

ANANSÍ

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FOREWORD

First there was the Chaos. Almost certainly it was called other names in other parts of the world. Some thought it was a war, or many wars, people had lost count... World War IV, or V. Who knows? A time of bombs, missiles, explosions. Nuclear power plants blew up. Large areas of land uninhabitable, because of poisonous radioactivity. The total breakdown of infrastructure in the most civilized countries; the collapse of governing everywhere. Without oil, no electricity; without power, no water, no transportation, no news.

Then, or perhaps at the same time, there were the diseases that swept across the globe. Some ancient contagious diseases that experts had thought eradicated returned, some new ones that nobody knew how to treat. There were no functioning hospitals. Nor functioning funeral services. In parts of the world—perhaps mostly in the Northern Hemisphere?—there was the Dark. The sun obscured by a thick layer of something that eventually thinned and blew away. The Dark lasted at least a year, or more: calendar time had also disappeared; nobody had, or could have kept track of time.

There were survivors. Somewhere in the far northern part of North America a few survivors found each other at a cabin in a forest. Their story is told in *Rain of Ashes*. Other survivors had started a village of sorts, near a west-facing coast of middle Africa.

As elsewhere, among the survivors were some who had recovered an ancient human talent to commune without words. For some of them, distance apparently was no barrier. One such, an African, called a cry that was heard by some in the cabin in the woods. The African, organized a daring expedition. They had found an abandoned private jet, and with a few companions—and a “real” pilot—they made it to the people in the north woods. Eventually, they returned, leaving two passengers that had come from Africa, and taking on two American women who wanted to join “the Africa group.”

This book, *Anansí*, is the story of the travelers, the Africa group, beginning after they left the north woods.

Part I, Saba

CHAPTER ONE

Katherine, naturally, and smoothly, slid into the role of housekeeper, even on the plane, where she carefully prepared breakfast. The little pantry was overflowing with venison, in two or three guises of preservation. With berries, it made an ample breakfast. They had some water, and she found several kinds of same-tasting juice in one of the drawers of the tiny galley. After everyone had eaten, and it was light outside, she checked the healing wounds on Max's shoulder and arm.

You were lucky, she said. A few inches (now I must learn to think in centimeters) to either side and it would have been much more serious.

Max, born and raised a Maasai, now the pilot, murmured something, then whispered, but it still hurts when I move this arm, lifting his arm back as if to throw a spear.

As he moved his head sideways, he looked out of one of the windows and yelled, *Storm* ! He and Guinée rushed to the front, almost colliding in the narrow door. Max said, I'll take the pilot's seat.

Now they could all see the black towering clouds to the left of the plane. Max put the plane in a steep climb and a slow turn, up and over the storm. When Guinée was about to ask a question, Max said, under his breath, *hurricane*, as he maneuvered the plane toward the black wall of clouds, This way we'll be above the storm hopefully. Then, in a normal voice, We had no weather report! Guess there are no more weather reports, eh?

It took almost an hour to fly high enough above the storm to encounter only minor turbulence. But they had radically changed their course. Now they were over open ocean, the storm still visible below and behind them, as a gray mass of thick, roiling clouds. Max pointed the plane south. He looked at his gauges, checked the reserve tank again, then said to Guinée, Tell them, that we have at most an hour, maybe less, of fuel left. I am gliding very slowly down, using a minimum of fuel. Tell them to look for airports. Islands, we must be over the Caribbean. Preferably without people but with fuel! If...!

Guinée left, stretched himself, Are you sure you can manage, Max?

Yes, Go ahead.

Alive and Katherine each took a side, Solomon moved from one side of the plane to the other. Now that they were flying with the nose slightly down it was easier to see down. There was still a cloud layer below them, but thinning. As Max hoped, a big island came into view. Jamaica?

Solomon stuck his head in the cockpit, There must be more than one airfield on Jamaica. But when they spotted one, and then another, Max said he would have to go back if they wanted to land there. They were still much too high.

Guinée said, go on, there are many islands! I can see a whole string of them.

They saw islands, big ones, small ones. A large island looked devastated: air fields, including

obvious military ones, that had been severely damaged, probably bombed, burned runways, pieces of airplanes and tons of rubble everywhere. They obviously had to look further.

They spotted a small island, like a brimless hat in the ocean, with a shiny white runway, glaringly empty of planes, undamaged as far as they could tell. They were low enough so that with a gentle turn they glided to the runway. Max had to go down at a steeper pitch, the airport was closer than he had thought. Close to the runway Max pulled the nose of the plane up sharply, almost stalling, making the plane “fall.” Before the wheels had quite touched the concrete, Max reversed both engines, full blast. The plane clunked down, began to roll, slowing down rapidly. Then one of the engines cut out, spinning the airplane around a full 360 degrees before Max could shut down the other, relying on the brakes to stop. The plane was now moving at a slight angle to the runway, the brakes were working, but not fast enough to prevent one wheel to drop off the edge of the concrete. The plane lurched, shivered, the wheel dropped off the side of the runway and the plane swung some more, then stopped—too suddenly. The nose wheel rested on the very edge of the runway. The wheel deeply buried in sand. Passengers and crew had been safely belted in; nobody was hurt, but they were shaken and dizzy from the violent motions, first the rapid descent, then the turnaround, and the last lurching coming-to-a-stop..

Guinée was the first to unbuckle. The plane leaned so that it was difficult to get out of his seat. He looked at Max, Are you all right?

Yes, go look at the others. I can manage. Come back for me after the others are off the plane. I don’t think there is much danger of a fire, we were just about out of fuel. That’s why the one engine failed, probably.

Alive and Katherine had already gotten out of their seats, and were struggling to open the door. When it was open, and the steps had extruded—at a crooked angle—the two women and Solomon got down, walked away from the plane. Guinée went back to help Max. A few minutes later they were all standing on the hot concrete watching the sad fate of their plane.

It was not obvious that anything was broken, but one wheel had worked itself in the sand well past the axle.

Katherine started laughing! My great adventure! Who would have thought we would end up on a rock in the Caribbean. Hurricane season. She threw her arms around Solomon, then Alive. Then Guinée and Max joined and they made a tight circle, laughing, crying, shaking, swearing, then laughing again.

They stepped back. Looked at the plane again, then turned around to see what the airport looked like. They were close to the very end of the runway. Max gasped, If that engine had not shut off just then, we might have dropped straight off the end of the runway, probably in the ocean, or on the rocks below. Phew!

Look, there’s a station building!

First Alive and Guinée, then Max. Katherine holding onto Solomon I know what you are thinking, she said. You think, How am I, we, going to get to Africa?

Yes, of course. That is exactly what I am thinking. Maybe we can find another plane. Or a boat! Only an ocean now separates us.

Only?

Well, we can wait until after the hurricane season. There must be ways to sail across from here, our forefathers did it hundreds of years ago.

Come, let's explore this island, at least, Katherine said.

Reluctantly, Solomon let himself be guided to the building where the others had gone.

As they reached the little building, **WELCOME TO SABA**, a large sign screamed. Max, who was ahead, of course, turned back, Anyone know where or what Saba is?

It must be the name of the town, or maybe the island, Alive said.

Guinée looked around inside, "we're in a movie," Guinée whispered. The people left everything without even closing the drawer of a desk. I bet the TV screens would be on, if there were power.

Some lights came on.

Katherine and Solomon had come in.

A man came out from behind one of the counters. He looked at each one, separately, moving his head slowly from left to right.

He whispered, *An interesting party of tourists?* He looked again, slowly moving his head from right to left.

Is he real, Alive whispered?

Is any of this real, Katherine asked?

The man spoke, louder this time, Welcome to Saba. As you guessed, Saba is the name of the island. You landed your plane at our proud airport. They all left; all the people left. Only I stayed behind. So, now I am Saba. I, all by myself, am the population of this little kingdom.

Solomon answered, Thank you, your Highness. We did not exactly come as visitors, our plane crashed at your airport. But we shall be looking for a way to get to our final destination.

And that must be Africa, the man said.

How did you guess, Katherine asked?

The man did not answer, perhaps because Solomon said, Yes, Africa, near the equator, on this side. Not that far away from here, probably.

The man smiled and said, Do you plan to wait until the commercial airlines start regular service again? Because if you do, he said, raising his voice, you may have to spend the rest of your natural lives here.

Solomon: I was thinking there must be some boat somewhere that could get us off this island to another island perhaps, or... Even Solomon could not finish the sentence, there did not seem to be an "or."

Katherine spoke up, First, I think we need a place to stay. From the air this island seemed intact. Can we camp here, or, are there other places?

Madame, let me show the way. He came from behind the counter, held out his elbow to Katherine, and so, slowly, regally, escorted the party out of the building, across a paved street, to a path that led to a house, hacked out of the side of a fairly steep mountain.

The view from the terrace was the essential Caribbean dream view. King Saba showed them around, then said, as in an aside, This is not mine, of course. Or, perhaps it is, as the entire island is. Small, but it fits me. This house has a water tank that is still working; gravity feed, they called it. Although I would drink the bottled water in the pantry, he added. There might be food in the pantry. The view is what we were famous for.

We brought food for at least a few days, but water would be wonderful. A water tank, you said?

Yes, and there are showers in this house. They probably work.

Katherine and Alive did a little dance on the terrace. Katherine saying I cannot remember when last I “took a shower.” In the woods we would bathe in the rain, in summer. A shower!

Saba, as he had asked to be called, left them in the house. Max and Guinée went back to the plane to get the food and what little they had of extra clothes. On exploring the place they found an abundance of fruit in the orchard, on the side of the house... The beds were made, and the linens seemed clean. There is enough water to take five moderate showers. Saba had said before he was off, down the path. The tank is filled by rain water, caught from the roof. We just had a storm pass over us with a bit of rain; the tank must be full.

The five caught their breaths.

Well, Alive said, this really is a movie. Or a fairy tale! I cannot even see the airport from here, and our poor dead plane.

Max interjected forcefully, Oh, no, she’s not dead! I’ve been thinking how we could dig out the wheel. Even if it is damaged beyond repair, we have all kinds of spare parts with us. I think there’s another wheel.

Guinée joined the discussion, The trouble will be to lift the plane back on a flat surface so that we can see what the damage is.

Solomon, I imagine there are some things at the airport. If they serviced any planes, they must have jacks, or trucks, or whatever one would use to lift planes out of holes.

But first, showers, Katherine announced. I haven’t even thought of showers for years! And then we eat a feast meal. Can I be the first to shower? Or, perhaps you want to shower with me, Solomon? And I’ve seen a liquor cabinet. This movie requires a party!

Even without a water heater, the water in the tank had warmed sufficiently to provide an unexpected luxury. The men had been used to quick wipes with cold water, this was a novelty. Max, who was last, complained that there was not enough water to even get wet, but nobody took him seriously because he came out dripping. They had found towels and soap, but those too, ran out.

Solomon said, One shower, with soap and a fairly dry towel, is more than enough to keep us healthy for another few years!

Alive, who had stayed in the shower so long that Guinée had joined her, “to save water,” declared this was the most memorable event of her entire life.

The shower-and-after party was perhaps more memorable, and certainly more pleasurable than the adventures of the last two or three years each of them had lived through.

The next morning, Max had already gone by the time the rest got up.

To look at his plane, Solomon said. Poor chap, he must have felt badly alone last night, without a partner. Maybe we’d better join him, and see what we can do.

Alive, Not so: we included him! A threesome. I’m hungry. Is there any food left?

Katherine said, Enough for today, and perhaps one more day. We need to forage on this island. There must be a town, or even a village. And probably other houses like this one, we can check out. Maybe Alive and I can look for food, and you boys play with your airplane.

Guinée, I’m a pretty good mechanic, that means I can work on engines. But fuselage, and wings, or wheels, are something else. I would not be much use at the airplane. Maybe I should accompany the *girls* (emphasis), they might need some protection.

Solomon had barely been able to contain his irritation with Alive and Guinée. Let's not bicker. As to your usefulness, Guinée, my guess is that at this stage we need your bulk and your muscles a lot more than your skills as a mechanic. In this new world nobody needs my brains either. I work best with abstract imaginary numbers. *I* should join the women, and you go down to the airport.

As if to end the discussion, Max came up, huffing and puffing. This path is steep; let me catch my breath!

He sat down on one of the sofas. Katherine and Alive went into the kitchen to serve what food they could find.

Max reported, I'm afraid there is not much we can do about the plane, as I see it. It looks as if the one wheel is bent or even cracked, the wing looks all right, but hard to tell. I didn't see any equipment at the little airport that would help us get the plane back on the runway. No other planes in sight. No fuel, that is the worst. For now we should explore the island and find not only food but a place or places to live temporarily. Or a boat.

Guinée, jokingly, How many islands do you know?

Don't islands and boats go together, Max asked seriously?

Solomon said thoughtfully, You know, when I first discovered—at least on an aware level—that I could communicate with humans without speaking words, and then with someone far away, I thought about the physics of that. We know so little about the brain, or rather about all those invisible energies we manufacture, to talk, to think, to commune, to see, to hear... The thing that bothered me most, of course, was that this far speech, as someone called it, seems to be instantaneous. That's pretty esoteric physics! Or, maybe not so esoteric. Einstein said things about instantaneous events, but not everyone took that seriously..

Katherine and Solomon had walked a to a little bench, overlooking a blue ocean, blue sky, a few clouds. A soft warm, Katherine thought to herself. She had listened to Solomon, of course, but only with a part of her attention. Now she interrupted, what she knew could easily become a lecture, How do you know it is instantaneous? On the planet itself it is not any more instantaneous than, say, telephone was. More instantaneous? Whether communication with my origin was instantaneous. No, I never really thought about that; you're the physicist, you must know about things like that.

