, the church was even more so. It was a square shack, roofed with corrugated iron sheets, and completely open on one side. Inside the church were four rows of wooden planks arranged as seats on each side. On top of the roof was a three feet wooden cross made of white wood. So this was the famous church.

Chester needed to rest, and seeing nowhere else, he sat on the nearest wooden plank bench and looked around him. He was very thirsty. To take his mind off it, he decided to read his letters. Reading them made him feel that he had left England far longer than eight weeks ago. Enoch Ugwu told him his father had found out where he had been living, and had been in touch. He wanted to see him urgently because he was dying, and had sent Julia to Liverpool to fetch him. Uncle Ugwu admonished him:

'It is time to forgive your father or how will you expect God to forgive you? Hurry up and return so the man who is your father in the eyes of God can go to his maker in peace. I hope

you are taking good care of yourself and your British passport, because you know, people can kill for a British passport. Don't let people know you are carrying yours. Many people here are worrying about you: the boys, Jo, your sister Julia and of course Esther.' There was no time to read Esther's letter, as the young boy who had been sent out to buy cold drinks returned. They ate some roasted corn and drank Coca Cola. Karimu maintained that that place was hallowed and his brother would never forgive him if he heard that he had allowed beer to be drunk there.

'In the evening, when the other members assemble, then we go start to say prayers for you . . .'

Karimu told Chester proudly that Christianity was the fastest growing religion in Africa. When Jimoh returned with the money he had earned in England, they would pay off the cost of the land, and build a bungalow behind the church. Next to it, they were going to build a proper shed for Mowunmi to sell roasted corn and plantain, and entice more converts.

As if on cue, Mowunmi appeared from behind the church in a flowing white gown, with a matching head cover. She was cradling Baby Isiaka, also dressed in white, and holding a Bible in one hand. They looked like an overblown Madonna and Child. She went to the table that served as the altar in the church, and began to ring the handbell that lay there, calling, 'Chialianu, Chialianu!'

Chester looked with amazement as the quiet spoken Mowunmi was transformed before his eyes into a spiritual leader. With her eyes turned heavenwards, she was so transported as to look as if she were floating.

'What is she saying?' Chester asked Karimu, who had been watching him closely, an amused smile playing on his face.

'She dey say we must repent.'

'But wasn't Jimoh a Moslem?' Chester continued, after watching Mowunmi for a while.

'Yes, but Mowunmi no be Moslem. She na Christian. Na because of her that my brother convert, and the rest of us dey follow him. At the end of the day, no be the same God? Ah by the way, for inside church, my name na Ezekiel, Jimoh na Jeremiah, Isiaka na Isaac and Mowunmi na Sister Marian.'

'Where was Jimoh ordained?' Chester asked.

'Like you sef, Brother Jimoh had a vision in a dream. The dream say, he for build a church here for this place, call people come and accept Jesus Christ. Maybe the kingdom wey you dey look for na here for the house of God. I no sabi, but I go help you find your kingdom. I sure say Brother Jimoh see you for his own dream. Me sef, I for wear prayer gown before worshippers start to come.' With that he disappeared into a little bush behind the church, leaving Chester to await the rest of the congregation.

Chapter 24

In spite of copious prayers, singing and speaking in tongues, and many offerings on Chester's part, Chester's kingdom was not revealed. Karimu saw he had to think again, and suggested that, as a last resort, they visit the palace of the Oba of Chamala. It was only a few hours drive from Benin, and Karimu claimed to know the Oba personally. He would intercede with him to enquire on Chester's behalf whether any royal family was missing a long-lost son. They oiled and shone the Peugeot, which had grudgingly come back to life.

'Listen, my brother, for this visit we no go take plenty present. We go offer just few, small dash, but we go give impression like say we get plenty, plenty money if he dey help us.' Chester nodded. He had little choice.

The palace was a modern compound, built of concrete. The walls were painted white, and there were decorative plants and flowers around it. A hut was situated just outside the compound by a huge overdecorated iron gate. There was no gateman in the hut, so they resorted to shaking the gate and shouting for someone to come and let them in.

