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WHIPPOORWILLO

OLUSAYO

By Timothy L Shaul

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The First of a Five Volume Tale

With Observations on

GETTING ALONG WITH DEMONS

Our Story Commences in 1775 A.D.

In a Small Native Village on the Western Bank of

THE OGUN RIVER, AFRICA

Where Olusayo and her Friends are Picking Beans...

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This work is dedicated to the memory of Joan Ellen Viener, who made it possible

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STRANGER

Right from the beginning, Olusayo is drawn to the stranger, simply because she spies him first. As she often does, Olusayo looks up from picking beans with the other girls, and there the stranger stands, down by the Ogun River on the village landing beach. He's pulled his little canoe up on the sand, and now he stands calmly munching on something and looking uphill across the bean fields toward the encircling adobe walls and big open gate of Olusayo's village, as if it wasn't at all unusual for a man to be there alone in a country where it's death to travel alone.

It flashes through Olusayo's head that the stranger is handsome, short, doomed, and apparently not in his right mind.

Olusayo murmurs to her friend, picking beside her, "There's a strange man down by the River."

Her friend stands up and brushes her hair back. "Oh, how odd! Maybe he's with the Igbo trader."

Every few months the Igbo trader comes to their village, with three loaded canoes and lots of strong, armed helpers, to make deals with the village Oba and ogle at the women.

Olusayo says, "But he's alone. Unless the other canoes are far behind."

Her friend says, "Maybe he's not really there. A ghost who wasn't buried right."

"Ghosts don't eat. Or paddle canoes. Wouldn't ghosts glide over the water like smoke?"

"Maybe the canoe isn't really there either. A ghost canoe."

"Maybe *you* aren't really *here*!"

"Just joking! Sheesh!"

Olusayo silently chides herself once again. Why is she so irritable with her only friend? She often stands looking about, searching for something she never finds, but generally her eyes first roam to the far borders of the village fields, where the men clear the jungle for more crop land. There's not much to be seen up there but smoke from the fires, and occasionally, amid distant shouts, the toppling of another huge tree, so far away it takes a moment for the crash and thump to come to her.

Seeing nothing but smoke from the working men, Olusayo's eyes always turn next to the Ogun River, flowing along at the foot of the fields, just beyond a thin copse of trees and underbrush...the River that murmurs of dreams coming true...the River that brought this stranger.

Olusayo's friend says, "He's not bad looking. A bit short. I wonder if he's Yoruba." She jabs Olusayo. "Go ask him. Ask him what he wants here. Ask him if he's somebody's relative or something." She laughs.

Olusayo murmurs, "Maybe I'll do that. I'll offer him water." Olusayo puts down her basket of beans, and takes a step toward the River...

But before she can go farther, the dog guarding the bean-picking girls also spies the stranger, who has now reached into his canoe, taken out a small pack and appears to be changing his shirt, probably getting ready for a visit. The dog immediately sounds the alarm, barking its head off, and dashes toward the River, eager to tear the stranger to shreds, should that be necessary. Instantly the two dogs that stay inside the village with the older women and children, come boiling out the big downhill gates, in full battle cry. The three dogs race to see which can bring this man down first.

However, the stranger can take care of himself. He does the first of many odd things he will do, in the village. He wades out in the River, up to his knees, faces the ravening dogs on the shore, spreads his arms wide and begins to sing in a loud voice. He has a nice voice, Olusayo notices. Handsome, short, doomed, probably crazy but melodious.

The dogs dash up and down frantically, confused. They've been trained not to bother the canoes that pass up and down the River, on their way to somewhere else. Dogs can't be sounding constant false alarms, unless a canoe comes to shore. So the River is no-man's land, and now this stranger is half in the River, half on the shore! What to do? It's too much for a dog to handle, so they bark and whine and bite each other and hurtle up and down the River bank howling. The stranger goes on singing, with dramatic arm flairs thrown in.

All the girls with Olusayo are watching the show now. One girl puts her head back and howls along with the dogs. Olusayo's friend joins in. *Ooowwlllll...* they all laugh.

The stranger hears them! Over the barking of the dogs! He looks up the hill to the girls, grins, then sings louder than ever. The dogs, infuriated, escalate their clamor. Olusayo howls too. What fun! The peak of the week, for sure.

Now the fourth village dog, that had been with the working men, dashes in to add its noise. Right behind this dog come all the village men. They brandish machetes and axes, ready to defend the village. They circle the stranger. They cast about for some larger threat. But he's alone and unarmed! What nonsense! The village men gesture for the stranger to come with them, so he takes his pack and what looks like a musical instrument out of his canoe, and walks in the middle of the men up toward the village. Three dogs follow, but the conscientious dog assigned to guard the girls does just that, sitting with his head held high, the first to sound the alarm.

Excitement over, the girls go back to picking beans, but Olusayo is in turmoil. Images of the short but handsome stranger, up to his knees in the River and singing, smiling up the hill at the girls...suppose the Oba tells the village men to kill him? Olusayo's breath catches, her heart lurches. What's this? What does she care for a new man in town? There's some reason why she shouldn't be feeling these odd emotions...

Oh, that's right. She's betrothed to marry an Elder, an ancient, shriveled man she detests. Hardly a woman yet, only some fifteen years old, and she's practically a village matron. She forgot.

Olusayo's friend straightens up to comment, "I hope the men don't harm him. He looked like a nice person. And his song sounded like Yoruba, so that's good."

Another girl throws a handful of beans in her basket on the ground. "He looked sneaky to me. They should have made him get back in his canoe and go away."

Olusayo says, "Sneaky! I saw nothing about him that looked sneaky."

The third girl says, "Sneaky people look nice, until you find out what they're *really* like." The girl stares at Olusayo significantly, and Olusayo's friend scowls at the girl, warning her to be silent. But Olusayo has already caught the implication, and it stings.

Pissed at the girl's insinuation, Olusayo presses the point. "That's silly! Like who?"

The third girl sniffs, "I see what I see, and I hear what I hear."

Olusayo says naively, "Well, I'd rather believe people to be kind, even if it means I get stabbed in the back some day."

The third girl leers, "Oh, it isn't *you* that I'm concerned about! Oh no!" She laughs at looks at the other girls, but they turn away and hide in their bean picking.

Olusayo's friend spits out, "You're talking dirt without any notion of the truth!" Her friend is always quick to defend Olusayo.

This little spat puts an end to the chit chat. One thing about living in a tiny African village. You can get along with some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't possibly get along with all the people all the time. Olusayo has a reputation for being irritable and strange her own self. It's her frustration that makes her so. The girls go back to picking beans.

All the girls are dressed for equatorial heat. They have wide straw hats, and a single loose garment of the most colorful fabric their mothers could afford to buy from the Igbo trader. They sometimes wiggle bare feet into the cool Earth, but it's against the rules, so usually they wear sandals. Their hair is tied up so it won't be hot on their necks. Olusayo wears a single ornament, a necklace she made from bird's feathers and beads her mother gave her. This necklace hangs between her childish breasts, her sole conceit. Olusayo is not beautiful in her face, except for her gorgeous eyes, the windows to her deep and melancholy soul.

Olusayo stands at the crossroads of her life, the child and the woman holding hands. As a child she was happy, dancing through every day. Now, as a young woman, she's anxious about her future.

Olusayo trusts her friend more than she trusts her own parents. Her friend is two years older than her, married and pregnant now with a first child. Her friend has found the secret to life, her face shines, her lips smile easily and often, her laughter seasons everything she says. She has a man she loves, and her man has given her a baby. She obeys the gods without effort or design. So! There it is! The gods have ordained that woman needs man. But for Olusayo, it's not that simple.

The problem began when she fell into the cooking fire, three years ago.

It wasn't her body that fell. It was her soul. Gazing into the flames, as children will, fascinated by the play of energy and color...suddenly she *became* a flame. A creature of air and light and flowing color, dancing in delight, shapeless and ephemeral, her clumsy body forgotten...

But below the flame...the dead ash, cold and dry as the back side of the Moon...a graveyard of the soul.

Olusayo screamed in surprise and stumbled back, and then had to lie to her mother that she burned her hand, and put up with being bandaged and salved, when all she wanted was to try again...to reach out again to the flames with her soul...but ready this time to jerk back from that deeper spiritual pit just below beauty's glow, where she herself might fade away like a star in the dawn.

Gradually Olusayo learned about her gift. She found she could trust some power within, to let her dance as a flame but come safely back to herself, when she had been gone long enough...and there always came a time to pull back, because, obeying some law more ancient than civilization, there's a price for the soul to travel too far and too long, a ticket more dear than Olusayo could pay, and remain whole. Being a sensible girl, mostly, and well trained to be alert for hidden danger, and well fortified by a mother's love, she spotted the spiritual trap, stepped over the pit and went on her way.

But with caution and restraint and practice, Olusayo found she could fall into other things.

She became a pigeon in a flock of pigeons, wheeling in flight high above the village, where she hurtled through the air in a spontaneous choreography, her powerful wings whipping her through a fluid bouyant as water, joined with the other birds into the single goal of *flying*...

She became a minnow in a school of minnows, darting as one in the River, breathing the delicious water, impervious to cold, the world shrunken down to a crystal cave with a shimmery ceiling that rained shards of light on the sandy riverbed...from under tree roots, fish ancestors dozed fishy dreams with their eyes and mouths wide open...

She learned from a bright spider how to cast out filaments on the wind, how to live in a tightrope hammock, sifting the air with her nebulous net, waiting patiently for the buzz of a fly...and to cherish a bundle of a hundred spider babies, wrapped in spittle and dreaming of space...

She lived the simple devotion of a village dog, found her village reduced to colorless strands of fellowship and threat, food and caresses, curses and kicks, heard her language reduced to guttural growls, where *everything* smelled interesting, no step went unheard, and all creatures had their rank. Her own rank was slightly above goats, chickens and newborn infants, but below dogs, all males and women with loud voices or big sticks.

She deciphered the language of goats as they stood for milking, muttering their complaints and their intricate observations on the follies of humans, including herself.

Goats found humans hilarious, but never laughed, for fear of being found out. Their primary objection to how humans ran things was that everything was too flat, which they found stultifying.

She fell into the endless eyes of a newborn infant, ringing with awareness like a bell.

Her gift became an avenue into wonder. It did make problems for getting her chores done, though. Work was such a bother.

One morning during breakfast, her mother said the village women complained that Olusayo was lazy and not doing her share. Not only that, but she was ignoring a lot of the superstitious rules that underlay village social life like bedrock. She was acting like a toddler, for whom foolish behavior was tolerated...but she was far too old for such willfulness, and it was talked about. So Olusayo tried to share her new experiences with her mother, to look inside her mother's eyes and soul and explain. Her mother listened for awhile, then looked away, clucked with concern, put a wrap about Olusayo's perfectly warm shoulders, felt Olusayo's forehead and made her stick out her tongue. Her mother brewed up a nauseating tea that Olusayo was forced to drink until sweat poured down her face, she felt deathly ill and nearly vomited. So much for that. Survival came before communication.

Olusayo blamed her own clumsiness, and began to practice opening up, with other village people. This did not go well. Most of her victims were either frightened or annoyed at her, and pushed her away. Some of the men imagined she was flirting, and responded in kind. But many of the village people were not there to fall into at all. Their eyes were dull and blank, and their souls were lost in dreams, impervious as a cocoon.

Olusayo's married friend was open to her, but they were so close already, that there was slight difference, when Olusayo gazed into her friend's eyes and melted into her like wax in a candle flame.

Olusayo could easily fall into the eyes of the younger children, and she spent a good bit of time doing this...until one day the children ran from her with fearful looks. This was odd. Then Olusayo noticed the silences that greeted her when she joined the women...and the whispers, behind her back, when she went on her way.

Then Olusayo's gift got her into bad trouble. It rained one day, and Olusayo went about her chores anyhow, but she became fascinated with rain...she was a cloud, then she was mist in the wind, then she was a single lonely drop of water, falling into the River, a flowing communion...something shook her, now she was a tree in the storm...

No, it was her mother shaking her. "Wake up, Daughter! Wake up!"

Olusayo came down hard, wrenched back too fast, still in a fog.

"Daughter...you're soaked...Oh, what in the name of the Ancestors am I to do with you? Come, let me get you dry things..." Her mother cried, tears and rain running down her face. "The whole village is laughing at you, standing in the rain...except the ones that want you shunned...and I blame myself. I dropped you once, I almost caught you, but you *did* hit the ground...all my fault..."

Pondering this talk, Olusayo realized that her mother believed she was a half-wit. Damaged. Perhaps she *was* damaged. How would she know? Obviously she was different. The very next day, her father came to her, his eyes full of pity.

"Daughter, can you understand me?"

"Of course! I'm not an idiot!"

Her father sighed. "Don't get excited, please. Your mother told me that the...thing happened again. Daughter, I've arranged a marriage for you. One of the Elders. You'll be his second wife, so you'll have few duties, and you'll be respected. No-one will laugh at you any more or tease you or threaten you."

Olusayo was appalled. "Papa! I don't *want* to marry an Elder!"

"My darling, I'm afraid you don't have many choices, with your condition. This is the best you can hope for. Don't worry, you don't need to talk to the man, it's all settled. The Elder is very kind, he realizes no other man in the village could afford your care. And he's so old he probably won't even...bother you, especially since you'll be his second."

"Papa...you don't know me! If you would look into my eyes..."

"Oh yes I *do* know you. I know you even better than you know yourself, because I watched you grow up. And it's alright, my darling. I love you anyway, and I always will."

"Why must I marry at all? Let me stay with Mama..."

"My darling...you can't possibly understand..."

"But I can understand! If you would only tell me, if you would only treat me with respect..."

"Now, now! You're getting upset! You're going to have another attack! And don't argue with me! It took me quite a while to arrange this for you! Believe me, I know what's best. Now, I believe the goats need milking. I hear you're very good with them, by the way." Her father kissed her on the cheek, smiled, and walked away.

Her mother tearfully told Olusayo that her marriage to the Elder would take place when Olusayo had her first blood. That was a year ago. Since then, she's had all the normal signs of adolescence, interpreted by her friend as her awakening need for a man's love. Olusayo bled a little, but she wasn't about to tell her mother. No, following her friend's advice, Olusayo began looking about at the eligible men, hoping to find someone she could love and who loved her, so she could tell her father that her betrothal to the Elder was over and done.

There was only one trouble with Olusayo's plan. Not a single man in the village would look at her. Oh, they nodded thanks when she served them, and glanced appreciatively at her swelling figure...but not one of them would look her in the eyes, or even give her a smile or a kind word.

Back in the bean field, munching a raw bean, Olusayo's friend clarifies. "The men ignore you because they believe there's something wrong with you. They've heard the rumors. You got a reputation. My man told me. They say you're either weak in the head, or possessed by a ghost, or something. No man wants a ghost for a wife, especially one that eats like you do. I do believe I'm the only one in the village who understands you, and to be honest, I don't see any place here where your gift is gonna work out. But also, the men are scared of breaking the rules. You're taboo, girl. You're betrothed to an Elder. You got a tough row to hoe."

Olusayo whispers, "I've begun to bleed, and I can't hide it forever."

"Have you told your mother?"