Solomon smiled. He turned to look at Katherine. This light becomes you, you know! And, after a little pause, he said, Can you remember the first time when you realized what you were doing when communicating with someone in your head?

Katherine thought for a minute. Yes, it was more of a process. I always knew, I think, what some of my patients were going through. Not words, of course. But often I would know where something pinched, or when they needed water, or things like that. And once i had a dog that I was sure could understand me. She smiled, then giggled softly, He would tilt his head to the side, look m straight in the face, and I imagined he would nod, yes, he understood. When you live alone you talk to dogs and plants, you know...

Solomon, I cannot remember that I ever talked to animals. But I would have what we used to call "interior monologues" about mathematical problems. It seems there were always people around, married, and students, visitors. When I had a sabbatical coming (long overdue) I thought I would get away from people. Everyone wanted something from me, attention, ideas, formulae. I had wanted to go to Africa, study the San perhaps, or those other pygmies in Central Africa, but

the Anthropology Department told me there were other people there studying them. They said, why not Papua? I should learn Indonesian, they said. The Department did all the work for me, getting permits, visas, and all kinds of paperwork. I had a whole suitcase with documents, books, permits, things I must write down, and so on. Solomon laughed, We used much of that paper to make fires! When I finally got to the particular tribe of Papuans they had arranged for me to stay with, they did not speak Indonesian at all, of course. And I did not either, so in a way that was a relief. I remembered as a child I had been able to learn enough Italian, American, to talk with the missionaries. Why not mimick these people and so learn their language? It was much easier than I had imagined! I remembered at night, lying in my hammock in a long house, quiet, and I could hear whole strings of sounds in my mind, not know where one word ended and another began. Frustrated! And then one word jumped out, the word for fire. I have no idea how that came, but I accepted it. It fitted in what little I had picked up. Mostly from the children, you know! Then, it seemed, in no time at all, I could understand what they were saying; and not long after that my tongue and mouth found ways to talk their talk. But no, it was before that, that I got the idea that I could hear their thoughts, and they could hear mine.

Katherine looked at the horizon, far, far away. And, when you talk, Solomon, I see you with those people. Imagination, of course, but it is so vivid!

Solomon leaned over and kissed her on the ear. Yes, he whispered, that was when I came alive again. A good year that was. Those people unlocked something in me that I had neglected. I had studied so much, *thought* so much... Too much thinking is bad, you know.

Katherine said, softly, But when you broadcast your "Anyone there?" it came all the way from Africa to us in the north woods. You learned, Solomon.

And I perceived something that told me that there was a connection, there was some kind of acknowledgement. The phone was ringing, at the other end. But nobody answered at first.

Katherine said, Perhaps, probably, humans have always known to do that! We were brainwashed, educated, to believe that it is impossible, imagination, fantasy. But there were always people who...

Guinée and Alive had joined them. And some people do it better than others, said he. I had such a shock when Alive first contacted me. It was as if she was inside my head. And I did not even know her then. Now I realize that before, I had been able to ignore glimpses of it. But when she was in my head there was no denying. She could make me see what she saw, and I think she could see what I saw. Only if I allowed it, though. That was the first thing I made sure of. Sometimes I hear Solomon "inside" easily, other times not. But I've improved, I think.

Katherine laughed. Yes indeed, you have. I think it is because you have let down some of your barriers. You had yourself so barricaded! Like a city under attack.

Max, who joined them said, That is what the world was like before all this mess happened. We *had* to barricade ourselves. I constantly felt attacked by people who wanted me to be more Maasai, others who wanted me to become Muslim, or Christian, and others who wanted me to get an education. I heard all that loud and clear, in words, but they also tried to get inside. Maybe they did not know they were doing that. I shut off my hearing.

Alive touched his arm, How, where, why did you get so attached to planes?

I grew up on the wide Veld in Africa, a typical Maasai youth. There were always light planes that broke down. I learned to fly small planes when I was still in the lower school. Later, I flew

bigger planes, and then jets. Oh, I learned all kinds of other useful bits and pieces, about weather, the atmosphere, storms, rain, ice even. But the best learning is always by doing. I don't have any piece of paper that says I am allowed to fly a plane (he laughed!) but who's checking?

Guinée: Don't worry, we know you can fly. And, you know, my mother—she was a queer one!—used to say that anyone can learn any job in six months. Not the million facts and figures that you must memorize, but *doing*. She was a physician, did I mention that? Among other things. She was other things, as well! She used to tell anyone who would listen, that 95% of her expensive “certified” education had been useless, that she learned to heal, and other things, by *doing*. Guinée sighed, She was a real healer. But she could not heal herself, when all those strange diseases came, one after another. But she could tell me how to survive them.

Alive leaned closer, and said, her eyes glowing, She must have been a remarkable person.

Oh yes, she was that. She could have been the queen of Guinée, but of course we were a republic. Hah! She fought for what she... Enough! What are we doing today?

They had been eating stale crackers, some mangoes that probably were not quite ripe. Bananas, and oranges aplenty.

Solomon asked Max whether he had seen enough of the island before landing (he did not say “crashing”) so that they might have an idea what to look for. And where. In which direction?

No., I was too busy saving the last drop of fuel when I saw that air strip and calculated that we could just make it, or perhaps make it. Almost make it. No, I did not see anything of this island, except that it is small. And very rocky. Steep I think. It rises out of the ocean like a mountain top. The airport was higher than I had thought, I was planning a wide circle. But at the last moment I had to land faster than I had planned.

They decided they would stick together. They were traveling light, after all. Nobody had any belongings. First get back down to the airport. There must be a road to a town from there. They would follow the road.

Max walked ahead; with his long legs he was soon out of sight. Solomon reminded them that the two couples were sufficient unto themselves, which left Max very much odd man out.

Solomon and Katherine brought up the rear.

Let the young people go first, Solomon said.

Katherine looked at him, Yes, we are the elders, do you feel that?

Well, yes, probably. My days of young student and the exciting times of being a physicist, mathematician, are over. I did not like teaching much, but I miss the intellectual stimulation of people around me who all are stretching their brains to the utmost.

But that must be years ago now. How about the years in Africa, not your childhood, but when you were in Nigeria? Not much “intellectual stimulation” there, was there?

No. No, not at all. It all happened so fast, I felt. That whole world died in a flash it seems. And we were left worrying about getting enough to eat, and hiding from bombs and crazy people. And you know, Katherine, what was the worst? So many people turned to me for advice. How could I know how to survive in Africa? I had not lived there for more than a lifetime. I did not know anything, but everyone — well, almost everyone — leaned on me.

Katherine, Yes, I had been so serious too, so intent on helping dying people to survive. And

then when you came, with a plane, no less, all the way from Africa, something happened to me. I broke through my sense of being responsible for the world. Now, looking back, I realize that is also why I decided to leave. I had enough of being responsible. Solomon, ... she did not finish the sentence.

There were road signs at the airport. The road to a town went steeply down toward the ocean.

Around a hairpin curve they saw a small town below. Quaint red-tiled roofs, and at least one three- or four-story concrete building. Everything looked damaged, glass broken, roof tiles missing, trees snapped off. Some of the houses higher up had swimming pools, which now were empty. One large building, a warehouse perhaps, was smoking, the remnants of a fire that had almost but not quite burned down. Metal sides had melted, or twisted, crashing what remained of the roof into whatever had burnt inside.

They heard a voice, nearby: Admiring the damage the hurricanes did?

Saba was sitting on a bench, next to Max who had his long legs stretched in front of him.

Max: Saba says that our plane was the first he had seen landing in many years. Even before what he calls "the War," no airline had regular flights to this island. There was a ferry. And, before the end, all tourists left, the economy of the island collapsed. Local people left. But he has seen planes flying over, a few times, not often, he says.

They had all found places to sit, looking at the desolate view.

Solomon asked, And what about ships, private yachts?

Saba shrugged his shoulders, Haven't seen any. But perhaps there are some still afloat.

Alive asked whether there had been many hurricanes here?

Oh yes, some years, this lies in the path of hurricanes. Other years they go further north. This last one was not a real big one, but fierce. Did a lot of the damage you see. The town was deserted, and had been for years.

Is there any food there, Katherine asked?

Yes, if you know where to look! But isn't that true for everything in life? He smiled a big smile.

Alive said, If we ask nicely, can you show us where to find things?

Of course, let's go.

And you're here all by yourself, said Guinée? That is difficult to believe. Such a beautiful island...

Before The War, Saba said, laconically, there were a thousand people here. Maybe more, maybe less. Then, when every one left... I don't know how many stayed. Not many. Then nearby islands were bombed—big explosions we heard—more people left. Trinidad, they had heard on some radio station that was still alive then, was the place to go. Close to the mainland, and so far undamaged. But then the diseases. They must have come on the air! No people came to bring us diseases, like they used to in the old days. First the hair disease: many people lost their hair, vomited, and died. Some survived to get sick from the yellow disease. And then other diseases, one after the other. We did not give names any more.

And you, you never caught any of these diseases?

I caught... but my constitution... I got well again.

After a long silence, Katherine asked him to show them one or two places where they could get some food. She spoke hesitantly, almost apologetically. Then she added, carefully, You're really

the only one living on this island now?

Well... a few more is on the other side. But they sick. I no go there. Animals we have. No dogs, but goats up in south side mountain, and I seen one chicken, maybe more? Goat, good eating!

You've walked all over the island then, have you. said Solomon?

My island. I know all ways, Not so many roads now, dead cars, dead bulldozer. No cars, no benzine — you say petrol.

Alive entered the discussion. I need some other clothes! It is *warm* here, and I want something more appropriate to wear. Are there places to find clothes?

Plenny place for clothes. I take you. Here, no many clothes need!

Guinée laughed, took his shirt off, and an under shirt. Bare-chested he looked even more impressive. Max did the same. Solomon took off an outer shirt, to expose a short sleeved pajama top, light blue silk, or some other shiny material.

Alive took off her shirt, Excuse me, men, I do not need to wear my under clothes. never again another bra! Turn around you, pointing at Saba, who looked on with a big smile on his black face.

After they had all shed what they could spare, Saba led them to what had been a town, or village perhaps. Not much was left standing.

Many hur'cane, Saba said. One year, mebbe two year ago. Hur'cane come from everywhere. Not east, but south and west even. Houses destroy, hur'cane take da roof. But inside still good. Some time.

Katherine wondered why his speech had changed, from the pure English that he had welcomed them with at the airport, to some local patois. The people here, they spoke English, she asked?

Ya, an' Papiamentu, dem from Curaçao, an' Dutch o'course. Dis Dutch terr'tory. But Saba its own, own flag, own gov'men. And den some people do French, and Spanish from da sout' mainlan'. Many touris'!

What did the people do, Solomon asked?

Touris. On'y dat. Wen touris come, mo' peoples. Wen no touris, dey leave, go Curaçao, Trinidad, or Jamaica.

Someone must have grown food, Guinée said. I saw some gardens on the way here. And they must have had horses.

Ya. Horses we haf. No so good for eat.

They were walking around the little town, avoiding streets that were blocked by rubbish, jammed cars, trucks. They could see a little harbor, but empty. Not even a rowboat in sight. And strangely, no piers.

Solomon pointed, Wes there ever a pier, for sailboats, over there?

Oh ya, but ocean she rise higher. Under water.

People must have had boats, Solomon went on. Where are they? How come there are no boats anchored here? Seems to be a nice little harbor, protected, clean.

All go away, Saba answered with a frown. Even row boat, dey t'ink dey reach Puerto Rico. Not'ing dere, all bomb'out. We see da cloud. Big black cloud ovah dere. Daht island dead. Da fishing boat dey go sout', find fish dey tell, but not come back. Mebbe mainlan' now.

And on the other side of the island, Guinée asked, more harbors? are there any boats?

Ya, two, t'ree harbor, no boat. No mo' boat on dis islan'. Mebbe later. after hur'cane season.

Is this hurricane season, Max asked?

Saba shrugged his shoulders vehemently. Don' know *what* season! But hurricane season da dogs go crazy, da birds too. No mo' dogs, no mo' birds.

Having outfitted themselves with new clothes, colorful, light weight cottons, and sandals, the group foraged in what must have been a restaurant, or a delicatessen. They found a storage room that looked untouched, full of jars of preserves and a wall of large quantity canned goods, the kind used by hotels.

Each one picked his or her favorite snack and the whole group found a way to a lovely beach. Obviously deserted, as the whole island seemed to be, but picture perfect.

As if we are the first to discover this place, Max said. Not bad, not bad.

Saba sat a little apart from the group, pressed against the rocks, smiling when they urged him to join them down on the beach. No, this my place, he said. He knew, of course, that the tide was rising. Now the group moved to join him.

Everyone eating the last tidbits of what had been an exceptionally sumptuous meal: Alive had eaten a whole jar of red caviar with reasonably fresh-tasting crackers, Guinée had found meat, Max had what he called blood sausage. Perhaps that is what it was, it looked bloody enough. Solomon and Katherine had found a whole cheese in a tin, and hard black bread, also tinned, and they had shared a bottle of wine with whoever wanted some. Saba had a fresh coconut which he had opened with the machete, he carried, drank the water and then carefully scraped the meat with a shard of the coconut shell.