A man came to the balcony of the main building, saw them, and went back in again. Then another person appeared from one of the huts at the back, accompanied by a dog. Instinctively, Chester and Karimu moved away from the gate.

'Yes, what can I do for you?' asked the young man. He was so thin that his rib cage was visible. He was wearing only a cloth and a pair of slippers.

'We have come to speak with the Oba,' Karimu said in his best English, surprised that this ill-looking young man was so well spoken.

'You have an appointment?'

'No, sir. This my friend, Mister Chester, comes from Great Britain and he wan ask the Oba some family questions.' Karimu shifted his backpack with an exaggerated wince. The young man studied them for a while and said, 'Wait, I am coming.'

His slippers flapped as he went back inside the compound with the dog at his heels. Again, a head watched them from the terrace of the main house. The young man came back without the dog, but with the addition of a shirt. He unlocked the iron gate and invited them around the back of the main house.

Here was a yard of reddish earth, with little huts along the walls, just like the palace of the Oba of Benin, only smaller. Women peered out from the huts, and from nearby came the sounds of children at play. They entered the large concrete house, and were invited into a reception room. It was one of the most extraordinary Chester had ever seen. A soft pink deep-pile

carpet covered the floor from wall to wall. There was a variety of furniture, including gold painted straight backed chairs, also upholstered in pink, which lined the walls. There were no fewer than three complete suites of different designs, one in red plush, one in black leather moquette and one in a zebra print. There were three ceiling fans, also edged with gold, which appeared to be only for show, as air conditioners purred softly. The temperature was ice-cold, and Chester shuddered involuntarily. At one end of the room stood a majestic wooden throne, with fat cushions also in pink and gold. Chester had to pinch himself to make sure that he had not entered another dream. He was still marvelling at the mixture of luxury and ostentatious bad taste, when a man in his early fifties entered and arranged himself on the throne. He did so slowly, trying to be majestic, though he looked more like a heavyweight boxer, in his white robe and black velvet hat with yellow tassels. As soon as the man was seated, Karimu prostrated himself. Chester did not know what to do, so he bent his head. The man waved them to a seat with his horse tail flywhisk and announced:

'Welcome to the palace of the Oba of Chamala. I see that one of you is a foreigner!' Chester was surprised to hear that he spoke with an American accent. Karimu reminded the Oba of where they had met before, or rather the occasion – the wedding of one of Karimu's distant cousins to a member of the Oba's family – at which they had both been present. The Oba gavé the barest of acknowledgements. Then Karimu introduced Chester.

The Oba flicked his whisk again and another young man in loin cloth and bare feet brought in a tray of kolanuts and garden eggs, the hard-skinned green vegetable that Chester had learnt people loved to bite on. The Oba took the kolanuts and prayed for the success of whatever mission had brought them to his palace. Then he looked up expectantly. Taking his cue, Karimu unloaded some of the gifts from Chester's back pack. He brought out three packets of Marlboro and a bottle of gin. The

Oba gave no indication of whether or not he was satisfied, so he added a packet of razor blades. When it became clear that Karimu was not going to bring out any more gifts, the Oba flicked his horse tail indolently.

'What can I do for you?' he enquired. Karimu was for once at a loss for words, and motioned to Chester to tell his story. Chester felt like a fool, but he told the Oba the story of his vision. The Oba listened patiently, occasionally grinding his teeth in a way Chester found extremely offputting. Otherwise, the Oba was as still as a sitting corpse. When Chester had finished, the Oba sat in perfect silence. Chester waited, but Karimu was almost choked by suspense.

'Mister Chester here, great Oba of Chamala, wants to find his family. He is hoping you fit help him.' The Oba willed life into his face, nodded thoughtfully and responded:

'I have heard that story many, many times before. It is a story told by our elders in the moonlight. What I don't understand is how you, who cannot even speak any of our languages, could have seen it in a dream. But then our ancestors were mysterious people. I speak to my ancestors often. Even when I was being trained in Pittsburgh, America, they followed me, guided me and showed me many things. This your story concerns the kingdom of Idu, the present Benin.' The Oba paused again and studied his visitors for a while before continuing.