"No! I can't tell her! And you can't either! Promise me you won't tell her! See, I'm to marry...that man. When my blood starts. Oh god. And I don't want to! It's all Papa's notion, he's convinced he's helping me, when really he wants to have an Elder for an inlaw...I saw it in his eyes...but...it's the Elder with the wart, and he's always chewing his own fingers, and he only smiles with half his face, more of a grimace than a smile...and whenever the Oba makes one of those stupid jokes, my dear future husband laughs too loud and shows his remaining teeth like some fool, and he comes to call on us sometimes to check me out and he looks at my titties like I was a roast chicken with mushrooms on the side...oh, he'll bother me all right, that's the *only* thing I can count on here...he'll probably burst his heart the first time he crawls on top of me and then I'll be a widow for the rest of my life...wait, holy shit, aren't an Elder's wives expected to kill themselves when he dies? Oh god. Oh god."

"Now now. Calm down. Nobody's gonna make you sacrifice yourself if you don't want to. They don't do that any more."

"How can you be sure of that?"

Olusayo's friend goes back to picking beans. "I'm trying to picture which of the three Elders is your lover man."

"I told you, he has a wart. He's wrinkled like he got left out in the rain. He even smells moldy. He's dull and boring. His hands are claws. He doesn't walk, he waddles along like a turtle...oh god! I would jump in the River, but Mama would blame *herself*."

"Hey. No call for that talk! Now you got me worried. Ten years from now you'll look back on this and chuckle."

"Assuming they haven't sacrificed me."

"Stop harping on that, would you?"

"Then what should I do?"

"Um...maybe this Elder has some nice traits? Maybe he's lots of fun once he gets enough palm wine in him. Maybe he's great at ceremonies."

"He can juggle burning coals from out of the fire. He showed Papa once while I was there. Three at a time."

"Whoa. That might liven up an otherwise dull evening."

"Oh stop, it's not a joke. I want a young man! Like yours! Somebody that laughs, or is kind, or something. He wouldn't have to be handsome or rich or powerful, just so he was nice and maybe liked to sing or something...something that would *tickle* me a little bit...so I could *like* him...oh, if only I could *like* my husband...but I don't like this Elder, and I never will, no matter if he juggles *four* coals at once, or how far we move up in the village, Papa doesn't fool me in the least as to why...besides, I'm pretty! Aren't I pretty? Look, my breasts are getting nice and pointy."

"Your breasts are very perky, very cute. And you're pretty, sure you're pretty. Not as pretty as me, but you'll get by."

"I deserve better. I have a gift. Even if it seems like a curse at the moment. But I could be *affectionate*, if I loved a man...I'm so pissed at Papa...I could scream...it's my *life* we're talking here..."

"Once you have a baby to love, you won't care where it came from."

"But I *will* care! I don't want some...ape's baby! I don't want *accidental* love. I want to *want* my baby...if I must have one...right now I don't want *any* baby."

"I hear you, girlie. I hear you. I'll be your friend no matter what. If they throw you out to live in the jungle, I'll bring you food."

Olusayo mutters, "I'll find an oleander bush and make my husband a nice tea...oh but then they might sacrifice *me*...oh, why was I born, that's what I want to know. But no, wait...if he dies *before* I marry him...have you seen any oleander anywhere?"

There's the soft clunk and splash of a dozen paddles, and out on the River, three big cargo canoes swoop past, headed downstream. Their effortless passage, like huge waterbirds, always thrills Olusayo. If only she could be on board! Perhaps in some other village, far away, she might fix her life...start all over...

Olusayo loves the River, it speaks to her. She loves the mystery of it. The River pulls at her, it chuckles at her grounded solidity, it calls to her feet to wander. Like the trees on the banks that lean precariously, the River does its best to undermine her roots. The River is always making promises it cannot possibly keep. *Come*, whispers the lazy current, *you could be more than this stolid village girl. You could be free of all this small-town hassle. You could be vast, like me. You could be drawn along by ancient forces, you could flow into something marvelous. Come with me, let me show you the very edges of the Earth! Let me introduce you to the World! Let your soul find its wings!*

But the canoes are gone without her. Olusayo sighs, and picks beans with the other girls. The Sun nears noon. Soon they'll go back to the village to help cook...and see if the stranger is still alive! The memory of the morning's events come back to Olusayo like a rebirth of hope. Oh, let the stranger be still alive! She suddenly aches to see him closer, to look in his eyes...and if she dares, to see if he'll let her in to his soul. Her gift *does* have good in it...if it brings love!

This stranger knows nothing about her...and she'll keep it that way. He doesn't know she's rumored to be possessed by a ghost, or that she's betrothed to an Elder. Why, with this stranger man...*anything* is possible!

VILLAGER

The village men do not kill the stranger. When the girls bring their baskets of beans in from the fields, to help with cooking, there he is, lashed to a tree inside the village walls, but off to one side. All the women whisper about him, he's the best gossip to come along in quite awhile. Olusayo puts her beans away, kneels by the cook fire to help her mother, and listens to the murmurs. The word is that the Oba can't decide what to do with the stranger, so while his fate is being debated, the man will stay tied to a tree. One woman opines that the man might be a sorcerer, and it's dangerous to mistreat a sorcerer, which is why the man was given some food and drink and allowed to relieve himself earlier, under guard. Another woman whispers the stranger is valuable, he might be sold for a slave or traded for goods. Another whisper...he might be given to the priest as an important sacrifice. The second woman says he's too valuable to waste, the village men will want to try him, to see if he can fight, and keep him if he's a good warrior. The third woman says the stranger could do the dangerous jobs of clearing the jungle, like smoking out the deadly wasps. Someone else chimes in that maybe he's a spy for a band of thieves, lurking in the Bush, waiting for a report on the state of the village defenses.

Clearly nobody knows.

Olusayo's friend, working nearby, suggests the stranger could be fattened up then cooked in a stew, with some herbs and mushrooms and a chopped yam, after the pig is gone. She glances at Olusayo, expecting approbation, but Olusayo can only smile back with difficulty. It isn't funny, her insides are tied in knots with worry. But Olusayo's mother overhears the remark, and snaps, "We are not cannibals!"

Olusayo's friend shrugs and says loudly, "Some of us know a joke when we hear it, others of us do not!"

Now that her friend is married and pregnant, she has the right to be rude to the other women.

The only thing that all the women agree on, is that the stranger is handsome. None of them say this outright, but it's plain to see, in that the eyes of every female in the village drift toward the stranger, as he sits tied to a tree, head back against the trunk, eyes closed, singing softly, waiting for his fate to be decided.

At mid-day meal, the Oba orders that the stranger be given a small bowl of food and water, taken to relieve himself with two men guarding him and then allowed to walk up and down for a short time. But for the rest of the afternoon, he sits tied to the tree. The stranger is still tied there, still singing softly, when night falls and the village retires. Olusayo's family hut is the closest one to the tree the stranger is tied to. Lying in her warm bed, her two sisters on one side of her and her mother on the other, Olusayo can hear the man singing as she tries to sleep. It hurts her to know he cannot lie down, being tied to a tree. He's singing in Yoruba, not one of those foreign languages. Thank

goodness for that. The Oba would never accept an Igbo or Ewu man, or worse, a despised Dahomey. The men would kill a Dahomey right off.

In the stranger's song that Olusayo strains to hear, the River has come up in rainy season and engulfed a village foolishly built too close. One village husband tells his wives and children to climb on his back, and he will swim to safety with them. Two wives and six children all clamber up on his back, like mice on a log. Then the husband's old mother climbs on his back, too. So the poor husband has to swim the flood with all these people sitting on his back and shoulders and head, as if he were a raft. But for all that, he's the only one in the village that makes it to high ground. Everyone else, swimming alone, all drown.

What an odd song! What nonsense! Nobody can swim with folks sitting on them, even one person would be too much! But the image fills Olusayo's imagination. This huge, strong, kind man, swimming bravely through the flood waters, with a whole family of little people perched all over him, holding on to his ears and hair and neck and his mighty shoulders.

With this image in her mind, Olusayo almost without conscious intent gets up, fumbles for the water jug, and jug in hand, quietly tiptoes toward the door. She bumps her middle sister's outstretched leg, the girl grumbles in her sleep and rolls over.

Her mother's whisper in the darkness startles Olusayo. "Here's a cake for him. I considered taking it to him, but your father would kill me if he found out. Mind you bring the jug back, don't leave it with him or the men will know!"

This seems a strange speech for her overly-protective mother to make, but Olusayo was distracted, so it wasn't until much later, when she was paddling down the Ogun with lots of time to ruminate, that she finally realized what her mother was saying to her...and by then it was too late. As always, the mothers of the world, even if surrounded by family, yet labor and cry alone, for compassion grows out of understanding, and where is the child who understands their parents...or the other way around...until it's far too late?

Olusayo takes the cake from her mother and sneaks out the door into the night air. It's cool and fresh outside, no moon yet but the starlight shows her the way. One of the prowling dogs comes to check, but recognizes Olusayo and nuzzles her hand. She makes her way to the tree where the stranger is tied, a dark form hardly visible, no longer singing. She whispers, "Are you awake? Here's food and water."

The stranger's deep, melodious voice says, "Thank you, Daughter. You are kind. But I cannot take it. Tied up, you know."

Why does his voice sound on the verge of a laugh? Is he like a baby, unaware of his plight? Olusayo hisses, "Keep your voice down! I could get in trouble!" But what to do? Her mother's cake is useless if the man cannot use his hands. That, too, will dawn on Olusayo later, because her mother is no fool. She huffs with impatience. "I'll have to feed you."

The stranger chuckles and says in a lower voice, "That would be grand." Even lowered, his voice sounds like shouting.

Olusayo says, "Can't you whisper?" Trembling like a reed in the wind, she kneels by the strange man and begins to clumsily feed him bits of the cake. It's so dark she has to feel for his mouth. She manages to get the cake in, but at the end, his tongue abruptly licks her fingers. She jerks her hand back. "Stop that!"

The man, surely on the verge of laughing at her, says, "Mustn't waste anything!"

Furious at him for laughing, she hisses, "Have some water to wash it down!" She tips the jug up way too high, and water sloshes over the man's face and chest. Let him laugh at that!

He splutters and chokes, "Enough! I'm drowning!" Now he really is laughing, but trying to hide it.

Olusayo snaps, "Serves you right for impertinence!" She's immediately contrite. "Sorry. Now you're wet. Let me dry you." She reaches to wipe the man's face and chest with the hem of her wrap. She can feel his heart beat in his chest, the rise and fall of his breath...already the water spilled on him is warm...her head is spinning. Worse of all, his damp musky odor wafts up, removing whatever air she had left in her lungs, and whatever sense she had left in her head. She gasps, "You stink of sweat! Don't you ever wash yourself?"

He says, "It was hot, today, paddling upstream. I would have bathed, but they went and tied me to this tree. Do you folk always treat visitors like this? It's quite rude, you know." He laughs softly again. Why does he laugh, when he could be killed tomorrow?

She says, "Why tell me? Do you imagine I have any say here?"

To show him that she's different, not rude like the others, she says, "But I'm going to untie you."

"Thanks, Daughter, but that would not be wise." He bends forward so his voice and breath falls soft on her ear. "I heard your mother speak to you before. I do believe she's listening to us right now. It would be best if you could tell her later, that I was tied up. Besides...I want it to be this way. Me tied up, waiting to die, perhaps....you, an angel in the night..."

She says weakly, "But you must be uncomfortable."

He ponders. "Yes, I am, and that's perfect. Isn't this strange? I just met you...and I can't even see you properly...but there are other senses. That must explain this odd feeling in me. Are you feeling...odd?" He's silent, waiting.

She has to stop him from talking like this. "Why did you come here?"

He sighs. "Sorry, I overstepped. I hoped...that's what loneliness does! But anyhow, I came here because I have a mission. I reckon most of us is tied to one tree or another. I have some information that might untie folks. So they can defend themselves."

"What do you mean? You speak riddles. I'm not tied! You are!"

"Oh? Let's play a game. Right now we speak Yoruba, we are both of the Yoruba people. Would you be helping me if I was of another people? Igbo? *Dahomey*?"

"Of course not! Those people are our enemies!"

"Ah. There's a tree you're tied to."

"So you imagine you came here to help us, to...to save us from our own stupidity. Well...maybe we are...some of us...oh, it's like the song you sang, the man who swam with a bunch of folks on his back. Right?"

"It's my hope to do some good."

"But...why do you care? You might die here! Men don't like to be told they need saving from their stupidity!"

"We Africans are in danger. All of us. There's a Demon coming, more powerful than anything we know or anything our old songs tell of...except perhaps the very gods! We need to come together, to defeat the Demon. Not just us Yoruba, but Africa. I have taken a vow to wake Africa up to the danger. All of us! We are all in it together! Even the Dahomey! Especially the Dahomey! My god, those poor Dahomey! Their king is truly mad. Possessed by a Demon himself, he is. Even worse than usual. We are all possessed, you know, or we would know we are all the same. All humans, so confused, when really, it's so simple. Look at you and me! Everything is changed, we pretend and talk coolly, when we could...fly...on new wings..."

He turns his head down to the River, chuckling away in the night, and he murmurs, almost to himself, "We could of been halfway there by now...am I the worst fool of all?"

She interrupts, trying with sarcasm to calm the feelings rising inside her. "First you have me tied to a tree, now you'd have me possessed by a Demon."

"Listen. Don't decide anything. Watch for what happens. Be ready. Like this morning, the dogs barking, me singing, you girls howling in the beans...marvelous!"

"You scare me. I don't understand you. I believe you might be mad. I believe *I* might be mad, to even listen to you!"

"I don't mean to scare you. Let's talk about something we both understand clearly. Peeing. Peeing is on my mind, lately. I will have to pee, soon. I've been trying to hold it, but now you gave me some water...it's very embarrassing. I cannot...I cannot...I'll wet my clothes, even more than already. I wonder...it's an silly thing to ask of you, but..."

"I'll help you." Olusayo almost chokes on the words. This is beyond all belief. She fumbles in the dark to undo the man's clothing.

"There."

"Um...just pull it out, if you would."

Olusayo whispers, "Gods of our Ancestors!" She reaches inside his clothes, grabs hold of him and yanks him right out.

The man jumps and takes a sharp breath. "Ouch! Whew! Smartly done! You're not familiar with men, I can tell! But I'm glad of that! Or I will be...later."

Olusayo kneels behind the man and begins yanking at his bonds. "Shut up. I've heard enough. I never heard a man go on so. I'm untying you. I'm not putting up with this. Then you can take care of your own self. Oh I know, it's so romantic for you to be

tied up so I have to help you weewee. No more. And if I leave you tied, I won't be able to sleep. And also, when they kill you tomorrow, then for the rest of my life, I'll be guilty of your death. So there. You're free. Now it's up to you. Run and save yourself, or stay and die!"

"Is that what you want? For me to leave?"

"I'd rather lose you, than see you die!"

The man leaps to his feet, rubbing his wrists, then grabs her arms. "Let's both run together!"

Olusayo yanks her arms away from him. "Let go! Stop it! Keep your voice down! You'd...take me with you?"

"Yes! We'll wager our lives! A flash! A flash!"

The flood of feeling inside her brings Olusayo to her knees and instantly erases her former irritation. "Where...where would we go? What would my mother say? What would we eat? I don't have my good sandals..."

The man walks about, a dark form pacing in the night, beating his fist into his palm. "But...my vow! My vision! I have to follow my path. Yes! That's it! Persevere, and hope to win her also! We could travel together, sharing the dream..."

"What are you talking about? Have you forgotten I am here?"

The man kneels by Olusayo and takes her hands. "I won't run. I'll be steadfast. The smell of your perfume drove me out of my senses for a moment."