Max broke the silence, licking his fingers, one by one, very thoroughly: This is a vacation. I can live here, it is warm enough, and there seems to be food. And goats according to the old man, moving his head in Saba's direction.

Don't you want to get to Africa, Solomon asked?

Yes. and also I needed to get away from the cold, and too many people.

(Katherine suspected he had wanted to say white people, she had heard the slight hesitation before "people").

Max went on, Here, we have a whole island. If we're careful we can live here. There are mountains. We can probably fish. Or we can make a boat, or a raft perhaps. But meanwhile, we live.

He looked around, almost dreamily. He stretched out flat on the beach, arms behind his head. Yes, I like it here.

Alive said, I want to go swimming. Is it safe to swim here, she asked Saba?

Oh yes, dis good place for swim. No curren', no shark fish. Dis beach for chilrun long time. Shallow, must go far to swim.

Come Guinée, last one in gets dunked!

As she started to take off her clothes, she stopped, We forgot bathing suits, she said.

Guinée had already taken off all his clothes (not that many any more) and was running into the water.

Alive shrugged, took off her clothes and ran after him.

Solomon, caustically, I know what they are going to say: Come on in, the water's fine.

Katherine, Well it probably is fine. Come on, guys, lets all go swimming.

Perhaps an hour later they all sat on the beach again.

This water is body temperature, Katherine said! This must be *the* most memorable time of my long, long life. A peaceful swim, with loving friends, on a tropical island. What else is there? Turning, she threw herself, still naked and wet, on Solomon's lap. I'm in love, she whispered.

Solomon embarrassed, What can I say?

For once, Solomon does not know what to say, Max said teasingly. But you're right, Katherine. This is the life. If only...

Solomon: ...we were in Africa, you want to say, no?

No, Guinée said, ...If only he had a woman!

Max did not say, but his smile smiled.

Alive, This ocean is salty! How do we get the salt off? I feel sticky. In the old days there would have been showers on a beach like this.

Saba pointed, Over dere, water no more. But, ne'r mine, rain, she come!

CHAPTER TWO

Solomon and Katherine found a house. Or, rather, a part of a house: two rooms still under a roof: a bedroom and what must have been part of the kitchen. The house was in the hills, above the little town. It had its own water tank, full. The faucets in the house did not work—the system needed an electric pump, probably—but someone had rigged a pipe with a stopper in the kitchen. They had found plenty of good food in a few stores.

Over a leisurely breakfast, when Katherine finally sat down, Solomon burst out, *Now we have to talk!*

Katherine knew, of course, that he had to talk. Solomon had to get to Africa. She had imagined her role to be the person who kept Solomon's feet on the ground, but after the few days they had known each other, she was beginning to see that Solomon had to be up in the air. (Was it only days? Yes, perhaps not even a month!).

Dear heart, I know you want to go to Africa. I am tired! I had some very difficult years up there in the woods. I took on responsibilities I was not really fitted for. Perhaps I have not quite gotten over the shock of our plane's "adventure" landing here! Now, for however long it lasts, we have a little house, food, water, a beautiful ocean to swim in. What more can there be? Tell me, how, or what can I say, or do, to make you feel less frustrated? I'm serious. Help me to understand you. I know you, in a way. I can feel what you feel. But I don't know how to get you out of this mood of urgency. After a little pause, she added, Because I think at least part of you wants to get out of this mood, or this frame of mind. You feel as if you are responsible, as if you have to take the lead, or something. You feel that we, Max and Guinée and Alive and I, are too frivolous, or not serious enough about getting to Africa. Maybe we are, dear. Maybe we, all of us—you included—have suffered so long and so much over the last few years that perhaps we have earned a day to frolic in the ocean, and gorge ourselves on stupid canned food.

Solomon nodded. Yes, all that is true, but... Suddenly he laughed, maybe after all those years "survival" has become too easy! I distrust it.

Katherine took his arm, You know, how I feel? When the plane took off, I was sick to my stomach. I felt like a mother leaving her brood that is not old enough to take care of itself. I felt terrible. I felt empty inside. As if I had killed myself, or—worse—those we left behind. It was bad. The hurricane shook it out of me. Or, woke me up, or something. I felt life coming back into an empty body. We were scared stiff—at least I was—when we were tossed around high above those huge, foaming black clouds. And then, when the plane went crazy, and the crash... But I survived. *Again!* Now I feel as if my life, from now on, is a gift. A bonus. I can start all over and make a new me, if I want. And I want. I also want to be with you, and get to know you. I am so in awe of your mind, and at the same time scared of what the mind has done to you as a person. Darling Solomon, maybe I feel a little bit like a mother. I have always had a great need to nurture, to protect. In my old life (my life in the old world!) I often took care of stray cats, and what I thought

of as “lost souls.” People who just could not make it in that crazy old world. Now, what I feel is different. I am totally and completely aware, I think, that this is a new planet, and we, humans, have to find new ways—and probably very ancient ways—to live.

Solomon looked pensive, he thought about what Katherine had poured out. His own feelings were not clear, he did not know yet how to express them. Then he said, first tentatively, then gaining strength, Of course I know all that. We’ve seen each other inside. I know who you are, and what you say is true of course. I just... it is so hard for me to throw away all the mathematics and science, and yes, gadgets, that were my life! I felt whole, and excited, and creative when I could write down a new formula to explain some esoteric detail of an even more esoteric theory. That was my reality. That is all I knew, do you realize that? I knew nothing about gardening, or shooting animals, or even cooking. I never even could make my bed, according to my ex. Hey, I wonder whether she survived. Probably not, she could not do without her television and...

Why then, must you go back to Africa? What is there that is not here?

The people there are expecting me. I told them I would come back with more people, and... I guess I need people to need me. Is that it?

But, surely they knew and understood how risky that whole flying stunt was? How did they feel about you, and that crazy trip on an airplane?

I never told them. See, the airport where Max had this plane, was two or three days walk away from the village we were just starting. We just said we were going away.

And it probably did not even occur to you, to tell them?

No, it didn’t. You know, in my old life, as you call it, if I had known you before all this craziness, I might have called you long distance, and said, I’m coming to see you, the twenty-sixth, and I would not have bothered with the details of how to get from where I was, in Germany, to wherever you were. Every now and then I would attend some conference. I would tell my wife, and my amanuensis, I would be gone for a week, goodbye.

Katherine laughed and embraced him. Eat your breakfast. I have to think about how we can use your genius. And in the meantime you must be content to just be the wise man. Eat!

Then, between bites, her fork stopped in mid air, Katherine said, Are there people in Africa you can talk with? Now, I mean.

Solomon thought. No, I don’t think so.

You mean you never...?

It never occurred to me. Maybe. I’ll try. Later!

They had planned to meet in the early afternoon, at the same beach.

Alive was there before Katherine.

At the last moment, Solomon had joined the men on their trip to the other side of the island, with Saba. To see the goats, “and a surprise,” Saba had said.

A surprise, on the other side? Katherine could not hide her curiosity. What kind of surprise can that be, she asked Alive..

No idea, I overheard Saba tell Guinée; “secret,” he said. Maybe explore the island, or find the paths that Saba knew. We’ll find out tonight, when they get back. So, now, here, it’s just the two of us. Two women.

One of them pregnant, whispered Katherine.

And you, Katherine? When I first met you, I thought you were “old,” but you look so young

now. Can you have children?

I don't know. I've been working on it. On my body, I mean. The equipment is still working! And Solomon is a powerful lover. Maybe I can have at least one child. Who'd ever have thought that Nurse Katherine would actually *want* a child? Do you know that I have actually forgotten how old I am! Or, rather, I don't know what this year is. I've lost count. But, it does not matter of course.

Should I worry, Alive said, about this baby?

Worry? Oh, because of... malformed, like the little coyote? Yes, that would worry me, but there is not much we can *do*, is there? Solomon said in Africa no babies had been born yet, or even conceived. But maybe he does not know. I am continually surprised how blind he can be to the people around him. He certainly has the gift, he has a powerful ability to project his inner voice. But he is not a good listener.

Alive smiled, You're really in love, aren't you? And you act as if this were the first time! You must be older than I; haven't you been in love before?

Oh yes, when I first... When I was young. Thinking back I cannot remember much; it seems so long ago, and it was so painful at the time. Unrequited love is a drag. It holds you down, holds you back. And nursing is not... It *was* not a job that suited me. I know myself well enough to know that I need to nurture: cats, dogs, people. As a nurse I found myself turning to stone, blocking feelings, blocking contact with other people. I didn't fit into the system. The damn system! Everything organized and every person a cog in the machine. "Hours!" Hours for work, visiting hours, staff meeting hours. And, above all, "patients." Being a patient was supposed to mean a will-less, thoughtless, emotionless chunk of meat. We could turn it around, put stuff up their noses, other orifices. The only thing that we were constantly warned against was "caring for" a patient. Life, sickness, death. We were kept so busy that we could not even think about that, let alone care for people. But now, I am free. That's one of the reasons I look young: I *feel* young. At least younger. An old maid like me, suddenly discovering she can still love... I'm scared, Alive! I cannot see a future for us, for Solomon and I.

I cannot see much future for me and Guinée either. But for now it is the right thing. Guinée is a good man, you know. He's had a rocky life, bouncing and being bounced. But he is honest. He is what he is, who he is. Come on, let's swim. A bit of exercise is what I need after my splurge yesterday! Imagine, a whole jar of caviar. I was crazy.

We were all crazy. But who is there to notice, or object?

Yeah, that thought haunts me. It's an empty world, isn't it? But maybe it is that, that makes us feel like family, don't you think?

Remember, we don't know how empty it is. There may be whole populations somewhere. But yes, it does make us cling together. You're right, hadn't thought about that. You know, we *need* each other!

It was dark when the men came back.

Katherine and Alive had spent a quiet day together. They had laughed when they did some "shopping" as they called it. They even had found money in what must have been an upscale boutique. They had left handfuls of different currencies here and there. When it was dark they had made a dinner for the two of them, with wine and candle light, after deciding that the men could forage for themselves! No more *Women's Role*.

When they had finished dinner they were in a reflective mood when they saw lights come down a steep path. Torches! Two, no three torches, wildly swinging up and down and sideways. Thick black smoke, visible even in the night; there was a moon.

The women had burned two candles, now they lit a few more, to signal their presence.

Katherine got up, I'd better see what kind of food is left for the men; they must be hungry.

Alive laughed, Katherine, you are incorrigible! I thought we had just decided to leave our women's roles?

I know, I know. It's just... I know where to find things. They would just make a mess in the kitchen.

Guinée was first, swinging two smoking torches, followed by Saba and then Solomon, each with one torch. Alive went outside to meet Guinée, who folded her into his arms, still holding wildly burning and smoking torches.

Stop that, she yelled, as Guinée kept swinging his torches. You are drunk! What have you guys been up to, and where is Max?

Saba showed Solomon how to douse the torch in a bucket of dirty water. They were obviously more sober, and certainly more tired than they let on.

Solomon went to Katherine, who was fussing in the kitchen, Hope you have something for us to eat. I am starved. No, I am tired. That's quite a trip, goat paths across rugged mountains. Just now Saba told me there is a paved road as well, but it is blocked at the pass by smashed cars and three buses.

He snickered, Apparently the people from the other side fled to this side, and the people on this side fled to the other. They met in the middle, and crashed into each other. Must have been a jolly sight!

Saba had taken off his shoes and was washing his feet. He called to Solomon, Better wash feet, Sol'mon!

The men washed, took off most of their clothes, got rid of the smoky torches—coconut oil doesn't burn very clean!—while the women cooked up what they had in the house. The table was not big enough, and there were not enough chairs in that house and nobody felt like going to another house to get furniture in the dark night. Fortunately, all of them were comfortable, sitting on the floor.

Max, the men said, had stayed on the other side.

Guinée said, with a twinkle in his eye, Saba here, had a whole village hidden on the other side! That was the surprise! He took us to meet his family, he said. Hah! Family! People of all ages. Max attracted a lot of attention right away.

Because he was so tall, Solomon said.

No, little man, Saba began, but Solomon stopped him, Don't call me little man. I may be short, but...

Sorry! I no forget. He, Max, stay behine' 'cause him so black! Da fam'ly, us like'em black!

It took a while to sort it out, but eventually the "village" on the other side of the island, was reduced to not quite a dozen people, who lived in shacks and one good house, up in the hills, with many goats, a coconut plantation, some gardens.

No plant'ation, Saba interjected, jus' wild trees. Not planted, he said in perfect British English.

And fruit trees everywhere. Mango, a wilderness of banana trees, and other tropical fruit trees

that none of the Africans had seen before.

And Max found two adoring girl friends, Guinée teased.

Children, Solomon said vehemently!

Saba: not chil'run! Da one Maria sev'teen, da otha five, sikteen. Dey womens.

Solomon went on, Well they looked young. But, Katherine, you know, there were two older women who were pregnant! They seemed proud of it, they wear only the scantiest clothes, and some of them wore almost nothing.

Guinée, Well, in this climate, why wear clothes? We went swimming in the nude yesterday, didn't we?

The men talked until they were too sleepy to stay awake. Even so, the two couples did not sleep much.

Saba slept outside, somewhere.