'But I cannot tell you more without making offerings to the gods. The gifts you have brought are insufficient. You must go home and come again with fitting offerings for sacrifice. My *Babalawo* will tell you what to bring. Then I can perform a divination and depending on the outcome, I can take you to the Oba of Idu. We Obas know how to talk to each other.'

'But we have seen the palace of . . .' Chester began. Karimu gave him a painful kick in the leg and Chester shut his mouth.

'These gifts were only to show you our intention', said Karimu eagerly. 'We will do as you say and come again tomorrow.'

'You can leave these ones here,' said the Oba, gesturing with indifference towards the gin and cigarettes. Karimu sighed deeply, indicating that he understood.

'We thank you for your offer of help, sir. You Obas like things to be done well, well. We will bring whatever you need, if na money, if na camera, if na watch, anything . . . so Mr Chester will find his family.'

The Oba ground his teeth, his face immobile. He nodded his agreement, but Chester was not convinced. He suspected the Oba had been offended, but did not know how to make amends. Just then the Oba asked in a bored voice:

'How far is your journey?' Karimu replied:

'We dey go Aburi area, close to Benin.' The Oba shook his head. He slowly consulted his watch and said, 'No visitor visits my palace and goes home empty-bellied. You must eat. There is still plenty of daylight.'

When Karimu and Chester left a couple of hours later, their stomachs were pleasantly full of pounded yam and kerenkere soup, snails and fish. It was the best food Chester had yet eaten in Nigeria. The sun was already sinking as they started out, and by the time they had gone halfway, darkness had fallen. Chester, half dozing in the front seat, was disturbed by a light in the rearview mirror. He turned to look behind them, and made out a large powerful vehicle some miles away, which was gaining on them fast. He thought nothing of it, and they sped on through the dark bush. When he looked again, it was almost upon them, and he asked in alarm:

'Look, Karimu, what's that?'

'Na one crazy driver dey hurry home before it get too dark . . . what reckless driver this one . . .'

The vehicle, which Chester could now see was a new Range

Rover, overtook them, swivelled round and blocked their path about a hundred yards in front of them. Karimu braked hard and the old Peugeot spun off the road into the bush. Suddenly shots rang out.

'Jesus Christ!' Chester cried.

'Na armed robber!' Karimu exclaimed. 'Make we dey run!' and he opened his door and stumbled away from the car with his hands on his head. Chester followed blindly, as shots rang around them once more. Karimu let out a frightened yell and Chester knew he had been hit, but did not stop running. The Range Rover, reversing at high speed towards where the Peugeot had come to a stop, skidded and crashed into a tree. Voices rang out, piercing the night. Then there was silence, but for the noises of the African bush.

Chester and Karimu stopped, gasping, too stunned to say a word. Chester was the first to speak.

'You okay, Karimu? I thought a bullet hit you.'

'Me, you know say I am Karimu omo Garuba. Allah no go 'gree for armed robber bullet to kill me. The bullet scratch my trouser, otherwise no problem.' Very cautiously, they approached the crashed Range Rover.

'Hurry, make we dey go,' urged Karimu.

'Suppose they need help. Some of them may still be alive,' Chester protested.

'You dey craze, Mister Chester? *Abi* they don try to kill us? God, Jesus, and Allah no allow them before, now you wan make them kill us proper. Me, I dey go.'

Ignoring Karimu, Chester took their flashlight and shone it into the vehicle. The driver was slumped over the wheel unconscious, and there appeared to be two or more bodies in the back trapped under the weight of twisted metal. A voice from one of the bodies made Chester jump:

'Mister Chester, Mister Chester, help . . .' Chester shone the torch at the face. It was their host, the Oba of Chamala. He

recoiled in horror, and ran back to the Peugeot, where Karimu waited in the driver's seat with the engine running.