"I don't wear perfume. Listen. If you stay, then tomorrow, sit with your hands behind you, as if you were still bound. If they come to kill you, then you could suddenly spring up, surprise them, defend yourself, run fast to your little boat and be off..."

Olusayo begins to cry. "But whatever happens, please live...that's all I want, right now...for you to live... if I helped you to live, I could be happy..."

"Don't cry! Hope for the best!"

Suddenly, Olusayo kisses the man. "And don't forget me. As I will never forget, that you wanted me to go with you."

The man says, "I don't know your name."

"Olusayo."

"Such a pretty name. I wish I could attach your name to a face. But I've heard your voice, and that scent you're wearing has lodged somewhere between my nose and my belly button, and shall live there from now on, I suspect. No, I will not forget."

"I'm not wearing any scent, as I told you. See, already you forget. And your name? Give me something!"

"Bodua. The Protector, according to my stubborn Grandmother from Ghana. It's my burden, my dream."

Olusayo whispers, "Bodua. I'm so happy...to have met you, Bodua. Goodbye!" She remembers to pick up the water jug, and she runs back to her family hut.

Olusayo creeps back into her hut and her bed. In the dark, her mother grabs her arm. "What took you so long?"

"I...I had to feed him and...I don't know, Mama. The time went by..."

Her mother is strangely intent. "Did you speak to him?"

Olusayo tries to get away from her mother's questions by crawling into bed. "We...did speak of...silly things..."

This seems to satisfy her mother completely, because she rolls away, murmuring, "Silly things...I once talked of silly things...how very odd life is. No matter what happens now, Daughter, I hope you know that I love you."

Olusayo tries to sleep but her heart beats like a drum. Was it wrong to touch a strange man's organ, so he could relieve himself? But then, to talk with him of running away! To set him free! To kiss him! And she betrothed to another! But what is right and wrong, anyhow? Isn't it right to love? Be that as it may, is she now no longer a virgin? Will all the village know somehow tomorrow, and drive her out to die in the Bush? She lays in her bed shivering, but not with cold, her hands between her thighs, filled with the memory of the stranger's lips, his heart beat in his chest, his voice, his odor, the weird things he said, how his manhood lay in her hands...

And above all else, the *feeling* in her! The desire for a man! So this is why the Gods made her!

How difficult could it be, to paddle a canoe?

She will be ready, tomorrow, as Bodua said. Ready to leap. Her sandals and some pig meat and bread in a pack. If the men go to kill Bodua, she will jump up and follow them with one of the big knives the women use, and when Bodua leaps to his feet to defend himself, she will give him the weapon. She will trip the village men, kick and bite, scream and shout like a fiend, then jump in the little boat with her lover, and flee down the River, into her fate. Or die trying, along with Bodua. Bodua! Her Protector!

The next day is the day for the village Priest to come. He and the Oba march down and talk to the stranger, who sits demurely, hands behind his back, answering politely. Then the Priest and the Oba retire in privacy. The Oba's personal woman whispers they are tossing the kola nuts to decide what to do with the stranger. After the Priest departs, the Oba emerges from his hut, claps his hands and proclaims in a loud voice for all to hear that the gods have spoken to him, and ordered that the stranger is to be fed as much as he wishes, a hut is to be prepared for his use, and he is to be welcomed in the village as an honored guest.

The nod that comes down is that the Priest suspects the stranger might indeed be a sorcerer, as was rumored, and best pampered, or even...a pause for effect...he might even be an emissary of the God Ogun Himself!

Collective gasps. That's one thing nobody thought of! An emissary of Ogun! Whoo!

So one of the old men who doesn't work in the fields goes to untie Bodua, and shouts out that he is not tied whatsoever, that the ropes have vanished magically! This adds considerably to the stranger's prestige. He *pretended* to be bound! How very peculiar! How elegant! Just what a sorcerer or an emissary of Ogun would do!

Bodua stands up and makes a show of rubbing the stiffness out of his arms, then he goes out in the Bush to do his business. Olusayo shivers with trepidation that he might simply disappear in his boat. But he returns shortly, and sits under the same tree. He digs through his belongings and produces what has to be a very stale biscuit, to munch. The women all pause in their work and watch Bodua eat a stale biscuit. Probably they hope he will magically make the biscuit into a roast gazelle, or braised goat with garnish. But, he does not. The biscuit remains as it was, until it is no more.

Olusayo sees her chance. She says in a loud voice, "As the Oba decreed, I will take our guest food and water." She almost said his name. She must be careful. Her mother is watching her intently. Moving slowly to conceal her eagerness, she scoops a large bowl of the stew they made for mid-day meal, and gets a mug of palm wine, and takes it to the stranger. She says to him quietly, "It's me, Olusayo. But pretend we are strangers! I could still get in trouble!"

Bodua smiles like the Sun coming out, and says very softly, "I understand. We will have a secret between us. But I'm so happy to see you, and to connect your voice and your name to a face...and a pretty face it is, Olusayo! And the rest of you isn't half bad either!"

She whispers, "Shush! You always talk too much! I'll bring you more if you want."

Olusayo, trembling inside with her daring, goes back to the women and her work. She's not half bad, he said! He only knows the half of it then. She has become totally evil. She would do anything, for him. She watches to see if Bodua wants more to eat.

Oddly, he does not eat! Instead, he sets the bowl down, clasps his hands, and sings over it, eyes closed! What an odd man! Then finally, he takes up the bowl and eats, and drinks the wine.

When Bodua sets the empty bowl down, Olusayo is about to get up to refill it for him, but her mother says, "Don't bother yourself, Olusayo. I will get it." And so it goes. Now all the women are eager to feed the man, or take him water, or offer him a hat to keep the sun off, or bring him a mat so he need not sit on dirt, or bring a salve to shoo the bugs. Olusayo seethes with jealousy, but she pretends indifference.

When Olusayo's friend offers to give Bodua a massage to get the stiffness out of his arms and shoulders, Olusayo could kill her, but Bodua declines, and says he needs to do some stretches, which he does.

As the Oba ordered, the women clean out a hut used for storage, and put the supplies elsewhere, so the stranger can have a dwelling. Olusayo helps with this, and gathers some flowers in a cup to sit the window sill inside. There are some mice nests to clean out, and the ancient door is about to fall from its leather hinges, but the hut is liveable.

Meanwhile, the stranger goes to the River and bathes himself. When he returns, he puts his pack in the cleaned out hut, then he sits under the same tree again, but on a mat now. He takes out his musical instrument, adjusts the strings, clears his throat, and to the further amazement of everyone, begins to sing and play, softly at first, but then with more confidence. Olusayo is thrilled and touched...as are most of the women, to judge by their reactions. The man is a sorcerer, alright.

The village men come in from the fields for evening meal. As they sit and eat, the word goes around that Bodua has been accepted by the Oba. After the meal is done, and the men sit about discussing events, one of the younger men gets up and goes to where Bodua sits alone under his tree. The village man says to him, in a challenging voice, "Do you wrestle?"

Bodua jumps right up. "Of course! Would you care for a fall?"

The village man laughs. "It's you who will fall!"

Bodua grins. "We'll see!"

The two men go over to the wrestling pit the men have made, a circle of logs about a small ring of softened dirt. The whole village, everyone pretending nonchalance, wanders over to watch the match. The wrestlers strip, it's customary to wrestle naked so that valuable clothes will not get torn or provide a hand-hold. Olusayo's senses reel, she must look down, her mind is flooded with the memory of holding Bodua's genitals. But she notices something. Bodua is the same height as the village men, but he's a bit wider, which makes him appear short in proportion, from a distance.

The match ends too quickly. The village man throws Bodua in the dirt. But he leaps up, grinning even wider than before, and says to his opponent, "Good throw! Good throw! I can see you're practiced! Next time, I'll try harder!"

On the second match, both men are intent. They circle like tigers, lunging, feinting. Then, they close. A flurry of muscled limbs straining, and the village man lands on his back! There's a sudden tense silence.

Bodua laughs, and promptly gives the man a hand up, and brushes the dirt off him, all the while smiling and nodding. How could anyone be chagrined?

Another young man stands smoothly and steps into the ring. This man is our champion wrestler. His maturity is obvious in the slow confidence of his step. He does not dash about, he moves sinuously, like the sacred python that lives in the rocks across the River, that glides slowly toward the sacrificial goat until the crucial moment. Again the two men circle and then, the sudden attack. Our village man hardly moves his feet, but Bodua goes flying into the dirt with a thud. Everyone claps and nods appreciatively. Good throw!

Once again Bodua bounces up, although not as fast as before, but still the smile, the cheerfulness. He says, "Ah! Very good! Very good! I learned some things!"

Our champion brushes his hands off and sits down contemptuously, and a third man jumps into the ring, but Bodua says, "Pardon me, I might...catch my breath." He's limping and trying to hide it. Olusayo feels his pain herself.

So Bodua sits while others wrestle, but not off to himself this time. He sits on a log with the men, and when he comments to his neighbor, the other man nods and replies.

That night, Bodua sleeps in a proper hut, and the next day he finds a tool and goes out with the men to clear land for enlarged fields. The women are bored, the entertainment is gone.

After breakfast and cleanup, Olusayo goes out with the other girls into the fields, and her friend prattles on as usual. Olusayo yearns to tell her friend everything, about her new love, but then fear silences her. Her friend's wagging tongue might reveal the truth to Olusayo's mother, even by mistake! What would happen? Olusayo discovers a new allegiance. She must do nothing to endanger Bodua! And so, she makes small talk while saying nothing of importance. She nurtures her secret. Her friend often glances at her quizzically, but Olusayo will not be tempted into a confidence.

At mid-day meal, the men troupe in, and Bodua talks and jokes like a village man.

The women always serve the men at meals. Bodua is one of the men, now, coming in from the fields sweaty, covered with grime and soot from the fires and the clearing of the land, his arms and legs scratched from the briars. Olusayo manages to be the one to take him a bowl. Bodua says under his breath, "I miss you, Olusayo of the sharp tongue, who never wears scent but smells like a flower. See, I recall everything about you!"

Olusayo whispers, her soul in her words, "I miss you too. And you know nothing about me!"

He murmurs, "Teach me then. I have seen no man's eyes following you...but my own. Are you married? Or love someone else?"

She has time to say one word. "No."

He smiles radiantly. "And I neither. Do you then love me...as I love you?"

At this, she cannot speak, but only gaze on him, and hope he sees the longing in her eyes. Then she must leave him, she cannot betray herself to her mother's watchful eyes.

At night, Olusayo does not sleep well. She wishes Bodua was still tied to a tree, so she could sneak out to feed him and talk under cover of dark and even, yes, help him weewee. She tosses restlessly, an ache in her as if a tender piece of cooked meat was balanced on the point of a knife, just beyond her hungry lips.

BODUA'S TALE

After Bodua has been in the village for three days, one of the village men stands up at evening meal, and announces to all, "Oba has asked me to say that our guest will sing for us tonight, and tell his adventures."

A buzz goes through the people. Entertainment!

The women clean up on the run. Half eaten meals are yanked from hungry hands. But no-one cares. The fire is built up. The men vie for favorite seats on the semicircle of logs around on side of the fire. The women wipe their hands and stand behind the men, as usual. The children are sent off to play games.

First the Oba speaks, and praises the men for how fast they cleared the new fields. Then the Oba welcomes Bodua with some flowery words. Then the Oba says he has given Bodua permission to sing and speak. This is so everybody knows who's in charge.

The Oba sits down pompously on his stool, arranges his robe, and gestures grandly for Bodua to proceed. Bodua jumps up with his musical instrument and thanks the Oba. Then he sings, and it's very nice, but Olusayo, standing behind the men, with women all about, only wishes that Bodua was singing to her alone, in some secluded and romantic place, with the Moon bright above and all traces of the village gone gone gone...

Then Bodua puts aside his instrument, and begins his tale.

Last year I was on a hunting trip with men from the village where I was born. We camped, and while we were asleep in the night, slavers jumped us. We were taken by surprise, we never had a chance. Our hands were tied and we were attached to a long line of other folks, taken for slaves. We were marched for days. Anyone who collapsed was killed in the most gruesome way the slavers could come up with, to scare the rest of us. These slavers were Africans like ourselves, young men all, but not speaking Yoruba.

Finally we reached a land of sand and grass and swamp, bordering on a land made entirely of water. Huge pens of logs near the water's edge were filled with hundreds of other slaves, with vicious dogs circling about outside the pens. I can never describe for you the horror of how we were kept in those pens. Many of the captured folk died there, of disease or starvation. Some tried to fight and were killed. Some tried to climb out and were eaten by the dogs. Some tore up their clothes, wrapped the rags about their own necks and choked themselves to death. After that we were all stripped naked. The women were in a separate pen, and we heard their screams every day. I believe they were being raped by the slavers. It was terrible beyond any words.

Finally strange men came into the buildings. Their skin was as pale as a mushroom, and they wore bizarre clothes, and their stomachs were enormous. We whispered they wanted to eat us to bloat their stomachs even more. They went through the captives,

and pointed at some, one after the other, and then the slavers would hustle that man outside. I was chosen, and glad to get out of that pen, fool that I was.

We chosen men were loaded onto canoes paddled by more of our own native men, and taken out onto the water to a gigantic canoe. This huge canoe was as big as an entire village, and had trees growing up out of its deck, festooned with vines in every direction. There were many pale men on this big canoe that I assumed were needed to paddle it.

At this, a murmur of disbelief goes through the listening people, but Bodua holds up his hand for patience.

I know you won't believe my story, so I have proof, which I will show you when I finish. So bear with me. We chosen captives were herded down into the belly of the gigantic canoe. Down in there, we had to lie in darkness on shelves, with the next shelf so close above that it was not possible to sit upright. We were jammed in there like sticks of firewood. It was almost pitch dark and stank and there was hardly any air to breathe and nothing to eat or drink. I realized that I had been well off back in the pen, and resigned myself to die.

After a day or so, the entire huge canoe began to tilt and pitch and sway and creak. We heard feet running above, and voices shouting out. Many of us became sick from the motion, and threw up, but there was nothing but bile in our stomachs by that time.

Once or twice over the next few days a huge door in the ceiling was opened, and we were given food and water, but it was not enough. Then, even this ceased. We were dying. Some had already passed. Some of the more resourceful of us clambered off the shelves and huddled in the dim light beneath the grated door in the ceiling. We made a plan to escape. We searched as best we could for any loose pieces of metal or wood that we could find in the dark. We called out for everyone to help break off or find scraps. Then we used the small pieces to break off larger pieces from the walls and flooring. In this way, we gathered a few tools.

Using these pieces of wood and metal, we began to demolish the big grated door in the ceiling above us. There was a ladder up to it. We would take turns working away until exhausted. In this fashion, we managed to break a hole in the grating large enough for a man to squeeze through. We sent our strongest man up through the hole. He reported back down that there was no sign of the strange pale men, and he soon figured how to unlock the entire grated door, from above. We pushed the door aside and began to climb up on the roof of the huge canoe. When it was my turn to go up, I stood and looked about. My beloved Africa had vanished entirely! In every direction I looked, was nothing but the heaving gray water. My soul quailed inside me. How would we ever get home?

There was a large wall built across the entire width of the canoe. On our side of the wall we saw none of the pale men. We searched about and found supplies and food and water, enough to cook crude meals, and a hearth with a huge pot. All that day we labored to cook food and feed our people still down inside the canoe. Some of us had

not eaten in days. It was good to have our stomachs at least partly filled again. Others of our people came up out of the belly to get exercise and air. We carried up the corpses and threw them over the side.