In the beginning, Saba, began his story, the Time of Confusion, we called it. First, the tourists left. The ferry never came back. A few ships came, one cruise ship and some smaller, private perhaps, but they left when the stores ran out of supplies in the quantities that they needed. At first there were radio stations from Puerto Rico, and strong ones from Venezuela, and Trinidad. People listened, until it was clear that nobody knew what was happening any more. All over the world, it seems, crazy people were looting, bombs in big cities everywhere, black clouds hanging over America. Oh yes, for a while we had television. Rogue stations, they were called. Great confusion. Then one day PR blew up. We don't know whether someone did it, or accident, or what. For days it went on. Black clouds, big noise. Then people started sicking. No, first the water came. Or the sicknesses? Anyway, the ocean, she change. Slow-slow, we did not see it coming, but then we notice: no more piers. Many people leave. Maybe they t'ink dis island under water—he laughed, throwing his head back—then no more food like we used to. I t'ink better hide myself. Dat time darker, sun he come up faded, you know. Dogs howl, I 'member. Den dey die. Alla dog die. And one day many fish jump on da stran': dead. I go down, but smell too stink. No eat. Many day I work hard-hard get cans in my cave dat I hide. Some mans com' but me 'scape. Nevah dey fin' da cave! Only womans come wi' me. Den de sickness come. Many sick, one behin' da otha' sickness come. Me sick long time. No eat, no see. Eye hurt, head hurt, ev't'ing hurt. Da ol' woman she take care me. You see ol' woman at fam'ly? Da's da one. She fine' med'cine in da rocks an' da sea. Good bakra woman, she know med'cine.

I would like to meet her, Katherine said.

Tomorrow, you me go fam'ly, Saba promised.

After a short pause, he went on, Dan, me see 'gain. Go outside. Oh, da mess! House tumble down, road broke, roofs blow 'way. Long time old woman an' me, we walk da island. Plenny food, here, dere. Plenny house for sleep. Me try make baby, woman, she too ole mebbe? We foun' da marias. One, den anotha. Da two what like Max, dey sista. Us, we make fam'ly. T'ree man, den four, we try make baby. Womens sick. One moon, two moon, da womans bloodin', no baby. Yes'day we see two womens, mebbe t'ree big wit' baby! Good-good. One say she sev'n moon 'ready. Good-good.

Katherine whispered to Solomon, I must go over there, talk to the women, find out what their experiences have been.

Saba watched her, then said, softly, Dem womens no speak engels, English.

The people here, they did not speak English, Solomon asked?
Well, ya, most people did, but not all. These womens not Saba. Dey come boat in da Da'k.
Solomon immediately asked, And where are those boats?
Saba smiled. Sunk. Big hur'cane come, boat sink.

Later Katherine asked, casually, Saba, why do you shift from perfect English to a dialect that I'm not always sure I understand? And the dialect changes. Obviously you speak perfect and fluent English, but then you shift to that other talk. I tried to figure out whether it had to do with what you were talking about, but cannot make a connection. Can you help me understand?

Saba, Most people on these islands, in this part of the world—maybe everywhere—we speak many tongues. When the languages are very different, it is not difficult to keep them apart. When I had to speak French, for instance, I did not have much trouble speaking only French. But if we had German tourists, I sometimes got confused and talked Dutch to them, which is some the same to German, but, the spoken is different. I don't read. But speak probably six, seven tongue. Not well, but well enough. With you people I get confused because some of you are black, and I think of you as belonging to the Caribbean, or even the mainland. But you, Katherine, you white, and you look American. I see a tourist and I speak tourist English. When I see your face, I speak English. When I look at the men, they look so much like people from Curaçao, or my own land; my tongue gets all twisted up. The tongue from home, the tongue from here, from Trinidad, all different, and all a bit of English, but not really.

And you, Guinée asked, you were not born here, I think?

You think right. I was born... long ago, my land. I miss it so much! Saba's voice trembled, almost tearful. My land, Saba continued, so big! Food ev'where, animal ev'where, trees, rivers. Beautiful people... He almost whispered. *So black*. Big, his voice rising. Powerful people!

Then, he said almost reverently, Anansi, she send da womens. She talk me.

And where is this Ah-nahn-see, Katherine asked?

In the dark trees. She da boss, maybe of all da granmans.

And these "granman" (Katherine pronounced it grahnd mahn) are chiefs?

Ya, dey chiefs. Anansi chief o' chiefs.

And where is this, Alive asked?

Sranan. My land name Sranan.

Solomon turned to Guinée, You know where that is?

Never heard of it. But then, most people had never heard of the many Guineas either. Saba, this Sranan, is it in Africa?

No, no, on mainland. Sout' Merika mainland. He counted on his hand, First Venezuela (the thumb), dan Guyana (pointing finger), dan Sranan (middle finger), dan French Cayenne— you know: Devil Island (ring finger)? And behin' all dose lands (tapping his palm) Bresil. But me mens deep da inland, da jungle. In da town, Java mens an' India and Jew mens an' maybe one, two white dey live town. And black Sranan, too, an' da color of the professor here (looking at Solomon).

How do you know to call me "professor?"

I know. I know many t'ing. Anansi tell me.

You knew we were coming, Guinée asked?

No, Anansi see in me eye.

Katherine, She sees what you see?

I t'ink. She *know*.

Do you talk to her, Katherine asked?

Sometimes I can, but mostly she talks to me. I hear her inside. Cannot explain very well. You people have different ideas. We, in the jungle, always know where other peoples are. We no see, but we know. Now dis island... me blinded.

Guinée, said, Wait. Too much information. You're going too fast. I'm not sure what you're talking about.

They were all talking at once, until Alive got up and said, Obviously time for tea.

But as she stood up, Saba said quietly to Solomon, She know you: *Famous professor*, she say.

Katherine and Alive were in a real bathroom, getting ready to sleep in a real bed.

What do you think, Alive, should I cut my hair?

It's getting long, eh? But you've got good hair. Why cut it?

I feel conspicuous, I'm the only white on this island, whose few remaining people like people dark, the darker the better. I thought maybe if I cut my hair real short, sort of chopped off, I might look at least not middle class white.

Alive walked around Katherine, looking from all sides. You know, when I look at you I don't see a middle class white woman. I see a sort of universal woman. And I'm sensitive about shades, you know. Lighter is better in some places, and darker is better in others. When can we forget that bullshit?

Yeah, but I'm thinking of tomorrow. I want to go visit those people on the other side of the island. I want to ask them about their babies. That's a sensitive thing to talk about. When I was a nurse, I wore my hair short. "Casual" I think it was called. Made me look tough. My working class patients, most of them various shades of dark, seemed to trust me more when my hair was short. I haven't thought about "hair" for a long time: maybe it's time to do something about it..

Alive put her hand in Katherine's straight brown hair. Holding hunks of hair between two fingers. Hm, yes, that might not be a bad idea at all. Do you think I should do something about how I look when we go over there tomorrow?

You coming too?

Of course. You think I want to stay here by myself. I know the men all want to go and ogle *girls*. Don't think I cannot read Guinée. He's already chosen one or two.

How about we both cut our hair short. I cut yours, you cut mine. i saw a mirror somewhere, we can look at ourselves as the other is cutting.

I feel like a teenager, Alive said, breaking out of the mold! I did that, you know? When I was sixteen. I had finished high school, was supposed to go to some expensive university. But I saw all those kids having a good time. At least I *thought* they were having a good time. Anyway, I decided I would be an expensive call girl..

You? The mathematics genius?

Alive shrugged, I learned quickly that you cannot be a call girl without a pimp. And to get rid of a pimp is as hard as getting rid of your skin color. I got sick of it in less than a month, and found I could not get out of that weird web that we weave, and let others weave around us. It took a year to start my life over somewhere else. Making myself over. Now, looking back, I know that

it was not a bad experience on the whole. I learned a lot about men. More than I ever wanted to know!

But the next morning Saba vetoed a visit to his family, as he called the little settlement on the other side. Dis day dey busy. Have to work, to get coconut, banana. Plant more you call “sweet” ‘tato. Mo’ wata’. Dey much busy. And Max he sleep! He busy all night, many womens.

Katherine tried to explain her interest in the aborted births some of the women had. As a nurse, maybe I can help. I’ve helped many women before. I was a good nurse.

Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Saba was quite firm.

Guinée asked, can the men go back today?

Saba looked at him, No, maybe tomorrow.

Solomon said, But we can help them work.

Saba could not be moved and they did not want to go without him.

That left them with an empty day. Katherine and Alive, with chopped hair, dressed for whatever they could find for a foot trip. Katherine had found a pair of khaki shorts and a floppy shirt, Alive had a long skirt that felt heavy like canvas. She wished she had chosen something else. They lingered over a breakfast of bananas and stale crackers. Alive had found a tin of instant coffee that did not taste much like coffee, but it was warm.

The skies were overcast. No wind, but no sunshine either.

Saba, who had not shared the breakfast, sat back, looking over the ocean. Mo’ hur’cane, mebbe.

What do we do in a hurricane, Solomon asked? Do we stay in the house, or go outside. Where would we seek cover?

Stay inside, Saba said. Mebbe small hur’came. Mebbe no.

Katherine asked Solomon, Have you checked in with Max?

He is sleeping the sleep of the innocent. He must have had a busy night.

Alive said, I feel guilty not “doing” something. Should we get more food if there is a storm coming? Do we have water?

Saba, laughing, Hur’cane come, plenny wata!

Alive got up, I want to walk around. Explore the neighborhood. There are other houses around here. I can’t sit still.

Saba nodded, Ya, hur’cane come. Womans walk aroun’, fo’ sure, now hur’cane come!

Nobody knew quite what to make of that.

Mid afternoon, suddenly, Katherine and Solomon looked at each other.

Do you...? Voices callingt...?

Both heard voices inside, voices in distress. *Help us!* And another voice, *It’s not far, I can see an island! We cannot... We must ...*

Solomon, thoughtfully, They are in the storm. In an open boat! Or a raft or something.

Katherine saw the face of the man who urged them on. A strong very black face, almost like Guinée, but more so.

They walked back to the house. Alive and Guinée nowhere in sight. Saba said they went swimming!

What! With a storm coming?

Saba shook his shoulders. *Crazy white people.*

But neither Alive nor Guinée are white!

Dey wite inside, Saba said with emphasis.

Solomon ignored the comment, Saba, we heard distress calls from people who are in the ocean, in the storm we think. They are in trouble.

Before he could say more, Saba stood up, stuck his arm out, hands down. Yes, I hear them.

They my people! My people!

He got up, held his arms up, *My people, my people, Anansi sen' brada sista.*

They are in the storm, Katherine said, reaching out. What can we do? Can we signal them? Can you see them? Are they near?

Solomon whispered, They can see an island.

Yes, Saba said soberly. I know where they are. Not far. Yes, the island they see is the south end of this island. They will be blown to the other side, where the wind will be less. The wind will guide them to the shore. My family there will meet them.

Solomon, You mean, they have boats on the other side? I never saw any.

They have. Now, I must go other side. You stay here!

Can we do something, Katherine asked?

But Saba had already left, running to the path.

Do you think we should... ?

Did you notice that Saba spoke without an accent? And he...

I worry about those two in the ocean when...

Sometimes I think...

Stop it, Solomon shouted! We must stay calm.

Are you listening?

Listen to what?

They are coming here.

Who? Alive and Guinée?

The people in the boat, or boats. To this side, not the other. The wind is getting stronger, can you feel it?

Hope Guinée and ...

If we run, we can get there in minutes, come...

Hand in hand Solomon and Katherine ran down to the beach — no mean feat since Katherine was at least a head taller than Solomon, but their run was perfectly synchronized to a sort of average speed that both of them could maintain for a while.

Alive was just getting out of the water, shaking out her newly cropped hair, when Katherine and Solomon came, almost but not quite out of breath. Guinée was swimming in from the breakers. The wind had increased sharply. Not a hurricane, perhaps, but certainly a storm. The sky out to the right was black, laced with almost continuous lightning with the blackness. Alive turned around, waved to Guinée, pointing to the black cloud coming closer. Guinée put more muscle into reaching the beach.

The beach was at one end of a shallow bay. The point at the wind side was not high and did not seem to deflect the wind much, if at all.

Guinée had to struggle against an undertow but the wind pushed him to where Alive and Katherine and Solomon huddled, waiting.

When he made it, Guinée was out of breath. Alive went to help him, holding him up as they staggered to higher ground.

Out of shape, Guinée rumbled, as he put shorts on.

Alive looked at him, You don't get enough sleep, nights!

They slumped together where grassy ridges began. The road only a few steps above them.

Katherine and Solomon joined them.

The storm was now upon them, the wind howling. They had no choice but to get up: flying sand was scraping their skin and eyes painfully. As they struggled up the low rise to get on the road, protecting their eyes with hands or a shawl, or by turning their head away, they heard a call.

Saba had turned back from his hasty run to the other side of the island when he realized that "his people" were coming to the bay on this side. He yelled almost incoherent fragments of sentences, they're here ... must help ... there ... Ayee, ayee! He ran right into Katherine who had held on to Solomon, helped by Guinée. They all fell in the sand, over and under each other. When they stood up and Saba had calmed down, they all looked to the end of the bay, where something was bobbing on the ocean, the wind pushing it into the bay. It seemed headed for the beach not all that far from where they were.

Solomon tried to understand what it was they saw. It looked like a square platform, floating on what looked like oil drums, with four masts on the corners, tightly rigged together and to the platform. Shreds of sail madly flapped in the wind. In the middle of the platform they could just make out a huddle of people, holding each other. More details appeared as the raft rapidly floated closer, tilting and rotating.

When the contraption hit the bottom, still some distance from the beach, it swerved madly before coming to rest, at an angle to the waves and the wind.

Saba murmured, *All come Saba, crash! All crash, all crash!* He looked pained, hurting. He was holding his stomach, then his head.