'Wetin you dey see?' asked Karimu, as he put his foot down. When he heard, he laughed. 'Now Mister Chester, you done see your kingdom proper.'

'But he was the leader of his people,' Chester said.

'But na the leaders de rob well, well, not the poor people.'

They drove back in silence. Before they got home, Karimu warned, 'This thing wey don happen to us tonight, e never happen, understand? You never see the Oba, you no sabi anything. If no, police go say na we do am.'

Some days later, Karimu showed Chester a report in the *Daily Echo*. The Oba of Chamala had been attacked on the road by armed robbers, and had later died. His people were in deep mourning. For a few days, obituaries and tributes filled the papers. These extolled the enlightened leadership of one of the new generation of educated Obas, who was both a devout Christian and a worshipper of his ancestors. He would be sadly missed.

Chapter 25

Esther was engrossed in her work one morning, when one of her secretaries told her that there were two people waiting to see her. She could see the outline of her visitors through the glass partition. They appeared to be a man and a woman, the former black, the latter white. She assumed it was a couple with a problem about housing, and smiled when she saw that the black man was none other than Enoch Ugwu.

'Do come in and sit down,' Esther invited. She ordered some

coffee, wondering who the elegant young woman was with Ugwu. She had not heard that he had sent his wife back to Nigeria, so concluded it could not be a girlfriend. She could not have been more surprised when Ugwu introduced her as Julia Arlington, Chester's sister. Of course, she remembered Chester speaking about a sister, and since they were both adopted, there was no reason why she should not be white. The coffee arrived and pleasantries were exchanged, but the uppermost topic on Esther's mind was Chester. Until two days earlier, she had not heard of him for six months.

'So you managed to trace your brother,' Esther began, still wondering what the girl was doing in Liverpool. The pretty face clouded.

'We've been looking for him for years,' she replied. 'My father was so distressed when he became ill and we couldn't find him. He got this impression that Chester was running away from him. And now it's too late.'

'You mean the Reverend has passed on?' asked Esther gently. Julia nodded sadly.

'He kept asking for Chester, but we had heard he'd changed his name, that he'd left the country, and all sorts of things.'

'So how did you manage to trace him at last?' Esther asked.

'One of the parishioners suggested we should trace the Ugwu family through the Clinton holiday chalets. But then old John had died and his wife had sold the chalets and moved away. It took us a while to find her, and all she could remember was that they came from Liverpool. But that was enough, and here I am.'

Esther stared at Enoch, who spread out his hands to indicate helplessness.

'Chester will be heartbroken at your father's death. He respected him very much. He felt he had to make something of himself before he came back home. This will make him very sad,' Esther said.

'I hope he'll regret not seeing him again. Arthur and Ginny did the best they could for us. Besides, Catherine, Chester's real mother, showed up a few months ago. She wanted to see him again too.'

'Hmmm, our women!' Ugwu said. 'Your mother must have been very upset.'

'Upset! She felt she was about to lose Chester for the second time.'

'Where is Catherine now?' Esther asked.

'She's a teacher in Hull. Since she made contact, she has tried to be friendly, but my mother finds it too hard. And now that I've found where he's been living, Mr Ugwu tells me that Chester is somewhere in Africa!'

'In Nigeria,' Ugwu confirmed.

'How on earth am I to find him now?' Julia cried.

'Actually, I've just seen the man who put the idea of the trip in Chester's head. I'm afraid he told me Chester was ill in Lagos and that he had lost all his papers. He gave me the name of the hospital. He wouldn't tell me how he heard or how long ago. He had been working for the council, but I was forced to sack him some months ago. He didn't care much for me after that. I was so desperate, I was thinking of going to Lagos to look for him.'

'So, if we hadn't come here today, you wouldn't have told me,' Ugwu said, sounding hurt. Esther smiled slowly.

'I was going to tell you, Enoch, but I didn't want you to talk me out of going. I wasn't sure if you weren't keeping his whereabouts a secret from me, because you guessed I could be looking for him?' Enoch Ugwu threw his head back and laughed.