While we labored at this, we planned our next move. Peering through chinks and knotholes in the planks of the barrier across the big canoe, we saw the pale men. There were only three of them moving about. Many others lay motionless, or writhing and moaning, or lying in cloth beds strung from the woodwork. They appeared to be sick, because there was no blood as if a battle had occurred. We decided an illness had destroyed most of them.

We waited until nightfall, then we scaled the wall and seized the three living pale men in their sleep, just as I had been taken. We tied them up so they would not bother us. Things were going well for us, finally.

We broke a hole in the barrier across the canoe, so our people had the run of the big canoe. We found many of the pale men lying either dead or unable to stand. We threw them all off into the water, alive or dead, except for the three healthy ones, who we wisely resolved to keep, intending to force them to take us back to Africa.

In the course of throwing bodies over the side, a terrible thing happened. One of the sick pale men pulled out a small tool which he pointed at an African man, then there was a noise like thunder and a burst of light and smoke, and lo! Our African comrade fell dead! A hole had been made clean through him! We saw first hand the weapons of the pale men at work!

We threw the pale man overboard along with his awful weapon.

We also found much better food and lots of water, and soon all of our people had full tummies. A strange exultation rose up in us, in spite of our tribulations and our precarious position. Singing was even heard!

We found a woman amongst us who was able to speak the language of the pale men. With her help, we made a deal with the three healthy pale creatures. We gave them three days to return the big canoe to Africa. Failing this, we would kill them. But if they returned us in that time, we would let them go unharmed to flee to their own people, in a tiny canoe carried on the big canoe.

The pale men agreed, but said they would need our help to move the big canoe. They showed us how to spread huge cloths from the trees growing up out of the floor, so as to capture the very Wind, and make the canoe move through the waters. It was amazing. The Wind was kind to us, and within two days we were once more off the beloved shores of Africa. However, the huge canoe could not get all the way to land. It ran aground and tipped somewhat and stopped there for good, a short distance out in the heaving water. It was very scary. We feared the canoe would turn over and drown us within sight of our goal.

We made the three pale men tell us what part of Africa was close. They said we were not far from a channel in the land that opened into another body of water, and a

town of our own people was located there. The only problem was to get from the stranded canoe, to land.

One of our men immediately jumped in to swim to shore. Huge red fish grabbed him instantly and tore him to shreds. We were horrified. So much for that scheme! Then many more of the big red fish came, and circled about us, waiting to be fed. Welcome home!

The pale men said they had kept their part of the bargain we made, and it was time for us to release them, which as decent humans we did. We sent them off in the tiny canoe, with some food and water, and we never saw them again.

Then we made a raft of wooden parts of the big canoe, and little by little, with ropes and poles, all of our people were ferried safely to shore, and vanished into the Bush, or marched off down the beach toward the village the pale men told us about. Soon I was alone on the huge canoe. I had decided not to leave yet. I was curious. I wanted to stay and learn about the pale men. So for two days and nights, I lived alone on the big wrecked canoe. There was plenty of unusual food and water, and a marvelous wine in jugs that made me more drunk than palm wine ever did. It was extremely interesting and pleasant, a fitting end to my odd journey.

I peered into the tools and belongings of the pale men. I found huge pictures made on white cloth, which I determined to be pictures of the Earth, as seen by a bird far up in the sky. I saw from those pictures that the realm of the pale men is enormous beyond belief. But Africa too is enormous, much larger than I ever imagined. I found many other marvelous things, few of which I understood.

At night, lying under the stars with the marvel of this ruined canoe about me, listening to the constant thunder as hills of water dashed against the distant shore, drinking the pale men's powerful wine, I had a vision. I saw that by sheer chance, fate had revealed truths to me that few Africans are privileged to experience. I wondered if the gods might have singled me out, for a unique destiny. I saw into the future. I saw that the pale men would return and return, Demons with an endless hunger, always hoping to steal the people of Africa away for some unknown purpose. I saw that the pale men were not strong enough themselves to steal Africans, but they were clever enough to enlist the help of Africans themselves, in the rape of Africa. The pale Demons were able to do this, because since the beginning of time, Africans have been divided amongst themselves, by language, by religion, by ancestors, by politics and by greed for power. So it's easy for the pale men, to turn one African against another.

I saw clearly, that Africa was doomed, unless Africans realized their danger, gave up old animosities, refused to aid the pale Demons no matter what presents they offered, and united in opposition to them. I realized that it was my special charge, to be the one to carry this message.

I made a vow to be faithful to this charge, and do what I could to awaken Africa to the threat.

On the second day my solitude was ended. A group of four canoes of the Kroo people arrived. They had heard there was a wreck, and were eager for salvage. They ran about the big tilted canoe like children, laughing with glee, loading their canoes with anything they figured to be valuable. It was then that I learned my most valuable lesson. For a moment, I was enraged at the intrusion of the Kroo! I considered taking up some of the pale men's weapons, that I had found, to drive the Kroo away! I had come to consider the wreck as my own! I had my second great realization. I realized that I too, had a Demon within me! I was staggered. Perhaps *all* men harbor Demons!

The Kroo asked me if I had noticed that another of the pale men's big canoes was approaching along the coast, still far away. I had not noticed. The Kroo advised me to be long gone before the pale men arrived, or they would surely kill me. I ruefully thanked them for the advice, found a pack and loaded it with food, some gold and some salvage of my own, and asked the Kroo to ferry me to shore, which they did. The Kroo are basically good-natured souls, even if they work for the pale men. A strange contradiction.

It was a day's hike to the nearby village, which is called Lagos. There I stayed for a week or so, speaking to folks in the Market about my vision. Then I bought a small canoe with my gold, and paddled home to my own village, where once again I told my vision. My family of course were glad to have me home, and wanted me to stay and marry and settle, but I told them that I intended to travel around Africa, as my life work, go to other villages, and spread my vision of cooperation to defeat the pale men. My mother gave me the praise name Bodua, the Protector. Then I left my own village, and came to yours, and here I am.

When Bodua finished his tale, there were a lot of skeptical looks. He says, "To prove my words, let me show you the things I took from the big canoe." He takes out some shiny, intricate devices and passes them to the Oba first, for inspection. "This thing is a small cage, and if you look inside, you will see a tiny spear that quivers with life. That spear always points at one star up in the sky, no matter how you turn the cage. I believe it helps the pale men to steer their canoes when out of sight of land, on the huge water." The men pass this about, and mutter in amazement. Men love shiny things.

Then Bodua gives the second device to the Oba. "This stick is marvelous. It's hollow, and if you peer in the small end at something far away, the distant object comes close to you." The Oba puts the small end of the stick to his eye, points it up at the half Moon above us, and actually grunts in astonishment. This object too is passed about, to the growing amazement of the men.

Bodua takes out a small metal bar. "Watch closely!" He holds the bar near our iron cooking pot, and the bar leaps out of his hand and attaches to the pot! Everyone gasps. Even the women like this trick.

Bodua says, "I show you these things and tell you they are only a small part of the wonders and power of these pale men. Their cleverness is great, but their hearts are

shriveled. They are Demons! Do you hear me? Demons! They aim to devour us! But they are not gods. Their bodies are weak and their numbers are few. Their strength lies in their ability to tempt us to help them and thus share in their magic. If we let them turn one village against another, they will surely destroy us. A new age is upon Africa, and we must unite or die. If we are stuck in our old ways of tribal warfare and distrust of one village for another, we are lost."

Well, a babble of talk and conjecture begins. The men say that a village that does not fight when attacked will be wiped out. Bodua says he is not advocating that they not defend themselves if attacked, simply that they do not work for the pale men by attacking other villages and taking slaves to sell. The village men say they have never done this anyway. Bodua says that the pale men may come offering weapons and gifts in return for cooperation, and that the young men of the village will be sorely tempted, especially by the weapons the pale men offer, which are even more amazing than the toys he has shown us.

Bodua says that all men have the capacity to become Demons, if the temptation is great enough. This statement does not go over well. There are a lot of frowns and sharp hand gestures.

The village men sit into the night, arguing and talking as the fire dies. The women get bored. There are still chores to do, and the children are sleepy, and tomorrow is another long day.

That night Olusayo lies without sleeping for a long time. The voice of Bodua echoes long in her head, and finally, in her dreams. He has taken a vow to save all of Africa! Never has she imagined a man could be so beautiful...in spirit as well as body.

In her dreams, she and Bodua kiss in the moonlight, and she wakes weak and trembling, filled with a desire that is more powerful than her own will.

THE FRUIT FALLS

Olusayo is seized with a fever that has no cure. Day and night, she knows only Bodua. His face is in the clouds. His voice is in the whisper of the leaves. His spirit flows in the River. She does not touch the Earth she walks upon. Bodua is the Sun, and Olusayo the Wind, that rises up to follow the Sun, and knows no other rule.

Then, the night of the full Moon, the Gods lay down their cards, and laugh.

Unable to sleep, Olusayo rises and quietly creeps out of the hut. She tells herself that perhaps a walk in the cool air will tire her aching soul and let her body rest. But once outside, in an Earth turned to silver and ebony by the light of the full Moon, her feet have other plans. They walk her in a daze to the hut where her love lies sleeping. A dog comes, sniffs, wags, then departs. A confusion fills her brain, she knows not what she is doing. Her heart beats like festival drums. Her hand reaches out and gently pushes aside the half-open door to Bodua's dwelling. Her weakened legs are barely strong enough to take her inside, but her hand closes the door behind her firmly.

The night is warm, and Bodua lies naked on his pallot, the light of the Moon dim through the window cloth.

He also is sleepless. He raised up on one arm, then he sits up, and says in his deep, low voice, "I was calling you, in my heart. Olusayo!"

Her lips and her soul say, "I heard you. Here I am."

She falls into his arms. Her clothes melt off her. She gives him everything a woman can give, to a man. And in return, he gives himself. They are one.

Even in the turmoil and the tossing frenzy of their ecstasy, she has the wisdom to refrain from screaming out in joy...as does he. They know already that their lives float like twigs in a flood.

When the first wave of lust ebbs, and they lie soaked with sweat and the juices of love, Olusayo has become a woman. They lie together, not saying a word, speaking with their bodies. Exploring. Savoring. Lost in wonder. And gradually, the dance begins once more.

After the second time, Olusayo says, "I must look upon you, my love. There's something I must find out."

"Now?"

"Immediately. How are we to do that? The Moon is not enough."

"I'll light my candle."

Bodua sits on the bed, digs in his pack and brings out a metal box. Opening it, he takes out a stone, a piece of metal, and a smaller box. He opens the smaller box and gingerly takes out a scrap of dark material, which he lays on the table by the bed. "This toy is to make fire. I watched the White men use it on the ship. It's well used, you can tell by how shiny it is, but there's not much of this black stuff, and I've no notion how to get more, so when that's gone..."

Olusayo whispers, "Please. Just do it."

Bodua pulls threads from his blanket. Then he hits the metal on the stone, and sparks fly off, landing on the black material, which begins to glow. Carefully laying the threads on the ember and blowing gently, he soon has a flame. Bodua quickly lights his candle.

Olusayo says, "Good. Now, if you'll just put the candle there, so we can see each other...look at me, Dear Heart, and forget everything you know." For the first...and last...time, Olusayo looks into the eyes of her Beloved.

Bodua gasps, and grabs both her hands in his...

...after some time, Olusayo sighs from deep within herself. "You're the one. I am you. Some day, you'll be me. No use rushing things."

Bodua shakes his head, coming back. "How did you do that? Are you voodoo?"

"It's my gift."

"I've heard of such things..." Bodua laughs. "I came to teach, and lo! I must learn!"

Olusayo murmurs in his ear, "Teach me what *you* know." She rolls into his arms again.

Three times they make love that night, while the Moon slowly travels the sky. Or is it four times? It's not clear. But Olusayo's both sore and consecrated.

Olusayo says, "Will you protect me, Bodua? When the Sun rises upon us?"

"With my life."

"Will you take my hand then, when the Sun mounts the Sky?"

"Gladly, and with pride."

"Will you want me again, when the Sun dips down...or will you forget?"

"Will I forget my name? Will I forget my own mother?"

"I won't hold you back. I'll go with you, around Africa. To follow your vow. If you want me."

"My love, from this night, I go nowhere, unless with you."

They lie for awhile in each other's arms, contemplating their new future.

"Olusayo...what about your family? Could you leave them?"

"You're my family now. I was betrothed, but that's over. Now I'm yours."

Bodua gasps with a start, "You're betrothed! Don't you know what that means?"

"Of course I know. It means I was supposed to be some Elder's wife. As I said, that's over with. It never was my wish, it was only a scheme my father came up with. I didn't love that man, I didn't want him, I hardly even talked to him, I hated the sight of him! I never once took that man inside me or even touched him! You're my first and only man! Please believe me!"

"Olusayo, my darling...it's not over. I could be wrong, but it's my understanding that when a betrothed girl takes another lover, and is found out, the penalty might be death. Especially if the jilted man is an Elder."

"Death! For what? For my love for you? That's absurd!"

"Absurd or not, it's what might happen. They may kill you, Olusayo. They'll probably kill me too. We'll die together, at least, if that's any consolation."

The lovers lie in stunned silence.

"We could pretend this never happened."

"I'd rather die."

"Yes."

There's another silence.

Bodua says, "We must flee. I'll live up to my name. I'll save us both. We must sneak out quietly, down to my canoe. It's small, but we'll manage. We'll go all the way down the River to Lagos to live for awhile and plan our next move. They're a hospitable folk in Lagos, they often take in refugees. And if we're to travel about Africa together, you and me, we may need a larger canoe and a tent and cooking gear. I'll not have you living like a savage. And we may have children, eventually."

Olusayo feels like her heart is singing. He wants her! "Lagos was the town you went to after the pale men's canoe wrecked."

"Yes. I know my way around, there. See, the River empties into a huge Lagoon. On the far side of that Lagoon is Lagos, an island village, a busy place. It'll be easy to spot, many other canoes will be coming and going."

Her heart is bursting with joy. In that ecstatic moment, Olusayo renounces mother and father, friends and village. "I'll come with you, wherever you would take me. Let me go grab my sandals and a few things..."

"No! You might wake someone in your family! No, we'll go as we are. Come! Now! This very moment!"

They dress quickly, fumbling in haste, laughing softly at their own clumsiness. Bodua packs his marvelous devices, but he gives Olusayo the small bar of metal that clings to pots. He says, "I am that bar, attracted to you as if by magic!"

She says, "What shall we eat? On the trip?"

"We'll eat joy. We'll subsist on kisses. And perhaps we'll find fruit growing."

"I know wild plants that are edible."

"We'll ask the monkeys to share with us."

They stand, ready to step into a world of love. Bodua puts his pack on his back, takes up his musical instrument, and says, "Take my hand, my love, my darling."

"Yes. Yes."

Bodua goes to open the door, but it's stuck closed. He whispers, "It never has worked right. I don't usually close it, but leave it half open at night. Now the damn thing is jammed..."

He pushes on the door impatiently, and the leather hinges, rotted with age, tear loose. The door topples outward and falls on the ground with a crash as loud as the crumbling of hope, to Olusayo's horrified ears.

Instantly the village dogs wake. One begins to bark, and the whole damned pack of them takes up the alarm.

Far off, down the length of the village, Olusayo can see the gate to the River in the moonlight. The gate closed and barred for the night.

Almost immediately, men begin to pop out of huts with ready weapons. Because of the constant danger of attack, the men are always quick to spring out of sleep when the dogs bark the warning.