Alive put her arms around him. It's all right, your people are here. We'll help.

The huddle on the tilting platform had rapidly disentangled itself, people were sliding into the water—only a little more than knee-deep—and stumbled to the shore. Guinée and Katherine were already there, helping them to drier parts of the beach, taking the clothes off their backs to cover the shivering, soaked raft people.

Saba and Alive rushed to the scene. Saba crying, unable to control his tears, his emotions. He looked at the men and women who had come ashore, four of them, then looked back at the platform where one—no, two—men were struggling with an inert bundle. Very carefully they slid down, holding the bundle high on their raised hands. Guinée waded in to help. Saba rushed in, sobbing now, Sista? Dat me sista!

Eventually the rescued and the rescuers sorted themselves out. Hard to tell who was the most exhausted. Katherine and Alive had a brief exchange: would it be better to bring the people to the house, or perhaps first bring food and water down to the beach?

Nobody noticed that the storm had blown past. The sea was still churning, but calming. Solomon, who had stood apart with a dark frown on his face, now approached some of the rescued, and asked whether there was something important left on the platform, because now it looked to float farther from the shore.

Oh, tide is coming in! Two men detached themselves to go back to the platform, bringing back

a stout rope, walking far up the beach to a tree.. They motioned to Solomon, We can leave stuff on the raft, we'll get it later. Not important.

Saba started to walk away, keeping his hand on the bundle carried by two bulky men. Everyone followed in a ragged file. He took them to another house, a large house, nearer the beach. He turned to Katherine and Alive, This is a big house, with good water, but we need food. You know where to find it, no?

The women set off to "shop." Solomon went with them, *At least I can carry stuff. I'm useless when it comes to rescuing people, but I can carry food.* He was still frowning, grumbling, *This new world! Very hard for someone like me. I can't do anything. I can solve math puzzles, make intricate fantasies in my head. But none of that is of any use in this new world. What is needed is bulk and muscle, and I never...* He did not finish the thought.

Katherine felt his pain, but knew not to pity him. She said nothing. Let's hurry. Some of those people look starved. They must have run out of food days ago.

The "shopping" went easier than they had imagined. They found a small shop, on a cross street, almost an alley, that must have been a distributor of food in quantities. Windows were still boarded up, the door locked, but a storm had to have rattled one of the window boards loose. They had little trouble pulling it off, then breaking the window, and reaching around to open the door.

Fortunately not locked with a key, Solomon muttered.

They found some large bags in a back room, and filled up with as much as they could carry. Tins of meat, macaroni and cheese, butter, even bread in tins, bottled water, soda water, some juices. Out behind the back door was a hand cart which they "borrowed" to carry the loot.

Saba's sister, a large, very black woman, was lying on a sofa. She seemed unhurt, but Katherine, who examined her, thought she might have hit her head on something. She complained of a bad headache, and pain in her eyes. Katherine whispered to Solomon, Dear, would you mind going back to that little store and see whether you can find some first aid things, and eye drops, perhaps bandages, whatever you can find?

Saba sat on the floor, holding his sister's hand. He sat very quietly, paying no attention to the other "my people."

After a hasty meal had been composed, water and juice distributed, it did not take long for most of Saba's people to fall asleep, on pillows, mats, on the wood floor. The large house felt crowded.

One man suddenly sat bolt upright, calling Saba, who translated, He say, bad people on the sea. Stole their boat, they quick-quick make this plank (raft) they found. But he think mebbe de bad man follow?

Guinée suggested a lookout.

Saba shrugged his shoulders. Where lookout? Here side, other side of island? Only one, two places dey can land.

Solomon said, I can search. I'll be lookout.

And not sleep, Katherine asked?

We search together, you and I. Maybe we can go to last night's house?

Most of the people were now asleep. Katherine and Solomon quietly left and spent the night, alone, in yesterday's house.

CHAPTER THREE

Alive woke up with a start. Dream...? Something had startled her, she felt a sense of danger, no, a vague apprehension. She heard voices in the big room where all the people slept who had washed ashore on the beach yesterday. They were whispering very intently, in a language that sounded entirely foreign.

Carefully she unfolded herself from under Guinea's arm. She looked for something to put on, found only a towel. Wrapped it around her hips, leaving her breasts uncovered. Still half asleep she walked into the big room. All but two of the men were sitting cross-legged by the door, huddled close, gesturing.

Saba's sister was still asleep on the sofa. Saba had fallen asleep, still on the floor, with his head resting on the sofa. One other man was asleep. He looked like a boy, all curled up.

She noticed again how large these people were. Yesterday had been confusing: the storm, the unexpected arrival of that bizarre raft. All of the new people had been wrapped in old and soaked jackets, coats, blankets. They had looked large, she remembered, but she had assumed it was all padding. Their clothes had looked as all clothes looked these days, she thought wryly: worn and either too big or too small. But now they were all nude. Except one, a woman who had a rag on a string around her waist. She and the largest of the men—he was a giant, what shoulders!—were arguing. Or perhaps not: now they were smiling, laughing.

The woman spoke softly, Come, sit with us, inviting Alive.

Alive had barely sat down in the space they had made by shuffling aside, when the woman began. Yesterday we were in shock, so many things happened! We were surprised..., and thank you, she added reaching out for Alive's hand. Did we even thank you for saving our lives? We probably forgot to tell you that we may have been followed by some crazy people. First they stole our boat. And killed one of ours. We killed three of them, but... So we had to make that thing we... Well, anyway, they may have found fuel for that boat. It is very old, we found it in Nickerie, and it runs on palm oil. We talked this morning about having lookouts. Are there many of you?

Alive counted, No, we were five when we came. Here, on this island we met Saba. But there are a few other people on the other side of the island. I haven't met them, but the men have.

The woman nodded, then continued, Those people who are perhaps following us are crazy, I tell you. They have guns, and their leader has a big knife. That's what he kills with. We did not have anything, except our hands, and what we could find to fight them. He (she tilted her head to the biggest man) has a knife, but it's mostly, what do you say, "ceremonial?"

The big man said a few words.

He tells me, no need to tell the whole story. But he wants to warn the people here.

Alive looked for Saba. He had awakened and was getting on his feet. He, indicating him, knows the island. He would know where to post lookouts.

Saba stopped by the seated people, mumbled something about going out to piss, and was gone.

The spokeswoman of the new people spoke, He (indicating the big man) says we must post lookouts *now*.

She had a brief discussion with the big man,

Do you have a map of this island?

No, said Alive, but I saw some yesterday in the place where we got food. I can get one.

The big man said a few more words. The woman translated, He says we wait for—who you call Saba?—to come back. He lives here, doesn't he? Anansí, who he calls his mother's mother, sent us to get him. This here (motioning to the big man) is his brother perhaps, or cousin. A relative in any case. He's a granman, our chief. He also thinks of Anansí as mother's mother. The woman smiled, leaned over to whisper in Alive's ear, All the men call her "my mother's mother!" Because she is old. She is not that old, but it is a name of respect, more than anything.

Saba came back with the sun, popping up to illuminate the world in bright pink light. Da boat, on da beach now, he said. And he burst out in a belly laugh that woke up whoever was still asleep in the house. The circle made room for him, Saba talking, laughing, hugging the granman and the translator woman and the others.

Guinée came in, also naked. Then Katherine and Solomon (with minimal clothing hastily donned). Saba's sister was awake. She tried to sit up and fell back with a groan. Saba shot up. He and the woman who had translated for the granman walked to the sofa. Saba's sister waved them away: No, let me. I can sit up. Just dizzy, but now I'm all right. She spoke with a strong accent. The accent was harsh, but her voice a warm alto.

Katherine had a flash of her as a singer.

Alive whispered to Guinée: Get some clothes on!

Heck no, if guests can sit around without clothes, I can too. Here is not as hot as my country, but hot enough. And, he added, looking at Alive, you have also forgotten most of your dress, haven't you?

Alive looked down, realized that all she was wearing was a towel, casually knotted around her waist. She laughed, You're absolutely right. Katherine, Solomon, what say we forget clothes?

Solomon muttered something.

Katherine shivered, said, Good idea. I'll wait until the sun makes it hotter (and my skin darker, she thought to herself),

Alive, The people who came yesterday think maybe there are some "crazy people" following them. They think we should have some lookouts, to warn us if anyone comes.

Katherine turned to the big man, knowing that he must be their leader, We knew you were coming, before we could see you. We should also know when other people come.

The granman said a few words to the woman who translated, Yes, and we also shall have some lookouts.

The granman turned to Saba, conferred with him.

Saba said to Alive, Can you tell me how to go to that food place to get the map you saw there?

Let me get it, I won't be away more than five minutes.

The woman who wore a small wisp of an apron, approached Solomon and Katherine, who stood together. She began rather formally, We must thank you for helping us yesterday. I think without your help... We thank you for feeding us, and... She seemed to search for words. Then she went on, This (looking at the large man) is granman Yosef. And over there is his son, my son,

also Yosef. But we call him Pikin, which means small in my language. Everyone laughed, Pikin was not exactly small! The woman went on, pointing to another man, and that is Heefoo, and Daf (or Dahvit), and Dobu, and she is Malia, another child of Granman Yosef. And I am Tilly. Don't particularly like that name, but have lived with it so long, that I hardly hear it any more..

From the sofa came the singing voice, And I am Mirelly.

Saba added, She famous singer!

Katherine, Yes, I imagined you must be a singer with that wonderful voice! And I am Katherine, and this is Solomon, and Guinée, and the one who went to get the map is Alive.

The woman Tilly looked taken aback. Yes, we see that she's alive. But that is her name?

Yes, Guinée said, and my name is the name of my country. These Americans cannot say my name properly. I think you can.

Solomon said, indignantly, I am not American!

Katherine turned to him, You know, I've never given it a moment thought what you are. You are one of a kind.

The boy, Pikin, spoke up (also a singer's voice, Katherine thought!) Now we're all just Men. I mean people. Humans. No more countries, no more borders, no more passports and all that nonsense.

Solomon whispered, The young understand so much quicker!

And Katherine added, And excellent English!

Alive came back with an armful of maps, out of breath. Thought I might as well bring all the maps I could find.

Katherine and Alive went to make breakfast for the many people they had to feed now. Solomon joined them, grumbling. In the large room, all the new guests and Saba had spread the maps out on the floor, they were walking around, talking, asking questions. The mellow voice of the singer, Mirelly, joined in.

Walked in Max, a pretty girl on each arm.

Pandemonium!

Max backed away, Oh, I must have the wrong house. We looked in the other house, where...

Katherine, Solomon and Alive walked in from the kitchen, their arms loaded with dishes of food: the usual crackers and whatever else they had found to go with crackers.

Max, Alive cried out!

Guinée walked over, hugged Max, held him at arms length, and who are these visions from heaven? *J'aurais dû mourir, voilà le paradis*, I must have died, this is paradise!

Everyone got up, greeting the new arrivals. The girls clung to Max, would not even open their mouths. Saba, whispered in a stage whisper, The girls have not seen that many people together for years and years! They're shy.

Solomon had left, sat alone in the kitchen, bent over as if he had stomach cramps. Katherine found him, sat on the ground in front of him, not saying anything. She looked back and said softly, Come, let's escape this madhouse. I've found a charming café where we can have breakfast *al fresco*.

Sooner than seemed possible the people in the house sorted themselves out. Two men went out to points marked on a map, for the first 12 hour watch. Two others were cleaning up the house and

would clean up outside after. A woman went with Alive to get more food, with special instructions to look for fresh vegetables in gardens. The granman and two men went to the beach, to see what needed to be done—if anything—with the raft.

Tilly took Katherine aside, Your man, she said, he's not well?

Katherine smiled a bitter smile, Yes, perhaps that is the best way to say it. He feels... he feels "small" around big people, particularly when he thinks that only big brawny men are useful in times like this.

He looks smart, that man, Tilly said. Have you known him long?

No, but nevertheless we know each other well. I understand him, but I do not know what I should say, or do, or not do, or...? But yes, he is smart. More than smart, he is a genius. He was a famous scientist. Katherine looked at Tilly, saw an almost naked, very black, large woman, with kind and knowing eyes. He, Solomon, she continued, thinks that the future belongs to people like you. And I cannot help thinking that he's right.

But... , your man, he is not white!

No, he is part San. The other part probably something close, Hottentot. Who knows? He doesn't really know.

Then we should revere him. The San are the oldest people. My people. we trust ancestors more than people from today. You understand?

Yes, Katherine said with a smile, I understand. I agree. Modern people are not to be trusted. But, you know, Solomon may be San by blood, by his genes, but he fought and got a superior western education. That changes people!

Tilly looks thoughtful, Yes, but a racial memory is never lost. We know that from experience.

Katherine looked up at her—there were few women she had looked up to, she always thought of herself as a large woman—, Maybe, but you don't know what a western education does to a man.

I know what it does to a woman, Tilly said. I have a doctors degree in biology from a famous European university. I assure you that I know. But I never lost the pride in my own people. They always came first. I never lost my identity. My specialty, by the way, was evolution as it can be traced in DNA. Some very interesting stuff. If I had stayed... in Europe, I mean, ... I was tempted! Yes, if I had stayed I would have made a reputation as the woman who discovered the collective subconscious in our genes!

Katherine, not hiding her astonishment, You outrank me! I only got to be a nurse, although eventually I was a very good one. You should talk to Solomon! He has strong ideas about... But you should talk to him, I cannot do justice to what he told me.