'No, I will never do such a thing. But I would have liked to help you arrange your trip.' Julia realised there was more to Esther than met the eye. She had noticed the vibrancy in her voice when she talked of Chester. Moreover, Chester was no

longer the boy he had been when she had left home, and Esther was a very attractive woman. Julia took in the short black dress and black tights which made her look as if she was all legs. Her hair was plaited close to her head, and she wore simple silver ear studs, a very thin silver chain and a silver link wrist watch. Yes, if these two were Chester's new friends, he had moved on.

'When are you thinking of going?' asked Julia. 'We were hoping he could be there for the memorial service, before Mother officially leaves the vicarage.'

'I was already preparing to go to Lagos before Jimoh came with his alarming news. My flight is booked for next week. I only hope he'll agree to come back with me.'

'His father is dead. He must come.' Enoch Ugwu spoke with finality, and the discussion appeared to be closed.

Chapter 26

Chester lay in bed in the Lagos hospital, recovering from severe dehydration and malaria. From his bed, he could see nothing of the street outside except the palm trees that lined the road. He had lain there for two weeks, too weak to move, mostly asleep, but otherwise just watching the swaying fronds outside. When he looked down at his arms and legs, he could see how emaciated he had became, the veins in his hands standing out in relief. Coming round from a feverish sleep, he could make out a shape between him and the window, but not what it was. He focussed his gaze, and the shape became a person, and then a woman, but he could not think who it was. It was only when he heard her voice that he realised it was Esther.

'Chester, Chester, you're awake! I've been so worried about you!' she said quietly.

'What are you doing here?' Chester whispered. 'How did you know I was here?'

'I'm here to take you home. Jimoh told me where you were, and I came as soon as I could. I've come to take you home as soon as you're well enough.' Talking was an effort for Chester, but he said faintly:

'I am home.' Esther was quiet for a moment, then she said firmly:

'No Chester. Africa is no longer our home. We have stayed away in the market too long, as Nigerians say. Our home is Liverpool!' A nurse passing by heard Esther talking and looked in.

'Ah ah, now you will get well quickly!' she said, taking in the two of them. The nurse turned to Esther and told her:

'He arrived with a group of people, all in white robes, praying and carrying Chester between them. They could hardly carry him because you could see that they had not had three square meals a day for a long time. A woman who called herself a prophetess claimed the spirit took Chester in their church, because he was looking for a kingdom. Unfortunately, he had neglected to take his anti-malaria tablets. If they hadn't brought him in, he would have found himself in the kingdom of heaven!'

It took some time, but Chester eventually regained enough strength to travel. Though Esther was anxious to get him back to Liverpool, she had had time to get to know Mowunmi and Karimu, having shared many hours by Chester's bed with them. From holding them responsible, she gradually forgave them for Chester's condition, they were so obviously sincere in their concern for him. As he recovered, Chester had come to the realisation that he couldn't stay any longer in Lagos. His watch and camera had mysteriously disappeared since his collapse at the church, his money had run out and Esther had settled his

fees at the private clinic. He still felt weak, and knew he needed time to recuperate. Going back was the best option. Besides, once he heard about his father's death, thoughts of Julia and Ginny had haunted him. Very gradually, he had come to the conclusion that he had grown up happier than he had let himself believe, if his grief for Arthur was anything to go by. He had lain in bed, recalling everything he could remember about his early life and the part his adopted family had played in it. Among the memories he had the sense of something eluding him, something that remained just beyond his power of recall.

Jimoh's family gave Chester and Esther a send-off party in Festac, with a festive soup and pounded yam. Esther paid for crates of drinks, though Chester could only drink Coke. Prayers were said and libation offered for Chester's recovery. Karimu whispered to him that his brother Jimoh had sent another thousand pounds through Cash the Sailor man who lived in Ajegunle. As a result, they had finished paying for the land on which the church stood and on which they hoped to build a family house. Mowunmi blessed Chester and invited him to visit whenever he wanted, or even to build a home on their land. When she referred to Esther as his wife, he did not have the energy to contradict her.