In moments, the lovers are surrounded. No words are needed to speak the truth. Olusayo's father pushes through the men, in a rage. He shakes his spear in Bodua's face, and shouts, "You've ruined her! She's betrothed to an Elder! She was my hope, my flower! And now...*she will die!*"

Olusayo's father stabs Bodua through and through, with his spear.

Olusayo falls into a pit of darkness.

Cold water hits Olusayo in the face. A voice is haranging her from a great distance, whispering down like the winds of rain and tears, over a vast terrain of pain and loss. Dark birds fly over endless ashes, croaking out, *gone...gone...gone...*

The voice jabbars on. More water in the face. Olusayo's mother, ranting. Her own hut all about. Her pallot under her. Her sisters cowering, eyes big. Her life over before it began. Are there knives here? Knives to open veins? Knives to give peace?

Her mother will not shut up. Words! Useless words...like *I love you...*like *take my hand...*like *always...*

Her mother's dagger! Under her pallot! Thank the gods! Olusayo stealthily searches under her mother's bed, next to hers...there! Her hand has the hilt of her salvation, cool and welcome...*I am coming, my love, once again...*she pulls the little dagger from its sheath...

Her mother falls on her cursing, scrabbling to get the dagger. Her sisters are sobbing in terror. Olusayo tries to bite her mother, to hit her with her free hand, to scratch her eyes out. Her mother hits her over and over in the face, and wrenches the dagger from her. Olusayo falls back sobbing.

"Go away...give me the knife...let me die..."

"Listen, fool! The Elder has not decided whether to take your head or not. I have no intention of giving him that satisfaction, the heartless worm! By the time the Sun comes up, you'll be far down the River, in your lover's little boat."

"The River...I'll seek *him* there!"

Her mother shakes her and slaps her again. "Listen! Listen to me! You were bleeding months ago! Between your legs! You're fertile! You imagine I don't know these things? I'm your mother! I knew you would love that man, too! I *wanted* you to...and run off with him and be happy! I heard you sneak away to his arms! My heart was glad! The only thing I didn't know, was that the damned door would fall on the ground! But no use in hand-wringing once the soup is burnt. At least you carry his seeds! How many times did you do it with him?"

Olusayo shrugs, then holds up three fingers, four, she shrugs again.

"Great gods! Oh, to be young again! Listen! There's a good chance you carry him inside you! Would you have him die yet again? Then save yourself, and give him new life! He had a vow, let it be *your* vow to give him new life! Do you hear me? Do you hear? Answer me!"

Olusayo nods dumbly. *Carry his seed...bring him to life again...maybe I could do that...*

Olusayo blurts out, "If you know so much, why didn't you help us?"

"Perhaps I should have. Looking back! But a seed cannot be yanked up out of the ground. It must reach up to the light itself, if it is to be strong."

"I am not a yam, to be watered!"

Her mother says, "Yes! That's what I want, your *fury*, not your weeping! Anger will get you through this! But you can't live here. They might kill you. I've packed food in this sack. Come! Pull yourself together! It's the only hope for yourself...and for his baby! Find strength! I'll help you as far as the gate. The gate is closed and locked, you'll have to climb over it. You can do that! You're my daughter! You're strong! I can't help you past the gate. When you're over it, I'll throw the food sack over to you. Then go down to the River, take his little boat and paddle away! Stay in the middle of the River, there's danger in the Bush. Watch for hippos and crocs and the big snakes. When light comes up, paddle to shore, hide the little boat until the next night. The men may pursue you in daylight. Travel alone!"

Olusayo mumbles, "I'll go to Lagos. He told me about it. We were going there."

"Whatever. Here, take my amulet of the goddess of new beginnings. Kiss your sisters. Kiss me. May the gods lift you up! May you never forget my love...or his. Now let us go! Perhaps, after a few years, when folks forget...you might be able to return. I'll ask the Igbo trader to take word to you if it's safe to return. Make sure you talk to the trader when he comes to your new village. Buy something from him and ask if there's a message from me. Understand?"

"I hear you."

Olusayo's mother bites her lip. "There's another problem. You haven't had your bath. You were sick when your age group was done, so you missed the ritual. It must be done in Lagos, or your baby will die. Do you understand me? You'll have to ask for a good woman to do it for you, as soon as you arrive. There's a few cowries in with the food, to pay for it. I'm sorry, I was just too busy, and the time slipped by."

Olusayo sighs. "I hear you, Mama."

Olusayo and her mother creep out of the hut. The Moon is lowering toward a distant hill. They hurry down the big locked gate. The dogs are prowling.

"We dare not open the gate. The dogs will bark. You'll have to climb over."

Olusayo reaches up. She can grab the very top, it's only just above her head...but pull herself up there? Impossible!

"Put one foot on that bar and step up! Come on, Daughter!"

Olusayo puts one foot high up on the bar and grabs the top of the gate and lifts with all her strength. Her leg is trembling with strain. Her foot slips, she tries again. Her fingers are sliding off the rounded top.

Her mother grabs her butt and lifts. Olusayo, gasping with strain, begins to rise, then her foot slips again and she and her mother both go down on the ground.

"Oh, dammit all! Once I could put you up in a tree! When did you go and grow up on me?"

Olusayo shakes her fingers, they ache from the strain. "I cannot do it, Mama!"

A deep male voice speaks from out of the night. "Hold on!"

Olusayo's blood chills. They are discovered! A figure strides down toward them, a dark shape against the Moon.

It's her father. He stands by the gate, stoops and cups both his hands together. "Put your foot in my hands, girl. Wife, help her balance so she does not fall!"

Olusayo's mother grabs her by the arms, she steps onto her father's palms, he lifts, her mother pushes, and she vaults easily up onto the top of the gate.

Sitting up there, Olusayo whispers, "I'm scared."

Her mother reaches up and lays a hand on her leg. "Life is scary. You'll be okay. I know you. And the gods smile on bravado."

"Goodbye, Mama. I love you. Tell my friend goodbye, would you?"

"I love you, my Daughter, more than you can know. Part of me will die when you go. Like I said, I'll send messages by the Igbo trader. Don't let your hair get all snarly, now. You might..." She turns away.

Olusayo's father says, "I'm sorry, Daughter. So sorry. What that young man said about Demons? I was one! I'll pay for it...until I die, probably. I don't expect you to forgive me, but...but listen. I hope you find a good life, and another love. You were always my flower! But you needed a rarer soil! I hoped to satisfy your discontent by giving you position and authority...I was a fool. I didn't look deep enough. I should have...I should have walked with you. I might have...known you. I'm sorry. It was my first time as a father. Where do you plan to go?"

Olusayo says weakly, "Downstream. Lagos."

Her father says, "Good. You'll make speed going downstream. I've heard good things about Lagos. Very open-minded folks there. Not like me! Tomorrow I'll pay back the dowry to the Elder, and if they try and pursue you, I'll tell them you went upstream to live with your sister's family. They'll believe that. Listen. Never return to this village. I heard them talk, tonight, the Elders, the Oba. They have no patience with wildflowers. Only death awaits you here! They want to sacrifice you to the sacred snake that lives in those boulders across the River!"

Her mother gasps in horror.

With a sob, Olusayo swings her legs over the gate and leaps down the other side. The sack of food comes sailing after her. She catches it neatly, wipes the tears from her

eyes and trudges down the hill toward the River, glinting in the last of the Moon's light.
She always did yearn to travel.

BLACKSMITH

The tiny Lagos militia is training, on the North shore of the Island of Lagos, right next to the Lagoon. On a rest day, this wide strip of gently sloping beach, covered with sandy soil and short grass, would be crowded with folks taking it easy, but today everyone is at work, so there's plenty of room for maneuvers.

It's a pleasant spot to practice, looking over the vast Lagoon, all the way to the distant purple hills that mark an ancient coastline. Toward the half-hidden Town of Lagos behind the men, palm trees wave gracefully in the cooling breeze. Several long piers reach out into the Lagoon, and a number of huge cargo canoes are tied up there, some loading, some unloading. A steady procession of workers carries cargo either out to the canoes or back in towards Lagos Market, often singing as they work. An enterprising man with a cart is selling pepper fries to the stevedores, and calling out his wares. Seagulls sit on the pier posts, hoping for a handout. Other birds dot the blue sky, or swim in the Lagoon waters, pursuing their livelihood.

It's a good place to live and work, Lagos at the end of the eighteenth century as Europeans might reckon, were they here. Hard to see any need for a militia at this time. But, some twenty young men, the entirety of the Lagos Militia, are busy preparing for trouble, on the beach alongside the Lagoon. This homegrown militia drills once a month, weather permitting. Up front, a grizzled old warrior, their Captain, is trying to teach the men to use the spear in combat. One of these young men, spear in hand, is named Korede, a tall and handsome fellow, son of a blacksmith, a blacksmith himself, the latest in an old, respected family of blacksmiths in Lagos. Korede will be important in our story. The old Captain is haranging the young men with yet another of his combat stories, one Korede has heard before, because his father and the Captain are friends and often sit talking. Korede swats at a mosquito, glances about to see if any girls are admiring the militia, sees none and sighs. His attention wanders.

Korede recalls how this militia began, with a conversation between the old Captain and Korede's father, some five years back. Korede, his father and the Captain were sitting in the courtyard in front of the blacksmith shop, in the shade of palm trees, at the end of the day, watching the citizens stroll by in the street, just beyond the gated front wall of the courtyard. Korede's father and the Captain were drinking palm wine and relaxing, and had given Korede a smaller cup. Korede enjoyed listening to the men talk, but at that time, at age fourteen, he was only allowed to contribute if spoken to. The Captain had been going on about how Lagos had but little means to defend itself if attacked.

The Captain had argued, "Lagos is fat and lazy. We'll pay for it someday. We're too used to being at the top of the heap, out here on our little island. We've become complacent."

Korede's father said, "If we're invaded, we'll hurl cowies and yams at the invaders until they choke to death." He winked at Korede.

The Captain said, "There won't be any time to hurl anything, if they come in the night, as they surely would! We don't even have any guards to speak of, except those three worthless bums who're supposed to sound the alarm, but only check up on the pepper fries!"

Korede's father said mildly, "We sleep soundly and wake refreshed. And nothing wrong with peace. Good for business."

The Captain said, "When I was young, I was as tough as the iron you work. I helped make the Oyo empire what it is today. Why, even the Dahomey feared us! We went where we pleased in Africa, and did what we wished!"

Korede's father murmured, "You were lucky. You lived to tell it. Many did not."

The Captain, already into two cups of wine, blustered, "I should of stayed upriver! In the Bush! Where life is hard! Where men are men, and so are half the women."

Korede tensed. The Captain's words implied an insult to his father, something few men dared. His father is enormous, and enormously strong. When he sits to table, his father's elbows span the length. His arms are the thighs of most men, and when he goes through doors, he must turn sideways. When Korede's father was a young man, wrestling with the others, he was never defeated. Korede's father would simply smile at his opponent, pick the man up, twirl him a few times and throw him out of the log circle. After awhile, no man would challenge Korede's father in the wrestling pit. They said what he was doing wasn't wrestling, it was some other sport.

Korede's father can stick his fingers in the holes in an anvil and lift it up, the stump still attached...with one hand. In an argument over a bill at the shop, he never raises his voice. He simply stands smiling at the customer, and all dissention fades. He has no need of anger.

It often puzzles Korede why his father associates with the Captain. Korede suspects that his father is rather unique. He seems to exist on terrain just a bit higher than the roads commonly traveled. Korede suspects his father finds it lonely, on the high slopes, where friendship grows sparsely.

So at the Captain's slight, Korede's father only smiled, and said in his low voice like distant thunder, "In Lagos, all the women are all woman. That's as it should be." He looked off down the street. Korede could tell the conversation was beginning to bore him. Korede's father once said they could hire the Captain to talk thunderstorms down into drizzles, and so improve the weather.

The Captain said, "What would Lagos do, if attacked? You're an Elder! Do they plan at all? Or do they throw the kola nuts and nod their heads and hope for the best?"

Korede's father took a swig and wiped his lips with his hand. "You could be an Elder, too. Anyone with sense is welcomed." He scratched his head and gave Korede a deadpan look that nearly made Korede laugh impolitely.

"Bah. I have better things to do than talk!"

"Don't complain about the lack of strategy, then."

"Alright. Perhaps I'll come to Council, and see if anyone listens to reason."

Korede's father says, "If you want to fight, why don't you join up with the Oba and go attack Badagri or some other town? Those folks seem to get bored if they aren't off on some conquest."

The Captain said, "You misunderstand me. My fault, I shouldn't of bragged about the Oyo wars. See, I ain't interested in dashing off to conquer anybody. I'm talking about defending Lagos! And not only from invasion. Suppose we were to have some roofs catch fire in a bad wind? Who's to discipline a bunch of stevedores who get drunk and start a fight? Even the stray crocodile is too much for those three constables to handle. No, we need a small force of men right here at home, always ready to be called up, simply to take care of Lagos."

Korede's father says, tapping his big fingers on the table, "So what's your plan?"

The Captain said, "I might begin a militia. Korede, would you like to learn to fight with a good iron spear?"

Korede said, "Only if it's alright with Pa."

Korede's father said, "You'd best ask your mother first, Son. It's alright with me, but enemy soldiers are nothing compared to the anger of a mother ignored."

And what had Korede's mother said, when asked if he could join a militia? "Son, you may learn to use weapons, if you swear to me, that you will never use them to *take*, but only to *protect*."

Korede said to his mother, "I'll have to obey the Captain, Ma."

"Then I refuse permission. You'll be a man soon, and a good man, if I have my way. A man obeys only his conscience, not some irascible old buzzard left over from the past!"

So Korede had sworn to his mother as she demanded, and she had given permission for him to join the fledgling militia. That was five years ago, and since then, Korede has become a young man...and a good man, finally, as his mother planned. Of course, there were some turbulent waters, getting to this point...but Korede does not like to recall that time. It's water down the Channel, as far as he's concerned.

That's how come Korede stands with twenty other young militia men on the Lagoon beach today, waiting for the Captain to finish telling war stories.

The Captain says, "So much for that. Let's talk about the spear, your main hope for survival, when the attack comes. Now there are fools who throw their spears at the enemy, hoping to stop him at a distance. We don't see those fools much on the battlefield...because they are dead, perhaps run through with their own spear, picked up by the enemy! No, leave the hurling to the archers! If I can get enough bows and arrows, we'll take that up some time. I might have to buy them out of my own purse, the Council gives me the nod but no cowries. But today, let's look at this spear."

"First off, the spear is not a sword. Never *hit* with your spear! You'll break the shaft! The strength of the spear lies in the *thrust*. The spear is like that other tool of yours, the one in your pants. It's no good for slashing about!"

The Captain often works in some sex along with his instruction. Perhaps he hopes to interest young men. Privately they whisper he needs to get laid.

"Secondly, just like that other tool of yours, respect your spear. It's never to be used lightly or in jest. Only use either tool when you mean business!"

"Now, don't make the mistake of grabbing your spear in the middle, when you charge or take an assault. The enemy will be coming at you, and they have spears too, so it's important that your spear be a bit longer than your opponent, for obvious reasons. So, grab near the handle end, not in the middle..." The Captain suddenly barks out, "Right, Blacksmith?"

Korede jerks his head about to front. He had been staring distractedly out over the Lagoon at something he spied out there on the water, and he had lost all track of what the Captain was saying. "Uh...Yessir. Of course, Sir."

The Captain spits on the ground in annoyance. "Tell me what I just said, Blacksmith."