Yes, I shall seek an opportunity to talk with him. By the way, the granman—who is not my husband, only the father of one of my children—does speak English, but he has me interpret for him. It gives him more time to think, he says. He does that very well. Thinking I mean. But he does not think himself into the kind of ugly knot your man has thought himself in.

They had walked away from the house as they talked. When Katherine looked around, she noticed that they had walked into a whole new part of the little town. Beautiful homes, placed in large expanses of lawn, now grown high. The road curved around a huge tree. Tilly picked up some mangos from the ground. Very ripe, and therefore very fragrant.

Do you like mango, she asked?

Yes, who doesn't. It's messy eating.

Hm, that's why I eat it, Tilly said through a mouthful of mango, juice and orange flesh dripping down between her breasts. The rain will wash it off, she said when she had finished the first mango. Strange, she said, it's not the season for mangos, too late. Maybe these islands are different.

She offered Katherine another. Here, this one is ripe and wonderful. I usually bite into the skin like this, and then you can peel the rest off with your fingers. She handed the mango that she had started.

Mouth full of mango, Katherine asked, You must be older than you look. I thought you were twenty, or maybe twenty-five, but with a degree...

Tilly laughed. I used to say I was twenty-nine, but very soon, at my next birthday, I shall be thirty-five. And you? You look like you're maybe late thirties or forty, but you *sound* older.

Let's sit down, Katherine said.

As she made to sit under the mango tree, Tilly stopped her, You never sit down under a mango tree. If the ants don't eat you, a snake will, or the monkeys will grab the mango right out of your mouth.

They gathered some more mangos, Katherine holding them in her shirt. You see what clothes are good for?

Touché! But you were going to tell me about yourself.

Where to begin? Have you ever been asked that? Yes, of course you have.

After a short hesitation, Katherine began in the near present, working back. The plane flight, her feelings for Solomon; feelings she did not understand herself. The people she had left, after nurturing them. Perhaps saving their lives. She mentioned the Ancient One briefly. It was her cabin that seemed to draw people. Almost casually she mentioned that she had been able to sense when people were approaching. Sometimes reading them, listening to them.

Tilly interrupted. I *knew* it! There was something about you. When I first met you I felt something. I can't say, but the same I feel with Yosef's mother's mother (she giggled when she said that). We call her Anansí, which is not a name, but almost an honorary title. Nobody knows how old she is. In her sixties, probably. Who knows. She says she was Brazilian, she did not like the place where she was, so she started to wander. Eventually she found us, liked us, she says. And then she... She looked into the minds of old people, and read—heard?—the ancient stories, and saved them. She says she is our memory.

Katherine smiled, Yes, Saba mentioned her with... fondness. No, more like adoration. Like she is a holy person. Then she added, Although I distrust "holy..."

Yeah, well, we, my people, know that she is special, because of all she remembers. She's really smart! And powerful! Her body is a wrinkled wreck, but you don't even notice that. The name, Anansí, is very ancient African,

Katherine looked pensive, I never had any children. Reasons? I did not like the people I found myself surrounded with. I should have done as she did! I should have looked for people. Can you think of her, do you have her face in your memory?

Oh yes, certainly, even better than that. I know how you can find her. Look into me, inside.

Katherine recoiled. I don't want to intrude...

It's all right. I'm used to Anansí coming into my head. It tickles. I know she is reading me, or hearing, or whatever it is she does. I learned long ago that she never snoops, and she's not interested in small stumbles. She says it's her way to learn from me, what I learned in the

Netherlands, in Germany, England, other places.

And that does not scare you, or freak you out, Katherine asked gently?

What's *freak-out*? No, it does not scare me. Why should it?

Katherine shook her head. I have a lot to learn in this new world.

When the sun stood high in the sky, a rain came in time to thoroughly wash the two women and Katherine's clothes!

In a remarkably short time, life on the island of Saba assumed a rhythm. There were expeditions to the other side; some of the people from the other side even visited on this side. Mirelly was walking around, singing scales, and in the evening sometimes she sang a few songs accompanied by other voices.

Alive and Katherine, often joined by Solomon, went swimming in the bay almost every morning, to be washed by the rain at noon.

Alive still ruled the kitchen of the big house, although now the many people used two other houses, where Tilly and others took turns finding and preparing food.

They had found a few gardens that, despite forests of weeds, yielded some valuable fresh vegetables. They had begun to harvest the abundance of wild fruit more systematically.

A crew, including Guinée—who now insisted that everyone learned to say Guenay—, was dismantling the raft, carefully saving the masts, the sails, planks, boards, and of course the barrels; hiding what could be used again in what must have been a sort of warehouse or storage building close to the beach. They had looked at the yacht harbor, but found it lacking in facilities. The piers, now mostly under water, were much too wet and slippery to be safe.

Max had moved to the other side, at least for now.

Granman Yosef and Tilly organized the work force and saw to it that the lookouts were assigned and properly victualed. They lived in one of the new houses, the one farthest away from the house where the plane people had settled down.

CHAPTER FOUR

One morning Solomon said he was going to explore; he did not feel like joining the women at the beach. He needed to be alone, he said. Katherine could not change his mind, but he allowed, that if he had not come back shortly before dark, they could go looking for him.

Where would we look for you, Alive asked lightly?

I think I can promise not to leave the island, Solomon said with heavy irony.

Solomon had not given much thought to where, in what direction, he would “explore;” he just needed to get away from the press of bodies. He needed to think, and experience had taught him that he thought best by himself. He found himself walking in the direction of the path across the island. He turned, took another road. He would stay on paved roads, he decided. There must be paved roads he had not walked. He did not even know what he was looking for, other than a boat, a plane, *a way to get off this blasted island*. He was angry. He must get some clarity in his own head about what it was exactly that he was angry about. What did he want?

He found himself in what must have been a nice neighborhood of cared for, uncluttered land with pleasant houses. Not big, but it was easy to imagine the spectacular gardens these must have been. He fantasized that local people had lived here, not tourists. There were no houses that looked like inns, or Bed & Breakfasts. There were clotheslines in some gardens. Cars in the driveway. A peaceful scene: he began to expect someone to come out on a porch, or children to come running into the street. He sat down on a bench, probably a bus stop. The houses seemed so appealing that he walked up driveways and peeked through windows. Nobody home, of course. But most of the rooms he saw looked untouched. He saw an easy chair with a foot stool, newspapers scattered on the floor, an open magazine on a little table.

What happened? Why did people rush off? Where did they rush to? He tried the door of that house. Locked. Walked around the back, where the kitchen door also was locked. But the sliding doors to a little patio were not quite closed. At first he could not move the door. The metal had corroded, he saw. With effort and judicious jiggling, the door squeaked open. He walked into what must have been a children’s room. Toys, dolls, all over. He found his way to the front room where magazines and newspapers cluttered the floor. Now everything was covered with a layer of dirt, or dust. And the newspaper, as well as the magazine, were in a language he could not place, then decided it must be Dutch. Not similar enough to the German he could read, but with some effort he could make some sense of it. The newspaper had screaming headlines on many more than the front page. Or, maybe these were the front pages from many newspapers? The magazine had few illustrations. A literary magazine? Or perhaps some esoteric specialty? He began to sneeze: the room was stuffy and dusty. He decided to take the magazine and go outside. He found his way back to the bench at the bus stop.

He sat down, worked to make some sense of words he almost understood.

A voice sounded in his concentration. I’m afraid, Professor, the bus is late today!

Solomon looked up. The granman stood in front of him, smiling. Solomon started to get up,

but Yosef motioned, don't trouble yourself. He sat down next to him.

You called me "professor," and you speak English!

One could not mistake such a famous face, the granman made a little bow. And yes, I speak English. I had my education in England and the Netherlands.

But your... wife? the woman, Tilly, she seems to be your interpreter.

We play that game, yes. She thinks very highly of your friend, Katherine. How fortuitous that I found you on my morning stroll.

Somehow, Solomon had the impression, that Yosef had been here, on this island, before. He asked, You are familiar with this island? You know this neighborhood? It seems so pleasant. I expected someone to come out and invite me in, any moment.

Yes, they left rather precipitously, didn't they? And, I see you are reading Dutch? You find it sufficiently close to German?

No, I have to analyze words one by one. I find some words that remind me of Scandinavian, particularly Danish words, many English words, and some that could be German. I had already deduced it must be Dutch. This island was a Dutch... what? Territory?

Something like that. Independent, but speaking Dutch. Not many lived on this island, a few thousand. I too have wondered why the panic that sent people out of their houses so suddenly, leaving things lying around.

Yet the doors were locked, Solomon pointed to the house where he had found the magazine.

Yosef, looking in the distance, said, These last few years have been shockingly different from anything anyone had ever experienced. We, my people and I, are lucky to live in the heart of Sranan, which is off the beaten track. In the deep jungle we were not shaken, only when we got to the coast and saw what had happened. In the towns—even the small cities and towns we have in Sranan—to be without electricity and water became a major catastrophe. People must have lost their minds, or at least their sense. Who had guns, emptied them shooting neighbors. Why? Heaven only knows. For food perhaps. One finds it hard to even imagine such scenes.

I too was in the hinterland, during most of the craziness, Solomon said, thinking back to his stay with his friends.

And where was this, if I may ask?

Nigeria. I was on a sort of sabbatical, rediscovering Africa, when the Chaos began. Staying with friends deep in the interior. Until we had to flee... Solomon shivered. I still don't like to think about that. I made it to a safer place just south of the equator, we think. On the coast. We, there were three of us left at that time, found some others, then more came. We established a sort of village. And a second, when other people came.

You've come a long way, professor!

You must have heard our story... the plane, our crazy idea to recruit survivors from a place I had... Solomon stopped abruptly. Too complicated to explain in a few words.

Neither of the men spoke. A silence enveloped the peaceful scene. No birds, Solomon noticed, wondering what wild life had survived? Mice, perhaps, although they had not seen any. Lizards? Insects? Yes, there were mosquitoes!

Yosef started slowly, carefully. Perhaps who you call Saba has told you of his mother's mother, in Sranan? A most unusual woman. She claims to be my mother's mother also, although nobody knows the facts of it. She is not of my people. She says, and I quote, "I inhabit a Brazilian body," for what that may mean. At a young age, I assume, she began a wandering through the

Amazon basin, and somehow crossed mountains and found us. She liked us, and stayed. She has become a mother to our tribes. She is not really our mother's mother, of course. But, that too is a title of respect. She prefers the name Anansi.

I know nothing about your country, Solomon admitted. You have tribes? Plural?

Yes, well, it depends on how one counts, or rather *who* one counts.

Saba talked about his country. He misses it, I think. And yes, he did mention his mother's mother. A remarkable woman, according to him. Very old, he said. Of course he is not exactly a youngster himself.

Yosef looked thoughtful. Then, as if making up his mind, he said, rather cautiously at first, The old woman is unusual. Are you familiar with the ancient African stories of Anansi? Solomon signaled, no. Yosef, continued, In any case she is much revered because she has made the whole history of our people her domain, and so, when she speaks (which is not too often!) she speaks with the voice of all of us, we know. These last twenty, perhaps more years, she has been instrumental in making our people strong, and proud, in a world that did not tolerate indigenous peoples. We deliberately kept ourselves apart, deep in the interior. We were hard to reach. And invisible from above: that was one of her commandments, invisible from the air, and whatever spy eye passed above the air.

The still morning that enclosed the two men, calmed their minds. Yosef continued, What I want to say is not easy to express in a western language. She has the unique talent to reach out to other minds. She speaks to some of us "inside," as I think of it. Not through my ears, but directly in wherever it is I experience. A most peculiar feeling, I must say. And she hears our response. And, for some reason, the thought came to me that you perhaps should get to know her.

Solomon grimaced, looked away, not sure how much, if anything, he should tell this wild man from the deep jungle of somewhere in South America. Then he thought of the very cultured voice this wild man spoke. He turned to Yosef, You said you were educated in England? What do you mean by that?

Yosef smiled, You mean am I an educated savage? Yes, I'm proud of being a savage but I also have a degree in ecological systems. I myself was surprised that I actually could use insights I got in a classroom, in my own jungle. That too, by the way, was her thought, that I study "ecology." Anansi is an exceedingly knowledgeable savage!

Solomon said, very quietly. I was a mathematician, theoretical physicist, and eventually got interested in anthropology. And... He did not continue. After a long silence, he said, Mr Granman, I feel useless now, in this new world. The things that occupied and excited me—all the things I know, but also the *only* things I know—are irrelevant now. My strength is my thinking, imagining even. When you and your men came on that contraption, and I saw how all those powerful men and women picked up, did what needed to be done, apparently having survived a severe storm and perhaps other extreme situations, then I truly realized that my big head is not what is needed. Your quiet leadership is needed, and I suspect that your size has something to do with that, too.

Yosef said, Professor, I am certain that you are quite wrong. We learn early, and throughout our lives, that power is in right action, not in muscles, nor even in the mind. Isn't it our mind that brought our species to this now strangely empty planet? Our mind also gave us much important knowledge that we need now more than ever if we are to survive.

Solomon could not sit still, he stood up, paced a few steps, paced back, Exactly. And it is

essential that those of us who survive will do it right. We cannot walk that same path.

You sound like Anansi! Even your words are the same. She has taught all of us that. She is without a doubt the most powerful and knowledgeable person of my people, not because she is big and black. Her skin color, I wouldn't know how to describe it. More like your skin than mine. She's tiny. He put his arm out, at the level of his waist, maybe a meter and a half above the ground. Among her favorite words are *our lives depend entirely on what the earth gives us, NOT on what we steal from her*. She knows you are here. She knows who you are, professor.