'You don't need a palace to be happy, ehn Mister Chester?' Mowunmi added wisely. Chester noticed how her confidence had increased now the land had been paid for. He asked her:

'How did you manage to carry me all the way from Benin to Lagos?'

'Ah, this na Africa. We prayed to God and he helped us. Even those robber policemen ran into the bush at the sight of us all dey in flowing white robes, carrying a body! They think say we dey make juju with dead person for sacrifice. We were washing you with the holy water from our mother goddess Oya, wey dey live for River Niger.'

'Now you all are talking. We for bring some to give our

visitors to take back to England. That is our own holy water. I sure say na the water healed you, not their yeye medicine,' said Josiah's mother.

Josiah asked for Chester's address and told him, 'Mister Chester, thank you for the Coca Cola bottle money. I used it to pay for my typing lessons.'

'My brother, I go miss you true. You remember that day at the palace in Benin?' said Karimu, and everybody laughed. They all embraced each other, and Mowunmi gave Isiaka to Chester to hold, so he could tell Jimoh he had held his son.

When they were finally on the plane, Chester's attention focussed on Esther, whose practical good sense he had come to depend on. He squeezed her hand and said:

'Thank you for everything. Africa is too big and complex to deal with alone.'

'You'll have to thank Julia and Ginny when you get back. They gave me 5000 pounds to cover the expenses of bringing you home.' Chester was impressed.

'Wow, that's a lot of money! I didn't know the Arlingtons had money.' His mind went to the missing two thousand. He hoped the two women hadn't really robbed the church this time. Esther moved closer, still holding Chester's hand.

'According to Julia, it's your money. It's your father's legacy. Don't worry, I put most of it in a savings account before I left England. I had already made up my mind to come before Julia turned up.' Chester removed the handrest between the two of them and kissed Esther long and hard. When he let her go, they were both panting.

'Lucky malaria's not infectious,' he joked. Right then, Esther didn't care. She was relieved to have found him, to have seen him recover, and to have accomplished her objective of getting him to come back with her. And he seemed to have finally accepted her in his life. That was her reward.

Chester, meanwhile, sat back and relaxed. He had noticed

since his illness and recovery that something had changed inside him. He no longer felt isolated and adrift, his head had cleared. Perhaps Karimu was right, and the water from the River Niger had washed away all his confusion and headaches. Yes, he would go back to Liverpool, and get on with his life.

Chapter 27

It was a warm early summer's day in June, with roses already beginning to come into bloom in the front gardens along the street. On getting out of bed, Chester looked out of the window to see the postman stop in front of the house. He put on his dressing gown and dashed down in bare feet to collect his mail. Two unpaid bills, a letter from Rufus, a get well card, and finally an envelope carefully addressed right at the top rather than the usual place in the middle. He didn't recognise the handwriting, and opened it in curiosity. It was from Jimoh, posted from Eastbourne but with no address to respond to.

'Dear Friend and Brother,

I hope and pray God has you in his keeping and has put you on the road to recovery. I hope you know you were under his protection, and so malaria could not deal with you. God has helped me too, and the money is enough now to build the family home. Now I can go home and continue God's work and care for my wife and son. My Friend and Brother, God will bless you for your esteemed assistance. I hope your family are all fine. And your friend, Esther. I had to leave the work at the centre because I had

God's work to do in another place. I will always remember you in my prayers.

Your Friend and Brother in God,
Jimoh omo Garuba.'

There was no mention of the passport, but it hardly mattered now. Chester had said he had lost it along with his other possessions in Nigeria, and been issued with a temporary one in Lagos. It had served its purpose, and Jimoh was going home anyway. He left home for the hospital for the obligatory test to determine whether the malaria had fully left his bloodstream. Afterwards, he emerged from the outpatients' exit and stood for a moment, feeling the pale morning sunshine on his face. He noticed a young woman in a long skirt and a suede jacket, watching him. She had short, stylishly cut hair and he couldn't remember who she reminded him of.

'Hello Chester, Esther said you'd be here,' she said.