The other young men grin.

Korede says, "Uh...always hold on to your spear, Sir. Don't drop it! No, that's one thing you never want to do, is drop your spear." Korede demonstrates his solid grasp of his own weapon, in the middle, and then he whacks at the ground with it to prove his firm hold. Korede looks at the man next to him and raises his eyebrows. "Right?" The other man shakes his head and rolls his eyes and looks back at the Captain.

The Captain sighs. "Pair off and practice. Reverse your spears so you can only jab with the handle end. Try not to hurt yourself, Blacksmith, your mother would kill me. I don't know what's got into you today...anyhow, practice the fient and deflection and thrust tactic we worked on earlier. One of you should be the attacker, the other the defender, then switch off. First do it slowly, then faster, then as fast as you can. I'll come around checking your style."

Korede is not foolish. Usually he listens to the Captain respectfully and is eager to learn the various weapons. It's just that he was distracted today. Out on the Lagoon he has spotted an odd little canoe. Tiny. He's never seen such a small canoe. And the person paddling it, looks to be a girl! Alone! Not only that, she looks about to die, or something! She paddles a few strokes, then bends over like she's sick. Then she paddles a few more strokes. If the wind was blowing off-shore, she wouldn't make any progress at all. Korede is fascinated by all girls lately, but especially by this one.

Korede keeps his eye on the girl in the tiny canoe, as she laboriously comes closer to the beach, even while sparring with his opponent. As a result, he gets jabbed in the chest repeatedly. He mutters angrily, "Cut it out, man!" His temper is his worst fault.

His opponent grins. "This is combat, Korede! You gonna tell the enemy to cut it out? You're supposed to *deflect* me, not *complain*!"

Korede does his best with combat practice, but his eyes keep wandering to the girl in the canoe. She finally makes it to the beach, climbs out of her canoe and stumbles in the shallows as if her legs cannot hold her. She grabs the bow of her canoe and tries to drag it higher up the beach. The effort makes her sit right down in the sand. She leans over and lays her head on the thwart of the canoe, and then, she slowly topples right over onto her side, in the sand, her legs still in the water! Thank the gods her face does not fall in the water too, or she might have drowned, right there on the beach! Watching this poor girl, Korede feels like he's actually been stabbed somewhere deep in his chest, by his sparring partner.

Finally the old Captain yells, "That's enough for today. Same time next month. We'll take up the cudgel. Wear something soft on your heads."

Korede runs down the beach toward the fainted girl. He kneels beside her in the sand. "Miss...Miss! Can you hear me?" He rolls her over, and stops, struck. She's very pretty, and so young, just a child on the verge of a woman. Her breast is rising and falling, she's still alive. And something is happening in Korede's breast, too. He's being re-arranged inside.

He gently reaches down and brushes sand from her cheek, and she startles. Her eyes flutter open. "Oh...oh god...where am I...what village..."

He says, "This is Lagos!"

"Oh, thank god...I made it...Bodua said I had to get to Lagos."

"Who's Bodua? Where did you come from?"

"My father killed him. He killed my love." The girl begins to sob. "Oh god. And...it was my fault...but I didn't know...I didn't know..." She sobs as if her heart will break.

Korede suspects his heart will break, also. "Hey, come on now. Please don't cry. You'll be okay. I'll help you! Do you know anybody here?"

She opens her eyes and looks at him, but does not seem to focus. "What?" She looks about wildly and tries to rise, but falls back.

He says, "Lemme help you. Your feet are in the water." He lifts her shoulders up until she's higher on the sand and sitting against the canoe. "Are you hungry?"

She weakly rubs her stomach. "My food ran out yesterday. Or was it the day before? How long...oh god. It was such a long way here. Such a long way. Is this Lagos?"

Korede looks about desperately. All the militia and the Captain have left. In the distance, the stevedores are singing a work song. Where's his mother when he needs her? "Here, take my water jug. Here's my tunic to warm you up." He strips off his tunic, lifts her up away from the water, leans her against her canoe and lays the tunic over her. "I'll be back in just a moment! Don't try to move!"

"I have to get to Lagos...is this Lagos?"

Korede dashes over to a man with a cart selling pepper fries. He gives the man some cowries and comes running back to the girl on the beach. "Here's some pepper fries for you."

She takes the fries with a shaky hand. "Oh my god. Oh! They're so good!" She begins to eat ravenously.

"Slow down! You'll choke!" Kneeling beside her, he watches her eat and tries to figure what to do.

She must be uncomfortable, sitting in the sand all scrunched up. Korede says, "Listen. Lean forward. I'm gonna turn your canoe over. It's got water in it anyway, it should drain. Then you can sit on it and eat. I wanna get you warm. You're shivering."

She doesn't answer, she's too busy eating. Korede looks inside the canoe, hoping she might have something warm to wear, but the canoe is empty but for the paddle. He turns the canoe over, and helps her up out of the sand, to sit on the canoe bottom.

"The sun's warm here. Soon you'll warm up." He adjusts his tunic over her shoulders, it keeps sliding off.

She goes on eating. She mumbles around the fries, "It must be Lagos. I came straight across the water, like he said..."

"Listen. Stop eating. Your clothes are wet. We gotta get you outta them wet clothes. I'll turn my back. I want you to slip outta your wet things and put on my tunic. Hear me? You're gonna get sick if you don't!"

She puts down the fries. He turns his back and waits. He says over his shoulder, "You done?"

She doesn't answer. He glances back. She's wearing his tunic now, and eating again. He tries not to notice that his tunic barely reaches her knees and almost falls off her shoulders. At least he got the cold wet clothes off her.

Korede bought four pepper fries. When she's on the fourth one without any sign of slowing down, he realizes he should have bought more. "Wait here, I'll get more fries." She doesn't answer. He runs over to the man with the cart, and buys two more fries and a big slice of goat cheese, which takes all his cowries.

Back with the girl, she says, "Oh, cheese! I love goat cheese. We had a herd of goats." "Who's we?"

She ignores him again, now she's working on the cheese.

"Drink some water with that." She takes his jug and drinks deeply.

She says, "It took me one whole day and half another to paddle across this water. I had to sleep in the canoe. There was water in the bottom. It was so cold, so dark. The night went on and on. I would of paddled but I didn't know which way to go, I couldn't see anything. I could hardly move when I woke up. And I had no food. I wanted to die, but I couldn't get up the nerve."

It hurts him in his stomach to imagine what she said. "You're safe now." He watches her eat and wonders how to cheer her up. "The Lagoon ain't as big as the Sea."

"What lagoon?"

He sweeps his hand. "This!"

She regards him dubiously. She's slowing down on the food. "The Sea is bigger?"

"You can't see the other side."

She goes on staring at him. "I don't believe you."

He says, "Don't you hear that pounding sound that never stops? That's the waves on the Sea. It's right over those low hills."

"What are waves?"

"Those humps in the water! Look! The Lagoon only has little waves, and they only make a bit of a splash. The Sea has big waves, big humps like hills, that stand up on end and then fall over and make that booming sound."

She looks away again, while she carefully breaks off pieces of cheese and balances them on pepper fries to eat. "You figure I'm some stupid country girl, so you can tell me anything."

"Listen! Lemme take you home! You can stay in our compound!" Korede leaps to his feet in excitement, startling the girl. He grabs up his spear where he dropped it, and impulsively takes her hand. "Come on! I'll show you my iron puzzle collection..."

She yanks her hand away, her eyes suddenly big and fearful. "You got a spear! How come you got a spear!"

"I was training with the Captain. We was practicing to fight, when I spotted you..."

She shrinks back. "You're a warrior! My Pa killed Bodua with a spear...is that what you do? Kill people?"

"Hey. I never killed nobody. But we gotta be ready, in case..."

"In case you wanna kill somebody!" She slides along the canoe, to get father away from him. "You're so big...I never saw such a big man..."

Korede throws the spear behind the canoe and steps toward her. "Listen..."

"You wanna make me a slave! Bodua told me about you! You work for the pale men! That's how come you're so eager for me to come with you! Oh, god...Mama, help me, Mama..." The girl begins shaking her arms and hands frantically as if trying to take flight away from him.

Korede says, "Gods! I's only trying to help you! What's the matter with you, anyhow? You crazy or something? Calm yourself down and come with me!"

She screams, "You're a Demon! Like Bodua said! Get away! Help! Help! Oh, there's nobody..." She's shaking like a candle in the wind.

Korede glances about. Shit! Folks'll figure he's hurting this girl, and he never even touched her! "Shut up! Another fucking crazy woman!"

The girl's eyes roll back in her head, and she faints.

Korede barely catches her before she falls off the canoe right back into the Lagoon. She's limp in his arms. He's flabbergasted. He made her pass out! Any minute now she'll revive, realize he's got her and have another screaming fit! He quickly carries her up the beach and lays her down gently where the sun has warmed the sand. Then, he lays down beside her, and waits. On inspiration, he begins to softly sing her a lullaby

that he recalls his mother singing to him when he was a boy, when it would storm outside and he would cringe from the lightening and thunder.

Korede goes on crooning. He finishes one song and begins another. He glances at the girl. She's awake, staring up at the sky. He feels a touch. Her hand is searching. He turns his hand palm up for her. Very gently, like the touch of a moth's wings, he feels her trembling fingertips on his palm.

He goes on singing softly. The Sun is warm. Little waves splash gently at the waters' edge with a calm lapping sound. From far off comes the singing of the stevedores, loading the big canoes. Gulls cry out in the blue sky. It's peaceful and warm.

The girl puts her free hand on her forehead and closes her eyes, but it seems to Korede like she's resting now, not in a panic. She says, "What are those singing men doing?" Her voice is different.

Korede stops singing and tells the girl about Lagos, how the big canoes come and go, bringing the supplies that are the life blood of the little town, and taking out the trade goods manufactured here. He tells her about Market, where the goods are sold from the ring of roofed stalls, while all about, the women of Lagos barter and talk in their bright wraps, many with baskets balanced on their heads and children tugging. He talks about his work in the blacksmith shop. He tells the girl about his mother and father and every relative he can recall. He talks and talks. He's never talked so much before. The girl simply listens, her fingers gently exploring the palm of his hand.

She whispers, "Do you have goats?"

"Goats! Of course we have goats! Are you hungry or thirsty?"

"Could I have more water?"

"Sure." He gets up and brings the water jug. She sits up to drink.

"You want more food?" She shakes her head, no.

"Are you warm?" She shrugs.

"Please don't be afraid of me. I can't stand it! I want us to be friends!"

She glances at him and nods imperceptibly.

"Do you want to come with me, to my place?"

Now she looks at him, and the bewilderment begins to creep back over her face again. The hint of fear in her dark eyes. "I don't know...what to do. I don't know if I can trust you. You tell me such strange things...and you're so big and powerful..."

"Listen. If I showed you the Sea, would you believe me, and trust me? 'Cause if you trust me, then I could take you to meet my Ma, and get you better clothes and all, and figure how to care for you."

For a bit she does not reply, but then, so softly he can hardly hear, she says, "I don't believe I can walk. I'm so weak."

"I could carry you. Would that be alright? I would have to pick you up. But I don't want to scare you. If it scares you, just say so and I'll put you right down. Hear me? You'll be in charge all the time."

She whispers, "Alright."

Korede gets up slowly, so as not to startle her. "I'm gonna drive my spear in the sand, and tie your canoe to it, so it won't wash away. It'll be safe here for the nonce. Later on, when you're safe, I'll come back and carry your canoe to my place in case you want it later." He does this and returns. "Alright. Now, I'm gonna slowly pick you up. I'll sling the water jug on my shoulder, don't let it hit you. If you don't like it, all you have to do, is say the word, and I'll put you right back down."

Very gently, Korede slides one arm under her legs, and puts one arm behind her back, and slowly lifts her up. He adjusts his arms under her thighs and pulls her in to his chest, and says, "How you doing? You comfortable?"

She whispers, "I'm alright. I like you to hold me." Hesitantly, she puts one arm on his shoulders, around his neck, and lays her head on his shoulder. "This is nice."

"Here we go! To see the Sea!" Korede strides up the shore toward town. He can't figure why the girl feels so cool, but at the same time, she's setting him on fire.

Down the sandy streets of Lagos he walks, carrying the refugee girl. She murmurs almost in his ear, "You're so warm! And strong! I haven't been carried since I was a little thing. I can feel the muscles in your back. If you're a Demon, you sure are a handsome one."

"Being a blacksmith does make a man strong!" Korede's flying. She's loosing the panic from her voice, and her body is loosing the tension in his arms. She's snuggling against him. This might work.

She puts her free arm up on his other shoulder, and buries her face in the crook of his neck and shoulder, and murmurs into his neck, "Is your muscular wife gonna show up and kill me?"

"No, I'm not married."

"How come?"

"Pa and me got a joke. We say, the way to pick out a blacksmith in a crowd, is that everybody else is trying to stand upwind. Ha ha!"

"Do you bite or something?"

The smile leaves Korede's face. "I get along fine with guys, but the girls act like I got the plague. The other guys tell me stuff, and it's pretty clear that girls don't act like that with *all* men!"

"Are you lonely?"

He says huskily, "Lonely! That ain't the word for it." He glances down at her. "Do you...are you...kinda *disgusted* by me?"

"No. I'm not scared now. You're very good-looking. If you just tried a bit, I believe the girls would like you."

Korede laughs bitterly. "Funny you say that."

"Why?"

"It's the same thing every girl I like tells me...as she's on the way to gone."

"Oh. Sorry."

"That's the second thing they all say. They're all so *sorry*, to have to despise me!"

After this, there's a silence. Korede strides along through the village streets.

She says, "So what's the third thing all the girls say to you?"

He looks at her, confused. "What?"

"I don't want to sound like some old crone *three* times."

He looks at her in amazement. "You made a joke!"

"But you didn't laugh."

He grins. "You caught me by surprise. Next time, I'll laugh, I promise you. What's your name, anyway?"

"Olusayo."

"Your name's real pretty. My name's Korede."

"I'm sorry you're lonely, Korede. Is there a girl you want?"

"I, uh, I like the potter's wife. But she's no girl. She's real mature. She's married and got chilluns."

Olusayo tugs on his ear with her teeth. "Why do you like her?"

"The potter has a shop down the street from our shop. It's a man and woman runs it, married. I like them. They're quiet and funny. Sometimes I go down there to eat my mid-day meal, and they stop work and we talk. But soon when I visit, the woman always says, 'Back to work!', and she takes her clothes off."

"Oh! She works naked?"

"She says she works naked because the clay gets all over her clothes, but I believe she likes me and her husband to watch her, because she looks right at me and smiles. Then she sits at her wheel and kicks the big bottom wheel to spin it, and plops a hunk of mud on the little top wheel, and when she shapes that slippery thing with her hands, and the slimey stuff runs between her fingers and all down her arms and thighs...I gotta admit, she gets me bothered. The more agitated I get, the more her husband grins. Could be they like torturing me. I...I can kinda feel how that would be fun. For them!"

"Do you ever kiss her or anything?"

"Of course not! She's married! What, you figure I'm uncivilized? Um...I admit I do have dreams about...loving her. I reckon dreams are no crime!" Korede ponders as he walks. "You know why I like that potter woman? She works, and it gets her dirty, and she don't mind the dirt of her job. She's like me. My work makes me filthy, and all the girls get that disgusted look on their face if I go to Market for some pepper fries...they're so damn stuck up! They make me sick! Fancy bitches! It ain't easy, shaping metal! And it's something this town needs, an honorable job! Why, my Pa is a town Elder! I'll be an Elder too, some day! Our family is upstanding citizens here!"