She told you to talk to me?

She asked for the honor to be introduced to you. She thinks of me as her ambassador.

The two men—so different in appearance, yet so alike in interests that went far beyond the immediate—talked for hours, interrupted only when Yosef brought out some crackers and cheese he had brought for lunch. They found a bottle of mineral water in one of the houses nearby.

It was late afternoon when Yosef said, We had better start back. The women will worry if we don't get back before dark.

Solomon muttered something about, *let them worry...* but walked ahead anyway. He realized he did not want to walk behind and have to look at that mountain of a man in front of him. He liked the man sitting down. Standing, he felt himself shrink into insignificance.

Yosef gave a few hints now and then. I think we should turn left here, or, I remember that path, it is a shortcut to the beach. When they were almost in sight of the big house that had become a sort of gathering place for meals, Yosef walked close behind Solomon, said, Excuse me, and lifted Solomon up under his arms and without further ado put the professor on his shoulders. Solomon waved his arms wildly, objected loudly, I am not a child!

No, you are most certainly not a child. This will show the others who you are. You are above me, do you understand?

Solomon was still thinking of that as they walked onto the path to the house, where most of the people on this side of the island seemed to be lounging, sitting in small groups here and there.

When Yosef walked up with Solomon on his shoulders, an abrupt silence fell

All the Sranan people got up, then bowed down deeply as Yosef strode slowly through them to the terrace, where Tilly, Katherine and Alive were setting tables. The three women looked in amazement at this show. Katherine began to smile, then realized that this was a serious occasion. They all stood up, faced Yosef, as he approached, then gently set Solomon in front of Katherine. Then he bowed to Katherine, and said, loud enough so that everyone there could hear him, Your friend, the professor, has told me that you are a *Healer*. He emphasized the word.

Katherine did not know what to say, so she said nothing, but gravely nodded and so accepted the title.

The low murmur of voices filled the silence again.

They served a huge dinner. Perhaps not what a nutritionist would recommend for people who had done hard physical work, but under the circumstances, the best there was.

Tilly mentioned that it was obvious that they had to find other sources of food than the little shops and one bigger supermarket that was almost empty anyway. We found a few gardens, and pointing at three large tureens with a variety of vegetables, but for this crowd it is not enough. .

Yosef nodded, spoke *Sranan tongo*, Tilly translating, Yosef says it is time to plan what we are going to do. Some of us perhaps want to stay here. Others may want to return to Sranan somehow. We have done what we came here to do, we have found who you call Saba. Now we can return.

We know that at home, in Sranan, finding food is no problem. Many of the men laughed at that, It flies in our mouths, one said. Another said, we reach up and there is a fruit in our hands. A third, smacking his lips, Ooh, I can taste a juicy pig!

Solomon had been silent since Yosef put him on his feet again. Katherine had done her best not to “hover,” as Solomon called it. But she was concerned. She knew he had not liked that ride very much, but he allowed it, so he must have gone along with whatever it meant. Most of the night he had been deep in thought. The next morning he looked haggard, and preoccupied. Katherine was ready to go to the beach, which had become a pleasant routine. She urged Solomon to join her. Peaceful, she said. But before they could slip out, a man approached them, not quite bowing.

My granman told me I could ask the healer woman for help. For a friend who is sick. We worry about him. If... could you come to see him? He cannot move, he is too sick.

Katherine turned to Solomon, go ahead, dear. I'll follow soon.

I'll go with you, Solomon said.

The young man brought them to a house they had not seen yet. A cottage that could as well have been in the south of France. The sick man lay on a day bed in what must have been the living area. Someone had put plants in pots, healthy looking, all around, giving the room a warm, welcoming feeling. The man tried to get up, but obviously was too weak to do more than grin. The Sick, he said. Me, the Sick.

Their guide went over, put his hands on the forehead of the sick man. He thinks he has the sickness you call Aids.

Katherine knelt next to the man, Why do you think that?

He opened his shirt to show marks on his chest.

How long have you had that, Katherine asked?

Two day, three day. Get sick fast.

Katherine looked at the man who had guided her here. Does he know about Aids? Have you seen it before?

Oh yes, we all see it before. Many die. But before. Not now. He my brother.

Katherine stood, looked at Solomon. Yes, it could well be HIV, although it came on too suddenly. But, of course, who knows what has happened to the virus? I have to think, what drugs did we use. Some of the symptoms could be treated I remember. We have to find a pharmacy. What would they call that here?

She had turned to the man who had brought them. We want to look for medicine. There must be pharmacies here. You know where you buy medicine?

Yes, here Apotheek—he spelled it out, letter for letter.

Katherine and Solomon walked to what they thought of as the center of this little town. Hoping to find an “apothecary”. She was trying to remember the names of the drugs, dosages, other care. Cover the sores? No, leave them to the open air. They spread, but nothing is predictable about Aids. Certainly not now. She turned to Solomon, Oh, how I wished I had studied more medicine!

You too?

What do you mean? You wished you had studied medicine as well as math and physics and anthropology?

No, but all that studying does not help me be useful today. You've had years of experience as a super nurse, and now, here, you feel unprepared. How do you think I feel?

Maybe what we both need to remember, Katherine said fiercely, is, *how could we possibly have prepared ourselves for this?*

True, but then, what can I DO? I feel I want to do, help, I'm not even sure how to explain to myself what I want. What I feel frustrated about.

Maybe our expectations are...?

Solomon touched her arm, and pointed, Is that what we're looking for?

Ah, yes, an "apothek." Of course the door was locked and the front window covered with plywood nailed down solidly. The little shop was part of a row of other little shops.. There was no side door, but there must be a back door. They followed the building, found a sort of alley that led to a lane behind the row of shops. The lane was blocked in several places with cars, carts, and a small truck. Solomon had counted the stores between the Apothek and the alley, he pointed at a door, That must be the back door.

There was a parking lot with two cars, both of them vandalized, windows broken, seats ripped. The door was locked, but looked as if it had been forcefully opened before, and forced close.

They found the crow bar that had been used by earlier burglars, right by the door. It took only a light tap, to open the wide door. The interior was dark, except for what light came in through the door. They found themselves in a storage room. There were freezers and refrigerators; a few stood open, their contents thrown about.

It's a little too dark to read labels. But, by systematically taking boxes on one shelf to the light, reading, they managed to check on the contents of three refrigerators (now musty) and cabinet that had been locked once.

All the while Katherine thought frantically, *Kaposi's sarcoma is not painful, I remember. But he has other signs of Aids, his listlessness, he could not even get up from the bed. But so quickly. Usually these signs came after months, years of being sick. Yes, and tomorrow we must also talk to Yosef about this. If the man really has Aids, we all...*

The next morning, Katherine went back to the Apothek. Nothing had been disturbed since their visit the evening before. Now she had a better sense of what there was, and where. Whoever had broken in had wanted narcotics, in the locked cabinet. The lock had been smashed. Obviously the thief had not been able to carry out all the narcotics, boxes and pills were scattered all around. She went back to the shelf with essential and thick books on pharmaceuticals available in different countries. She looked through the American version, by far the thickest. Found elaborate instructions about treating Aids, and a section on different diagnostic procedures, and a "warning" that because Aids basically was a viral disease all drugs could only treat some of the "opportunistic" manifestations of the disease (the HIV virus weakened or even destroyed the immune system, making the patient more likely to get other diseases; it was these other diseases that eventually killed). The more she read, the more certain she became that her patient had something that was perhaps related, but not the Aids that she knew.

She picked up a bag of a few of what had been the most effective chemicals. Fortunately they were packed with detailed instructions, side effects, etc. Lots of water seemed a universal advice. *Hope they have good water there*, she mused.

Reluctantly she trudged up to the little cottage. The patient and his brother were not only awake, but sitting at a table in the kitchen, eating some kind of porridge. As she walked in, the patient said gaily, Your visit yesterday cured me! See, I'm well again.

And those spots, Katherine asked? Have they gone?

No, but fading back into my black skin, he said proudly.

His brother was more subdued.

And you, Katherine asked, you are all right?

Maybe now I catch the Sick, he said slowly. I am very tired.

Katherine sat down with them, at the table. No, she declined sharing the gruel they ate. What is it, she asked? It is something we brought from home. It is the last of the cassava we brought with us. You may not like it, it's sort of tasteless, but we're used to it. Hard work to make it; they both nodded. Yesterday's patient added, And our healers say we must eat other things with it, but we don't have these other things, like papaya and banana and...

But, I know where there are plenty mangoes, Katherine said. I shall get some for you.

Tilly walked in. Ah, you're still here. Good. I see you have already done wonders with Seem.

No, I just arrived, and we were yesterday, but I didn't do anything. The patient looked much sicker yesterday could not sit up in his bed. He healed fast, but I can't take credit for it.,

Tilly sat down, Our people are strong. Then she looked at the brother, and said, Now you don't look so good. What is it?

I'm tired, he said. I so worry my brada — now I sick.

Tilly reached out and clasped his hand. No worry. Now we have a healer. She look out for us. Rest, both of you. I tell granman you need another day rest.

Katherine and Tilly left together, Katherine still carrying her bag of drugs.

You know, she said, I am quite stumped about that sickness. When Solomon and I came by I thought that the man had Aids, or, at least one of the effects of HIV. But it bothered me that it had come on so suddenly. Usually it begins quite differently. And then to find him this morning, sitting up, eating, is even more of a surprise. Now his brother is sick, the same fatigue. I don't know what to think. This morning I went to the apothecary and studied some books on all the drugs used for treating symptoms of Aids, and the more I read, the more I became convinced that what these men have, had, is *not* Aids as we knew it. Although, of course, viral diseases can mutate rapidly. You called him Seem, what is his brother's name?

Seem is not his name, just a nickname. His whole name is Simoro and then something long. And the other man is not his biological brother, only that they have grown up together and are friends. Thick friends, we say. They do everything together. They both married the same woman, Tilly laughed.

As they approached the big house, where most of the Sranan people were only now starting their day, two men walked away, each with a bundle of food and water, to relieve the night watchers.

The granman Yosef came down the path to meet them. He said something rapidly to Tilly, who left, speaking over her shoulder to Katherine, Must settle a dispute in the kitchen, she said laughing.

May I escort you to your house, Yosef asked Katherine?

I am honored. Then she added thoughtfully, Hope you forgive me for any impolite or wrong words or acts. Americans are not used to royalty, I feel uncertain about how to address you, or how to be with you.

Yosef put his arm around her waist, nudged close, and whispered in her ear, You got that wrong, I am not royalty. We are the proud descendants of slaves. Now, and for the past several hundred years, free and proud.

Katherine stopped, turned to face him, Slaves? You certainly don't act like slaves. Did you tell Solomon about this, he has a thing about slavery and all related issues. One of the reasons he is so down is that he had planned to go back to Africa, to "his" people, and raise them in some way so that they would never be slaves again. He thinks slavery, the whole idea of classes, of worker ants and bosses, all that he sees as a fault in humans. He is obsessed with doing something that will erase that from the species now that it seems we may have a chance to start over.

He, your Solomon, is thinking like a westerner. Let's join him then, and we'll talk. May I ask you a personal question? Are you and Solomon... eh, married? Coupled?

Katherine laughed lightly. Not married, but yes, coupled. I've only known him for a short time, it is I who is smitten with him, and I don't even quite know why.

Solomon sat outside, dressed only in a very brief brief, scribbling in a notebook he had found in the house.

How is the patient, he asked with real concern?

Strangely, the patient seems to be much better, but now his friend has similar symptoms, he is very tired.

Katherine sat across from Solomon, Yosef remained standing, I don't want to interrupt your calculations, but we need to talk about this illness that two of my people have. It could be—probably is—infectious.

Solomon closed his note book. There are chairs over there; please sit down.

Thank you. Katherine is the expert in medical matters on this island. He made a slight bow in her direction. She tells me that the symptoms look like an advanced stage of the disease caused by the HIV virus. We, in my country, have had experience with that, of course. I doubt that any country escaped that pandemic. Early, when our people became ill—and I'm talking now about my tribe, in the dark tropical rainforest—we, a small group of us, did research on treatments. As you know, western medical scientists could only think in terms of fighting with chemical weapons. That meant any treatment would be expensive. We thought, in the ignorance of "primitives" (he allowed himself a slight chuckle), that we should do our own kind of research as well. The woman we now refer to as Anansí has many talents, among them a remarkable ability to heal her body. She asked to be infected with the HIV. Then she cured herself. From the western literature we had learned much about how the virus is transmitted. That, after all, was the first defense. Abstinence, or "protection." That kind of protection does not work very well where we live. We had a society without money. It is true, the tribe as a unit (a "corporation," you would call it) had a goodly income from various arrangements with governments. But we had better things to do with that money. So, when the old woman cured herself, she offered herself as a sort of maker of vaccine;. Not as simple as I make it sound, of course. It took more than a year to find a combination of natural substances that, with what Anansí contributed, turned out to be an effective cure as well as protection.

Solomon had listened, literally with his mouth open. Katherine leaned forward, nodding.

Yosef continued, So, when Katherine said that she had recognized the symptoms of advanced HIV disease, I was not too worried about the patients. But I am worried about the people we found here. None of them—neither of you—are probably protected, as we are.