'Jules!' Chester cried. Brother and sister embraced long and fiercely.

'I've waited a long time for this,' Chester said.

'Me too,' Julia replied after getting her breath back. 'Come on, I'm taking you to lunch.' They picked a small restaurant with tables under an awning on the pavement. As they sat down, Julia said:

'I suppose you're not allowed to drink? I feel we ought to toast our reunion.' Chester shook his head.

'Seeing you is enough of an uplift for me,' he said.

'Oh, Ches,' Jules smiled. 'Am I glad to see you!' She threw her head back as she used to, but there was no long hair to toss.

'Why did you cut your hair?' asked Chester.

'I just wanted a change. You've changed, too, you know. I only knew it was you because I was looking for you. You're thin and you look much older.'

'Nigeria made me grow up quickly. I went there full of illusions, looking for something I expected to find.'

'You mean your kingdom. Did you find it?'

'No, and I don't think I'll find it in Africa either. But I did find out more about myself, in a roundabout sort of way.' As they ordered, Julia told Chester what had happened after they had both left home. She had had an abortion in Manchester, and stayed on to study psychology. She had stayed in touch with Ginny and Arthur, and had gone home for a visit after the first year. They had all discussed how to set about finding Chester, but for a long time had encountered only dead ends.

'Then one day, mum was talking to Mrs Miller. You know they sort of didn't talk for a long time because mum knew what had happened between me and Ray. Mrs Miller remembered your friends, the Ugwus, and suggested looking for them just in case. Dad started from there.'

'Dad?' queried Chester.

'Yes. He felt really bad about you leaving like that. He used to say you needed a father and he was all you had. When he got sick, it got even worse. He so much wanted to see you before he died.' Chester was silent for a while, and Julia continued.

'Mum's held back the memorial service so you could be there. She wants you to read or give a eulogy, whichever you prefer.'

'Julia, I'm still in shock about Dad. How's Ginny taking it?'

'You remember you once told me Ginny was stronger than I thought she was? You were right. She nursed Dad right up to the end, and when he died, she was the one doing all the comforting.'

'I feel bad that I never made it up with Dad. He probably died thinking I had rejected him.'

'Well, if he did he forgave you,' said Julia. 'He left the greater part of his estate to you . . . you're inheriting £50,000!'

'In that case, I'm paying for lunch!' said Chester. Beneath his excitement at the news, he was aware that this meant he had

been favoured over Julia, and resolved that he would do whatever he could to help her.

'And one more thing that will surprise you,' Julia went on, 'Your real mother turned up to claim you. She had let you go when the man she was pregnant by didn't want you, but then he left her, and she came to look for you. She made such a scene when they told her they didn't know where you were. And Chester, it wasn't your father who was the 'wandering Nigerian', it was your mother. She came over from Nigeria when she was a child and grew up in Northampton. She still keeps in touch in case you turn up. We haven't told her anything because we thought you should decide if you want to see her.'

Chester gripped Julia's hand. He was shaking.

'Did she tell you who my father was?'

'Was? Your father is very much alive, apparently. He's an American – he was in the US army over here when he met your mother. Look, I've got a picture.' Julia brought out from her wallet a photograph of a black man, an older version of Chester. It was too much for him at last, and Chester covered his face with his hands. Julia patted him gently and explained that he too had been in touch, through Catherine, Chester's mother.

'They had stayed in contact intermittently, but Catherine had never told him about you because she was ashamed of giving you away. She only told him after she had been to look for you. I think she suspected Arthur and Ginny of not wanting to tell her where you were. Maybe she thought he could put some pressure on.'

Chester sighed deeply and asked, 'Julia, where did I get this idea that I was an Oba's son from?'

Julia shrugged her shoulders. 'Maybe you should ask Mum. You told me years ago that she was deeper than she seemed. You were right. That very night, after I told her of my pregnancy, she gave me two thousand pounds and asked me not to tell Dad. She contacted Uncle Robert in Manchester and asked

him to refer me to a doctor. The abortion was performed a couple of days after my arrival at Uncle Robert's. Once Dad got over me leaving, they saw to it that I studied in comfort. And here I am now, with a degree in psychology.'