Inside Korede's head, a quiet voice murmurs, "*Are you gonna tell her the real reason why the girls don't like you?*"

A young man walking past calls out, "Is that the only way you could get a girl, Korede?" He laughs and walks on.

Olusayo whispers, "That wasn't nice of him."

"He's a friend of mine. That's how we are."

There's a silence.

Olusayo says, "This town is so big! And so pretty! These wide, sandy streets, and the way those trees bend over make it nice and shady...the flowers in the pots, up on those low walls...and all the gates have metal hinges."

"Pa and me make them hinges. Among other things. See the iron ornaments up on the gate posts? That's the ancestor's design for the family that lives there. The little ornament below is for the gods to smile on them. That thing with the iron striker is for guests to ring, to call the baale. We do all those."

They pass two women walking, with several children towing along behind. The two women stop walking, and stare at Korede carrying Olusayo. Abruptly, one of the women calls out, "Are you alright, girl? You need help?"

Korede murmurs, "She's talking to you."

Olusayo says loudly, "I'm fine!"

The woman says, "Well!" She looks at her friend. "It takes all kinds!" The women both laugh, and walk on with their children.

Olusayo says, "Did I say something wrong?"

Korede says, "Oh no. She figured I might hurt you, taking you home to fuck you, I suppose. See, all the women figure I'm some kinda damn brute! Right there is what I's talking!"

"I don't believe you're a brute."

Korede says, "No. I'm a Demon, remember?" He laughs sardonically, but then his throat clenches. What a stupid thing to say! "Joke...!"

She says, "I don't reckon you're a Demon nor a brute."

"Exactly!"

"You do talk kinda rough."

Korede looks at her in surprise. "Whadda you mean?"

"If a big strong fella like you curses, girls get scared."

"Huh! Am I scaring you again?"

"A little bit. You confuse me. It's all so new...so new."

DIZZY

"Here we are!" Korede sets Olusayo down at the base of a wooden tower, about as tall as a palm tree. "The Elders had this tower built after my Captain convinced them we need to be on guard for invasion. There's supposed to be a man up in it all the time, looking out for attack or fires or crocodiles, but lately, that don't seem to happen. But the merchants use the tower to signal ships, and the Kroo use it to check the tides. See these nice iron fasteners on the posts? We made them, and Pop directed how to build the thing. I helped."

"Who's the Kroo?"

"They're folks from another town, who know how to paddle out to the big ships. It's real risky for them. That's how they make a living, 'cause nobody else can do it. You can tell the Kroo, they all have a blue stripe on their face...and they talk all the time."

"What are tides?"

"That's when the Sea goes up and down. Up twice a day, down twice a day, which is good, because if it came up more than it went down, we'd be in big trouble! Ha ha!"

She looks puzzled. "Where's the Sea?"

"When we get to the top of the tower, you'll see it. I forgot how narrow the steps are. You might have to get on my back."

"I can do it." She starts up the winding stairs.

Korede comes behind. He has the urge to put his hand on her behind and push, but he resists it.

The girl climbs steadily, and at the top, she disappears up through a hole in the ceiling. Korede hears her say, "Oh! Oh...!"

A man's voice says, "Hello there, young lady! Come to take in the view, are you?...whoa! Hold on there! Hold on!"

Korede clammers quickly up into the tiny room at the top. Two Kroo men are there, and one man holds Olusayo in his arms! The blood rushes to Korede's head. "Get your fucking hands off her!"

The man shoves Olusayo at Korede. "Watch your mouth, fella! She near fell back down the stairs, if I hadn't of caught her!"

With four people in the tiny room, there's not enough space.

Olusayo says, "Korede, I got dizzy..." She reaches for him.

The man says, "See, it's you she wants! You need to learn some manners, brother, afore we gotta teach you some!" He says to his companion, "Let's get going! Easy to see we ain't wanted!" The two men clatter down the steps.

Olusayo says, "Put me down. Let me sit." Korede lowers her to the floor and she sits leaning against a wall with her head down on her knees.

He says, "You came up the stairs too fast. That's all it is."

Olusayo whispers, "They did scare me. Those blue stripes on their faces. Like you said. I figured they was the Demons."

Korede rubs his forehead. Damn it all. Things were going well, until he lost his temper. Like always!

They sit side by side for awhile. The tiny room has walls that are only waist high, then open, up to a thatched roof. There's a pleasant breeze up here in the tree tops, that comes through the upper open part of the walls. Birds chirp in the tree foliage below. The girl takes his hand as she sits with eyes closed. Perhaps she forgives him. Korede swallows and nervously says, "You seen me at my worst, just now. When I yelled at the Kroo man."

The little voice inside Korede's head says, "*Your worst?*"

Olusayo says, "Well, your anger was dumb. He was helping me, Korede!"

"Yeah. But I get mad so fast! Did I scare you again?"

"You confuse me a lot. Mostly you're nice, but then, all of a sudden...you're not."

"Sorry!"

The girl opens her eyes and looks at him. "You're like my Pa. When I was little, I loved Pa. He would play with me, and hold me if I got hurt, and sing to me...like you...but inside him, I was something he owned." Her eyes fill with tears. "When Pa saw me and Bodua, standing there in the moonlight, holding hands, those damn dogs barking so loud..." She begins to sob. "I loved Bodua so! Oh, god, how I loved him! But Pa didn't care! All he saw was, Bodua was in the way! So Pa killed him! And...*left me alive!*"

The girl puts her head back and lets out a wail of anguish. Then, she bends over, sobs racking her thin body. Korede is appalled. He clumsily takes her in his arms. She turns to him, buries her face in his shoulder, and sobs. Korede strokes her skinny back and holds her tight.

After a long time, the girl's sobs die down, and Korede simply holds her. Then she turns away from him and huddles herself down into a small cocoon of misery. Korede tries to touch her, and she cringes away. So he sits close to her, and waits.

The little voice in Korede's head says, "*She got you pegged. You was once a nasty son of a bitch, just like her old man! But you ain't about to tell her that tale...and see her turn her back on you, like all the other girls! No, no!*"

When he was younger, Korede was early stronger and taller than all his friends. He liked that a lot. He took to strutting about, chewing a sliver of wood, laughing too loud, staring folks in the eye with a scornful expression. Even grown men respected him. He wore a red scarf about his head, pulled tight so his hair stood up in a tuft, making him look even taller. He wore a leather gauntlet on one wrist to accentuate his arm muscles. He felt like a warrior. Among his friends, he was the Man.

When the Captain began the militia, Korede couldn't wait to join up. He threw himself into the training. He delighted in his prowess with the various weapons, and the Captain delighted in him. Often the Captain would call Korede up front to demonstrate to the others how it should be done

In the wrestling ring, it was another story. There were smaller boys who could throw Korede, by their skill and adroitness and speed. But when thrown, Korede would fly into a rage, striking out with his fists, which was not allowed. Soon, none of the young men would wrestle with him.

He would take girls out, to festivals, to Market. And woe to the boy who would smile or flirt with whatever girl Korede had chosen for the evening! Korede was quick with his jealousy, quick with his anger. And later, he felt no remorse for his jealousy. On the contrary, he would savor how he had humiliated some fellow.

But Korede was not liked by the girls. Some of his friends bragged of their fast older women. Some had committed girl friends. Some were betrothed. Korede had kissed a few girls, had a lot of wet dreams, rubbed himself raw, but he'd never yet had sex with any female. He felt his inexperience to be a lack that mocked his yearning for manliness. He resolved to take a woman, not as a girl friend, not as a wife, not even as a back-street mama, but simply as a one-time conquest, a plume in his bandana.

He picked a girl that attracted him and would impress his friends. It was irrelevant that he had no previous relationship with the girl. He simply wanted an impressive trophy for the man he had decided to be.

He asked the girl to a festival. They danced with the other young people. Later, in the soft night, Korede walked with the girl along the Lagoon, to a secluded spot he had chosen. He sat her down and complemented her hair and kissed her lips. He nuzzled her neck and caressed her breasts and told her he lusted for her. From listening to his friends, Korede knew he had to get the girl hot, whatever that was. After diddling with her for awhile, he figured she oughta be hot, and time was wasting, so he started taking off her clothes, so he could proceed with the rest of the plan. She resisted. He insisted. She said she wanted to go home. He said that wasn't what he had in mind, yet. She tried to get up, he pushed her down. She began to struggle, so he had to hold her arms and try to get her clothes off at the same time, which made him angry, and he inadvertantly ripped her clothes a bit.

Then he figured he might as well finish the job so as to get access to what he wanted, and she was no help at all, so he ripped the clothes off her. She screamed. He had to shake her and cover her mouth with his hand to make her shut up, while he held her down and positioned himself and pulled out his tool, eager for a trial run. It wasn't easy for him, but at least he was far stronger than her, and few slaps seemed to calm her somewhat. The girl, however, was biding her time, perhaps following her parent's advice, and she brought her knee up very hard and slammed his gonads good. Now it was Korede's turn to scream. He rolled on his side, clutching his pain. The girl leaped to her feet, and ran off as fast as a gazelle, her tattered clothes trailing behind.

By sunup of the next day, half the town knew Korede had tried to rape a girl, and the other half were eager to hear about it. The girl's father and her male relatives marched to Korede's compound and hammered on the gate. Waving a rusty old scimitar, the girl's father was furious, screaming in anger. Folks gathered in the street.

Words were shouted, fists shaken. Korede's father gave Korede a long, hard look, and only calmed the girl's father by promising to take the affair to the Council of Elders posthaste.

The town constables, all three of them, came and took Korede into custody. They had to put him in somebody's grain bin and nail the door shut. Lagos did not have a jail. Always before, if anybody broke the rules, folks would just shout at the culprits until they were hounded into making amends. And nobody got far with any misdeed, in a tiny town surrounded by shark-infested waters.

At the hastily-convened Council of the Elders, Korede sat bound and gagged to hear the proceedings. There were Elders who had been insulted by him in public. His behavior had been noted by everyone. Not one face turned in sympathy to Korede except his own father.

A town constable unnecessarily reviewed the crime. The Elders invited public comment. The girl's father stood up and demanded Korede be castrated. None of the Elders knew how to castrate a man. It was discussed. There were conflicting opinions on the technique and the possible health ramifications to the castratee, such as, possible death by bleeding. Nobody was certain. Heads were scratched. Hearsay was touted as gospel. The victim had to be drunk, one Elder opined. No, that would make the bleeding worse. Perhaps cauterizing would stop the bleeding? Perhaps. Perhaps not. An Elder swore that no cutting was needed, one simply tied a stout string three times about the base of the offending organ, as tight as a man could pull it, and then one left the string tied until the organ dropped off painlessly. Just like the umbilical cord on an infant. The cauteree would probably need some sort of bondage to prevent him removing the tied string prematurely. Hands tied behind his back, that sort of thing.

But another Elder opined that a man's genitals were not a baby's umbilical cord, and the tied-string technique would cause intestinal rot. Far better to cut fast and get it over with, so the wound could heal properly, with no rot.

Should Lagos hire on a municipal castrator? The concept was dismissed. Not enough demand, Korede being the sole candidate so far in anyone's memory. One Elder aired the notion that there might be traveling castrators available by appointment, serving the gelding needs of the broader Lagoon community. But who knew how to find such a one?

It was getting late, and no verdict. Yawns were stifled. Korede's father, a respected and law-abiding Elder himself, stood and begged the other Elders for clemency. The Elders finally decided castration was a bit much, given that it was Korede's first rape offense, and besides, not enough solid information. Korede was soaked with the sweat of fear when he was escorted back to the grain bin.

However, Korede was publically humiliated. He was tied to a post at one side of Market for two days and two nights without food, for all to jeer at, unable even to defecate or urinate except in his own pants. Each morning the girl he had attacked came and spit on him, and threw the contents of the family nightpot on him. Onlookers

grinned, it was amusing. There were many in town whom Korede had insulted, and were glad to see him get a come-up-pance.

After the pillory, Korede had to do occasional menial work for his victim's family for a year. Korede's father was fined.

And Korede was shunned. From that time on, not a girl in Lagos would give him a smile or a kind word, except his own mother...and the potter's wife, who shook her head and her finger at Korede, and gave him a sad rueful smile...but still worked naked for him to watch, not fearing him.

The potter's wife made Korede a gift. It's a very odd looking piece of pottery, about a foot long, hollow, but only the diameter of a hoe handle inside. This device had handles, on both sides, and no bottom. Along with this odd creation, the potter's wife gave Korede a little jar of palm oil, and a smile. She had a quirky sense of humor, which is why Korede sincerely liked her. Too bad she was married! In Lagos, when a man took on several women, it was called matrimony, but when a woman took on several men, it was called big trouble. Otherwise, the potter's wife might have solved Korede's problem.

The fact is, there was many a night when Korede lay in his lonely bed, grinding his teeth and dreaming about the potter's wife, and her clay-besmeared thighs. All that restrained him was the notion of a thin string...wrapped three times about his genitals and pulled as tight a a man could pull it. Then, cursing, he would reach for the toy the potter's wife gave him, and the little bottle of palm oil.

Korede became a different person, after his punishment. He had heard the word loud and clear. He cut his hair and eschewed the red bandana forever. He flew low and kept his head down, from then on. But he still ached for a woman, and had none.

After the rape incident, Korede's mother one evening said to him, "Son, did I ever mention that, before you jump all over a girl, you gotta find out if she loves you?"

Korede stares at his mother. "Why?"

"Oh my. I've been remiss. That's what makes you a man, Son. Animals don't care."

Korede is amazed. Here he figured muscles made the man. "So how do I find out if she loves me?"

His mother says, "That's what makes you a god, finding that out."

"What the heck does that mean, Ma?"

His mother dried her hands, she had been cooking. "You find that out by kissing her very, very carefully, so as to taste the words on her lips that she wants to say, but cannot. When the words you taste are, 'I love you', only then can you kiss her some more."

"How can I taste words, Ma? It's all riddles!"

His mother kisses Korede on the cheek. "You'll know, when it happens. Just remember what I told you...and meanwhile, behave yourself."

Back in the tower, Olusayo has revived somewhat during Korede's reverie. Now, she sits pensively hunched over her knees. She's trying to get the snarls out of her hair with her fingers.

Korede dares to touch her hair, and says, "I feel bad that I scared you when I yelled at the Kroo man."

She glances at him with her sad, dark eyes, still teary, but she says nothing. It occurs to Korede that if she stays in Lagos, this girl will soon hear his sad history...and likely shun him, as all the other girls do already.

But now, Olusayo says in a low voice, "Before I was telling myself that Bodua was the only man I ever met who didn't get angry and jealous. But to be honest, I only knew him a handful of days. Maybe I'm fooling myself. Maybe if he and me had...married...been together for awhile, he woulda turned out just like everybody else. Like you. Actually, he himself said he had a Demon inside. So I shouldn't single you out as any worse."

This doesn't really sound like a compliment. Korede says, "How you reckon I could change?"

She studies him intently now. Her eyes really unsettle him, they seem to be a peephole into a place where he could sink without a trace. "Change?"

"What?"

"You said change."

"Change what?" Now he's studying her lips...another piece of risky terrain. And the dark little tip of her tongue, that darts out then shyly hides behind her tiny perfect teeth...

"Change yourself! What's the matter with you?"

"I was wondering...if you wear perfume or something. It's kinda making me dizzy..."

"What's perfume?"

"Some women...Please don't change! I like you fine."

"You said..."

"Right. Right. I was wondering what this Bodua fella said 'bout fixing his Demon."

"He didn't say." She gives a little laugh. "You're used to mashing hunks of metal into any shape you want, so you figure you can mash yourself into shape, too."

"Maybe if two folks was in love, they might change each other." *In love...!*

She's gone back to yanking on her hair. "I don't believe love changes folks. Mama said she and Pa loved each other, but it seemed to me, they might as well of been strangers." She looks at Korede. "I believe men and women want each other bad enough that they're forced to ignore the fact that they don't really get along. It's like how the Earth clings to us. There's no escaping the Earth's attraction for us, and sometimes, it's the death of us."

Korede says, "Hey. Listen to this. When you get strong, tell me all about this Bodua fella. Everything. Even the...kissing...and...you know. Details. I just got this flash that it might help us both get over him."

"Who said I want to get over him?"

"But...he's dead."

"So?"

"Kind of a waste, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you."

Korede huffs impatiently. "Well then, tell me to help *me* get over him!"

"Everything you say is you talking. Can't you hear yourself? *Me me me*...you sound like a baby bird."

Korede laughs. "Who else would be using my mouth?"

"Forget it. It's hopeless. See, you got it all figured out, the truth I would tell you. I bet you figure I'd tell you how great Bodua was in bed. And actually, that's not the most important part, to me."

"So, what *is* important to you?"

Olusayo whispers, "It would ruin it to cram it into words."

"Oh, I see. Too sacred to tell a blacksmith!"

She looks away. "That hurt, Korede. Not your words, but how you said 'em."

"It sure did! 'Cept it was *your* words that hurt *me*, and how you said 'em."

She murmurs something he can't hear, and rubs her eyes.

Korede says, "We gotta start someplace! Babies can't run and jump! And folks don't go and throw 'em out for a loss!"

She sighs. "*Why* do we have to start? Always you assume. Always you push the river." With her slender fingers, she brushes the sand off her exquisite brown legs and feet, sending shivers up Jed's spine all the way to the back of his head. She fiddles with her hair. She wipes a tear from her eyes. She says, "You're right. Let's try and talk. Like babies, both of us. Maybe that'll help us care for *his* baby. I can't be a mother this way, nor you a...but if you use what I tell you about Bodua, to ambush me with some kinda punishment, I'll never forgive you."

"His...baby?"

"I made love to him, Korede. All night long. That's why I don't kill myself. I have him in me. Don't go and pretend..."

Korede snaps, "I ain't pretending! You kinda hit me with it, there!"

"See, Korede! You say you want me to talk, but then you flinch!"

"Of course I flinch! I flinch 'cause I like you, and 'cause I got hopes that...you want I should be some kinda carving? You're flinching too! You're flinching from telling me your truth when it's hard to do! And by the way...what do I care if you have his baby? Huh? Ain't that *you* talking? Ha ha! Who's pretending here?"

She taps her teeth. "You're not as dumb as I figured."

She looks at him and gets a new expression on her face, then, quick as a snake, she darts forward and bites Korede hard on the neck.

He jerks back. "Ouch! What the heck was that for?" He puts his hand up. Blood!

"Just doing what you said! I been wanting to bite your neck since you carried me here, and that's the truth." She touches her lips then shows him her bloody fingers.

"Truth hurts, Korede." She closes her eyes and waits.

"Are you praying for my damn neck to heal?"

She opens her eyes. "I wanted to see if you would hit me."

"Hit you! And hurt myself even more? No, I ain't gonna hit you. I'd like to spank you sometime. But only if you want it. Did you chew on Bodua?"

"Sure. But I'm no cannibal. I had a goat I liked, and I couldn't eat goat."

"Oh, so you won't serve me up 'cause I remind you of a goat friend? By the way, was Bodua human? I assumed...of course, you believe you carry his baby...hm. No, that's impossible...ridiculous!"

She almost laughs but clamps down on it. She lays her arms crossed on her knees and lays her chin on her arms and stares at him. "Tell me something about yourself that I can make fun of."

Korede says, his voice harsh, "When we do this talking, I'll tell you something 'bout myself you won't find the least bit funny. My past. Then you'll hate me, like the other girls do."

She looks at him again with that intent look of hers that feels like she's sucking him dry. "Why don't you let *me* decide how I feel 'bout you. By the Gods but you're a mess."

The tunic Olusayo is wearing...Korede's...is so big for her that it keeps slipping off her shoulders. Korede can't stop his fingers from adjusting it. He says, "My tunic can't be warm enough for you. We gotta look at the Sea then decide how to get you warm clothes. What's that around your neck?"

She pulls her necklace out of her front to show him. It's an amulet, a tiny carved wooden woman with a big belly, and parrot feathers, on a leather thong. She hands it to Korede.

Korede takes the amulet and inspects it curiously. It's a wooden carving of a pregnant woman with a hole in her abdomen. "Why does she have a hole in her tummy!"

"Mama said she's the goddess of new beginnings. Every once in awhile I get a flash of why she has that hole...then it's gone." She's inspecting her legs again. "I wonder when I got this scrape. I sure don't recall. Did you do this to me after I fainted? Some kind of tribal brand? You didn't cut any of my hair, did you?" She pats her hair all over, searching for missing hunks.

Korede huffs in annoyance. "I reckon you scraped your leg your own self! You fell when you fainted, and I barely caught you! You should thank me instead of...damn, girl! How can you say that? You got a few rough spots too, you know! Lemme show you the Sea."

"I fainted alright, because you was waving a spear at me. Help me up."

Korede gives Olusayo a hand up, and she holds on to the railing. Korede sweeps his arm to the South. "There it is!"

Olusayo gasps, "Oh my God."

A few taller palm trees block the view to the South, but for the most part, the Sea fills the whole of the distant southern hemisphere. The sight never fails to touch Korede deeply. The expanse of water, bands of every shade of blue, green and gray, speckled with an infinity of sparkling wavelets. Over it all, the vault of Sky, a blue so intense it becomes blue-black at the horizon. Here and there, bright white arrows of seagulls, high drifting specks burning in the high light. A few clouds drift lazily, and always, the distant thunder of the unseen surf, the Earth's heartbeat.

Olusayo says, "There's fish out there as big as goats." She's fumbling for his hand. "Oh Korede...I feel funny..."

Far out in the water, the sleek humps of a school of huge fish stitches down the coast.

Korede points. "Look, there's one of them White men's ships. You can see the chain going down to an iron thing on the bottom that's holding them in place." A big European sailing vessel rides at anchor a good ways out, sails furled, a toy boat on the vast waters. "And look, over to the right. See that channel? That leads from our Lagoon, out to the Sea. There's some Kroo headed down the channel in their canoes! They're going out to the White man's ship, to service her."

Korede, glancing at Olusayo, is struck. She's come alive. All the lethargy and fear is gone.

"Korede...my very soul aches to look over that edge, where the Sea ends and Sky begins! What could it be, Korede?"

"I never heard tell of any man who looked over that edge."

"Oh, Korede, this, this is what's been calling me, all my life! This Sea! I knew it had to be! Why else was the River hurrying along, if not to get some place marvelous!"

"You can't see the surf, from here. That's where the water makes hills that fall over. When you get strong, I'll take you there. Around the East end of the Island, then across the dunes to the beach. Or if we're brave, right down the Channel, when the tide's right."

"Oh yes, Korede, take me to this surf some day! I want to put my feet in it! To taste it! Maybe I could make friends with one of those big fish, like my goat friend. Maybe one of those fish swam to the edge of the Sea, and peered over, and can tell me what it saw!"

"You'd best stick with the goat and me for friends. There's fish in that Sea would love to nibble on you, and not some little nip like you gave me. You listening? It's death to go out in the Sea or the Lagoon either one! The sharks only come up in the Lagoon when the current flows backward in the Channel, but best if you just figure it's never safe to swim."

"Well, nothing could eat me if I only was wading up to my ankles. It's so nice to wade when it's hot. And I could wash off a bit."

"There's lots of things to do, on the beach. I love to watch the waves. There's pretty shells to collect. We could take a basket of food and a blanket, and lie in the sun and pester each other and make a little fire and drink wine..."

"What are shells?"

"The tiny home a sea creature made. Real pretty. Like you." Her face glows with wonder of it all, and the kiss comes like breathing. She's soft and open and she moves into his arms, her girlish breasts warm on his chest. He cups her buttocks in his big hands and lifts her right up so he can get to her lips...and her kiss says...*maybe*.

She pulls back a bit, and lays in his embrace, both of them searching, both wondering...and her eyes say, *not yet*.

Every fiber in him wants to ignore what she's telling him and make her his own. But his father said, "*Son, seeing as how we all got so many mistakes to work through, it's best not to repeat any.*"

And his mother said, "*Only if her lips say, 'I love you', Son.*"

Korede sets Olusayo down on her feet, steps back and smiles. "Listen, lady. I reckon we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's take you to my place, and get some proper food in you, and let Ma check to see if you need a healing woman. Let's figure where you're gonna stay, a place for you to sleep, a place of your own. Let's find you some decent clothes, and anything else you need."

He's shaking so bad he has to hold onto the railing. He never felt so good. He didn't know this good was even possible.

She whispers, "Yeah, I'm real tired. The Sea wiped me out. And I'm hungry again. Gimme time, Korede. When I get strong, I'll look in your eyes and decide what to do. Right now I'm scared that I might not have the strength to get back out. Do you understand?"

"Kinda. Can you manage the stairs?"

"You go in front of me."

At the bottom of the tower, she says, "I'm so weary. Is it far?"

"Just down the street."

"Korede...could you..." She reaches for him.

He scoops her up. She cuddles against him and sighs in his ear as he walks down the street, "Korede, you're a good man. I can feel that, without seeing it. I never did that before."

"Ma will know a place for you to stay. And we gotta put some flesh on your bones."

"When we get close to your home, put me down. I don't want your mother to figure I'm some cripple. I can work, Korede, when I get my strength. I can cook, and clean up, and tend animals, and learn your ways..."

"Lady, stop worrying! I don't wanna see you frown again today! Whoo! Wait'll Ma sees what I found!"

This finally gets a laugh out of her. Her hand plays in his hair, and she snuggles against his shoulder. He walks along, his feet some distance above the street. The feeling in Korede's chest is so strong, there's hardly any room for breath. He sees his life, from now on, as if it were a bar of iron he's shaping. He'll take care of this girl. Whatever she wants. Just so she lets him be near. Just so they can talk, and argue, and work things out.

And maybe, some day, she might come to love him, and take him as a woman takes a man, as his wife. That'll be his hope, from now on.

SHOP TALK

Some months go by since Olusayo arrived in Lagos. Korede and his father sit outside their blacksmith shop, in the shady courtyard fronting on the street, eating their mid-day meal. His father clears his throat several times. Korede looks at him questioningly. Korede usually dashes home for mid-day meal to see Olusayo, but today his father asked him to linger and talk.

His father says, "The potter asked me how come you don't visit any more, and if he or his wife insulted you in some way."

Korede slaps his leg. "You know, I forgot? I'll have to stop by and pay my respects. I don't wanna lose them for friends. Why, if I didn't go down there, they probably wouldn't have no pots to sell!"

His father looks puzzled, then forges on. "Son...that pretty wife of yours. Olusayo."

"She's a wonder, ain't she? Did you like the stew she made last night?"

"Yeah, it was good. What was the meat in it? I didn't recognize it."

"Don't ask, Pop. Just eat it."

His father gestures impatiently. "I don't wanna talk 'bout stew. Your wife. Now I grant you, she's a spirited and very nice girl. Or woman, I should say. And she says the darndest things. Makes me look at the world fresh, she does. I...I've come to love her my own self. As does your mother. She's become the daughter for us that we couldn't seem to make ourselves. And, she's straightened you out. I'm thankful for that."

"Straighten me out! What's that mean?"

"You was getting to be a dreamer and a rascal, afore she came along. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. And you was flighty. Rascals might work iron, but not dreamers. You gotta be tougher than the metal. And rascals can't run a business, as you'll have to do, when I'm gone. You's getting there, now. You got your axle. Could be she had something to do with that."

"Militia helps. The captain's always whacking me into shape."

"Yeah. He's a good man. But I wanna talk about your wife, not militia. You studying family, by Olusayo? Chilluns?"

"Sure, Pop. I love her! And she loves me! Sure I wanna give her babies!"

His father fidgets nervously, something Korede seldom sees. "She's awful pretty. I suspect that's made a problem."

"Hard to see how that's a problem, Pop. Not the way I look at it. Lying down, if you get me! Ha ha!"

"Let's get serious, Son. I'm sure you done noticed that she's in the family way."

"Well, that's to be expected. Ha ha!"

The old man sighs. Korede seems to elicit sighs from the older generation. "Let's put a lid on the humor, here, Son. Your mother told me she guesses Olusayo is about four months gone."

"Your point, Pop?"

"Well, she got here about four months ago. Um...I don't know how to say this, except right out plain. Son, do you give her your essence?"

"Whoa! That's hammering right down on it, Pop! She's my wife! And she's gorgeous! And she wants me! What would you do? Deny the poor girl?"

His father rubs his forehead hard. "Calm down, Son. I just wanna know when it began! The...essence thing. When did it start?"

"Not 'till we was married, Pop, and you know when that was. Whoo! Just two months ago! Yet it feels to me like I been loving her all my life!"

"Son, the point is...why do I have to say this...if she's four months gone, and you only been giving her your essence for *two* months, then...see what I'm driving at?"

"Ah ha! I got it. You're wondering whose chile she's carrying, and if it'll be blacksmith material, or just some wimp who can hardly heft a hammer."

Korede's father scratches his head. "Well...don't that occur to you?"

"Come on, Pop. That's kinda old-fashioned, ain't it? Don't you reckon any natural boy-chile could pick up our trade, if he gets it from the start? It's like the story of the little boy who carried a new-born colt up a hill each day of his life, and when the colt grew up to be a horse, the boy grewed to a man who could still carry it up the hill. Besides, she might have a girl. You don't know it's a boy."

The old man hunches forward. "Son, we ain't got horses and we ain't got hills and you ain't hearing me! Forget boy or girl, what I want to know is, how you feel about raising another man's chile! You know your own self, sometimes the iron we work will have a clinker in it, that ain't visible on the surface, but causes the work to break under load. Is that gonna happen to you, down the road? 'Cause it takes a lifetime, to raise a chile! It ain't some lark to laugh about!"

"Pop, you just now said your own self, that you has come to love Olusayo like a daughter, even though she ain't from your loins. Don't you reckon I can love her chile, even though it ain't from my loins? It's hers! I admit Olusayo's been forged on another anvil. She told me all about it, Pop. Her father betrothed her to an Elder that she didn't love, and she fell for this Bodua man, and went to his bed. But her father killed Bodua, and the village men was gonna kill Olusayo, so she ran, or floated, to my arms! She ain't some loose woman, Pop. She was near a chile her own self, when she came here! She's a good woman who got messed up bad. And she hurts bad, for that mistake. You know your own self, that I made bad mistakes too. You know she gets the sad spells, even now. But I'm the man to help her go right, just as she's the woman to help me! 'Cause all I want outta life, any more, is keep a smile on her pretty face. Way I sees it, the next one she hatches, will be mine! She's changed me, Pop. Given me something more enduring than the iron we work. I reckon it's love, and my love don't ask for no perfection! Why, when we hammer a piece of iron into shape, it still carries the marks of the tools. All my love asks, is to be given a chance to prove it's temper...for the rest of my life."