'What about Ray?' Chester asked.

'He's married with two kids. He never asked me about the baby. He must have guessed what happened.' After a little silence, Julia said, 'I was doubtful about that abortion you know. But Uncle Robert and his wife didn't give me time to think. I now wish I had kept it. We had two young mothers in my year at University. At least by now I would have had someone.'

'We have each other Julia. You'll always be my sister.' Julia smiled.

'Thanks, Ches. And now you have Esther too. You've made a very good choice. Esther has style, and she obviously cares a lot for you.'

Chester and Julia held hands silently in the taxi to the station. After all the talking and revelations, Chester could think of nothing more to say. The cab stopped in front of Lime Street station and Chester went with Julia to her platform. They embraced again, and Chester said, 'See you soon.' Julia nodded. 'You take care of yourself and give my love to Esther.' She was already in the compartment when she leapt up and ran back to the door.

'Oh my God, Chester! I forgot this. Ginny said to give it to you. She found it when they were clearing out the vicarage. She said it was something she made for you when you were little. Here take it!' She leant from the window and handed Chester a bag, just as the train began to pull out. Chester waved until the train was out of sight. He went on standing there, looking after it, like a child who had just let go the hand of a big sister, and was on his own for the first time.

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He felt he had to talk to someone or his head would explode. It was just too much to learn all in one day – who his real parents were, his adopted father's feelings after he had left, the legacy. He decided he had to see Esther. She was at work, but he called her from a coin box at the station and she agreed to come to a café where they often met. As she arrived, she reproved him for not going home to rest.

'You know the doctor said you still had to be careful.'

'Careful of what?' She slapped him playfully, and asked:

'What's that you've got there?' pointing at the brown leather bag.

'In a minute. Let me tell you the rest first. I had lunch with Julia. Apparently you told her where to find me, and she came to the hospital. You won't believe it Esther.' And he related to her everything Julia had told him. Esther listened attentively, her eyes on his face. When he had finished, she asked:

'And the bag?' pointing at where it sat forgotten on the floor. She leaned over and picked it up. 'May I?' she asked. Chester nodded. Esther dug inside and brought out a large hard cover book loosely covered in brown paper. Something stirred in Chester at the sight of it, and the familiar sensation of something eluding his grasp came over him.

Esther very carefully removed the brown paper, to reveal a faded but still visible painting of an African village scene. It showed a mud-walled compound with men sitting under a shade tree, and women carrying water pitchers on their heads while children played. Slowly and deliberately, she opened the book, and began to read aloud the story Ginny had written out for him so many years before.

'Once upon a time, there was an African king called Oba . . .' As if the clouds had finally cleared away, light broke in Chester's head and memory flooded back. The thing that had eluded him came and settled in his heart.

'. . . And he had twelve wives, many daughters but no son,' Chester finished the sentence, looking ahead at the pale English June sun that was struggling to shine in the distance.

'Chester, Ginny gave you your dream!' Esther's voice was tremulous

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Emecheta, Buchi.
The new tribe

DEMCO



Buchi Emecheta is Nigerian. She is the author of many novels including *In the Ditch* and *The Joys of Motherhood.*

When a baby girl is abandoned at birth, Reverend Arlington and his wife Ginny are only too happy to adopt her. The media cover this moving story, and a Nigerian woman living in England takes more than a passing interest in the Arlingtons. She decides that they would provide the right Christian home for her own baby, Chester. Shortly afterwards, Chester is delivered to social services with a letter explaining that the Arlingtons should be his new parents. So young Chester enters the vicarage of the sleepy seaside village of St Simon. He is the only black child for miles around.

The New Tribe tells the story of Chester's long search for his true identity, and the challenges he faces as a black child in a white family.

'Buchi Emecheta is a born writer.'
The Sunday Times

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ISBN 0-435-91204-6

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Cover illustration by Synthia St James