Katherine said, When I first saw the man with spots, I thought it very strange that he could show symptoms of an advanced stage of the disease, after surviving what must have been a

harrowing and physically demanding trip over the ocean. I could not help but think that perhaps the HIV virus had mutated into another form altogether. Now I must consider that at least this symptom was a sign that, you say because he had a vaccine, or something, he is resistant to the virus. That is quite remarkable. Ouch, that came from an old me. Forgive me. No, the new me knows that whatever theories, observations, diagnoses (that means giving something a name) Now we must start anew, with what we have.

Solomon turned to Katherine, Can you think of a way to immunize us, knowing that the people from Sranan are protected by that jungle vaccine?

Even if I were a biologist, or other kind of medical scientist, I don't have the facilities and the tools.

Yosef, Maybe I can help. The medicine we developed was scratched in the skin, much like the old small pox inoculation. And both Tilly and I are blood type O.

Katherine, amazed, impressed, whispered, You've thought about this, then? Yes, that may be a possibility, although simple blood type was not enough in the dead world. I can find iodine or some other skin bactericidal in the *Apotheek* we found. I'll see what I can find.

Solomon sat back in his chair. Everything I hear about your people makes me more curious. *Who are you?* There is a feeling about all of you that impresses. I'm not sure what it is. Your bearing is ... regal. Proud, certainly. And all your people have that. You seem very sure of yourself. I have known people that have that same assurance in their own worth, and a sort of detachment. You don't need to be "accepted" by us, westerners, strangers, who have (had!) a superior civilization. I thought it is because you are so large. And (with an embarrassed smile) so black. But of course I know other people, in Africa and yes, even in Papua, who are as black, and as big. But... Yes, he said slowly, I must say the Papua are as fiercely proud. They stand straight. Or did—until, in the last century, they were invaded, educated, fought with and over. They are not as free as they once were; it shows.

Yosef, My people are certainly not unique, but we are proud. Usually we tell this about our history, very briefly: we are the descendants of runaway slaves. In the 17th century, and perhaps before, what is now the country of Sranan, was a British colony. The colonists did not think much of the native people: Amerindians, Carib and Arowak. They were lazy, they said. Every colonizer everywhere has said that. So they brought slaves from Africa. Perhaps because of the wildness of the land, a majority (we like to think perhaps as much as 80%) escaped immediately after landing, before becoming used to being slaves. It may have helped that the trip from west Africa was shorter than to, North America. Since then we kept a 17th century African culture alive in South America. That is, of course, too much of a simplification. But one of the things we have carried from generation to generation is an intense need to minimize contact with western people, or even with westernized people. For at least a century we have had various treaties, so-called, with the rulers of Sranan, guaranteeing us some kind of sovereignty in our forests. Occasionally we have had to fight for that limited independence within a sovereign nation. Then, the last however many years, when the whole world went crazy, we have withdrawn as far inland as we could. Before, some of our people would go to the towns, but never for long, and they knew to be always alert. Yosef laughed deep in his chest, We have left our seed in the city, but I don't think many civilized people have given us theirs. One obvious disadvantage of that is that our gene pool is becoming limited, Anansi thinks. She encourages mixing now.

After a short pause, he continued. We have warred and exchanged seed with the Amerindians

who live around us, but, you see, we have been able to keep ourselves largely aloof from the whole western world. That, perhaps, is unique. Most other indigenous people have been overrun by westerners. It has amazed us that so many indigenous peoples all over the world, have evidently not been able to maintain their ancient cutlrures. Now, Anansí has said, it is time to come out of hiding. Yosef laughed out loud. That is why, he continued, I am hereby inviting you to join us when we go back to Sranan. I can assure you, you will be welcome. Not only welcome, but much appreciated, revered even. Both of you! We badly need a healer, someone who knows procedures. We need your skills, your knowledge. And Anansí probably wants your genes! We are the descendants of probably Ibo and other tribes from West Africa. In the last hundred years, we learned about the San. And for sentimental reasons perhaps we have come to revere them, as Ancients, as a people as proud as we. Ananasí says that we, ancient people, have not forgotten how to be *human*.

Before Solomon had a chance to say anything, Yosef added, the Anansí herself told me to bring you to Sranan. We must protect you, and bring you, even before we return who you call Saba.

CHAPTER FIVE

Katherine asked Solomon to help her find some medical supplies, she said she needed. Solomon, who had been silent and withdrawn most of the day, reluctantly joined her.

At first neither of them talked much. They went back to the Apotheek, then went looking for another, similar shop, Katherine leading the way. After a few hours Solomon lagged behind; Katherine suggested they get something to eat somewhere and then find a beach. Or perhaps there is a park in this place?

Almost as if they had created it, around the next bend of the road, was a two-person park, as Katherine called it. A big tree, five or six benches arranged around the tree. Some open mesh rubbish bins, half hidden in the vegetation that had shot up since the people left, and the little park was no longer maintained. From Tilly she had learned to look for snakes and vermin, by looking up in the tree, and for good measure, she hit the tree a big whack with a branch lying around.

It's safe, she said. But we forgot to get food! You stay here, I'll get something. that house over there looks promising.

The house turned out to be an apartment building of sorts, with a tiny store on the ground floor, with a sign, *All Day All Night*... What it was the shop promised all day and all night had faded too much to make out. Of course the place had been visited, probably many times, before. But Katherine had become expert in finding hidden treasure. Under the counter she found a package, neatly wrapped. There was no writing on it; perhaps someone had ordered something delicious and had forgotten, or not been able to pick it up.

She opened it to find tins of sausages, a jar of tomato jam that looked home-made, two tins of sardines, a large slab of dark chocolate, and a box of packages of tiny round crackers. The chocolate showed its age, the crackers looked and smelled all right, but they were almost certainly stale. A fine lunch, Katherine thought. She would worry about vitamins and other essentials another time.

They washed the meal down with mineral water, Katherine had found, (which, of course, had lost its fizz, and now tasted like vaguely salt water). The tomato jam sat between them, for dessert.

Katherine said, What do you think of Yosef, dear? He sounds so strong and sure of himself. I must admit I am curious about his people. Although, at the same time, I have never experienced being the only white person in an all black world, particularly where people have a strong aversion to my kind of people. I would face that in Africa, perhaps even more. I don't know.

I feel something like that, said Solomon. With a difference. I cannot get over the feeling, conviction really, that I cannot adapt to this new planet. My whole life, it seems, has been a struggle to be accepted by that western world that destroyed itself. Even as a child, in Africa, I remember being around white people. Africans would not have raised me so well, but there were no Africans who wanted me. I adapted, and even excelled, in several fields. From the time I became aware—I think of it as, “when I awoke”—I knew that I could only survive if I developed

my brain. My first memory goes back to when I was maybe three, or perhaps four years old. I was about to starve to death. It was as if suddenly I woke up and decided, *NO*, I am going to live. I found some food, probably rubbish, but it sustained me sufficiently until I managed to be noticed by some missionaries. From that time on, my whole life seems to have been dedicated to be smarter. I could not deny my skin color, or, my size. So I invented this fable that I might be San.

Katherine interrupted, Aren't you?

I have no idea! I don't even know who my mother was, let alone a father! What I call my waking up begins with me as a starving child! I saw those missionaries, learned a few words of Italian. They passed me on to German, American, and other missionaries, and I always educated myself. A wry expression brushed his face, Even then I knew that my intelligence did not mean much. But it was what I had to work with. I learned to talk like them, dress like them, even think like them. I learned to survive! Money? Making money in the western world meant having some to begin with. When I figured that out, I got some—don't ask me how. Don't you see, I have no other skills than my head! Until Papua—now twenty years ago—the whole western way of being became only too clear to me. That was my second awakening. That is why I stayed so long, a whole year... But the Papua never were "my" people. They were wonderful, fascinating people. Oh... I've gone on and on, and cannot even remember where it started.

Katherine said very softly, ... These last days I have had fleeting thoughts that I should have stayed up in the woods... I am like you, in that all I know is how to be "western." I not only talk like them, think like them, but I even *look* like them!

Solomon heard. He looked at her now. Yes, I forget that. Katherine, I don't know who "I" am any more, either. Am I that dying African orphan? Or am I the famous professor—no, that is ridiculous. Katherine, We are both lost. *Deraciné*, as the French say. Uprooted. We have no roots here, or in that jungle country. And probably not in Africa, or in those woods where I found you.

There must be other people who feel as lost as we do. Survivors, I mean.

Yosef and Tilly—oh, and Saba—seem to be "at home" on this deserted island, and probably in their jungle.

Now Solomon turned all his attention to Katherine. Have you noticed, when they talk about that old woman, and they don't seem to mind being bossed around by her. And yet, obviously, they are a very independent kind of people. She is a strange one, Anansi! It is we who don't fit, Katherine. You might fit up north, but I would not fit even there. That is probably the reason I have not tried to reach that old woman. She scares me, and I'm afraid to be rejected. Yosef told me a few times that she wants to meet me, talk to me. He seems to know that she can talk and listen inside, as we call it.

Neither of them said anything.

Katherine finally gathered some thoughts. You know, when I heard a brief history of Yosef's people, a tribe of Africans in Yosef's country, I understood that surviving must be better—safer? less stressful?—in an indigenous culture, certainly if that culture has been able to keep itself apart from western influence. They still live in "survival mode."

After a short pause, Solomon said, My people in Africa (I don't mean "my," I mean the people I knew) were a complete mess of different backgrounds, different tribes, different educations, even different physical type and skin color. Some were Arabs, I think, others lighter than I am. I don't remember any whites, but many who must have had a colonist or two among their ancestors. They were not a tribe, nothing bound them, except the need to survive.

And that is why you want to go back to them, Katherine asked softly? Because you feel that you can help them?

Solomon shrugged his shoulders, Yes, perhaps. It came so naturally, we were all individuals, or small groups, and we found each other on that beach. Perhaps because I was less confused and tired, I started some structure. Now that I think of that, I know that was wrong. Perhaps a good thing that I left! Surviving, I know only too well, is a personal thing.

No, I don't agree, said Katherine, sitting up straight. What happened to our group, in the woods, showed me that what we all yearned for was community, a family.

Yes, Solomon said. I agree. My own struggles, when I look back, were always to find a family that I could belong to. And I am using the word "family" not as a biological, or even social concept. We in Africa, too, were seeking a family.

Katherine looked up, Solomon made no attempt to hide the tears that ran down his face.

He whispered, Our world is gone...

What are our options, Solomon? We could stay on this island, it feels friendly. Or, we could find another island. Or go to Yosef's country. Or back to the woods...

A desert island. And live our lives for another ten, twenty years, without seeing anyone else? No thank you.

You are right. We need a community. There is a sort of community here, although all of us feel we are transients, visiting here until we can get off this island. Maybe on the other side, but I still have not been there. Tomorrow, Solomon, let's walk to the other side, just the two of us. I still want to know how those women are doing with their pregnancies. And, as an afterthought, From what we've heard, they're not all black and huge.

Solomon: There's another alternative. I am bone weary, tired of this life. It's been long enough.

Katherine did not answer. She gathered the remnants of their meal, saved what could be saved, and put the rest in the rubbish bin. The bottle is good, I think we should keep it, don't you?

When Solomon did not answer, Katherine went on, It's too bad that you cannot practice your physics without some very powerful and exotic machines, but surely you could study the anthropology of this odd group of people, under these extreme circumstances.

And publish it where?

Is that why you study and do research, to publish?

Yes, that is the way the western world was set up. I know no other world.

Katherine mused, I find it fascinating to observe how we relate to each other, most of us strangers until only a short time ago, and then being invaded by a very tightly cohesive group of people. That's another reason I want to go to the other side. Are they a community? Have they grown a culture?

Grown, Solomon said, tilting his head?

Yes, because a culture is not *made*. I don't know exactly how people develop ways of living with each other, but it must be a slow process that "happens." And sometimes, after a culture was formed, an individual emerged, sometimes well-meaning, other times power-hungry, with an "idea," a man-made idea of how this group of people *ought to be*. The story of religions, and all the different systems of ruling we had.

Yes I hear you. It is not the way I have thought about culture, but then, anthropologists rarely think about how cultures come to be. We say "custom and tradition" but rarely look into where

those got started. And hey! Katherine, you gave me a new interest. You know, he continued, I feel my roots were chopped off. I spent many, perhaps most, of my fifty-some years in a world that I got to know, and with all its faults, it was the only reality I knew. The western world. A very complex world, immensely varied, but with some powerful base ideas. Now I feel cut off. Floating rudderless on an immense ocean. Without a compass!

Katherine answered, And I'm sure all survivors feel that. You are not alone. And both of us were in some upper percentile of our society. Middle class, educated, privileged. We were free to live where we wanted, go where we wanted. Food was something you bought in a store. Neither of us had food-gathering skills. I went through that whole transformation. I was a babe in a reality I don't know even yet, and it keeps changing! Nobody yet knows in what shape the planet is today, what the world is like, what our climate is like, what plants and animals have survived, perhaps mutated, like those big rats that destroyed Rat's face. We seem to have lost dogs, and cats. Why? Are there new animals that can be domesticated? To tell the truth, we don't even know whether our own species will survive. Have any children been born yet? I know, both of us think about that. She laughed a deep belly laugh, We are not alone, Solomon! We have a whole colony of fellow travelers. Let's join them! I want to be with them, I have so much to learn. And they know so much more about finding food and the essentials of shelter. Clothing. Although they do not seem to have much idea about clothing. Wonder whether they wear any in their country?

The Papua with whom I lived did not used to wear clothes. But they adorned themselves. They had elaborate attention-drawing devices for their genitalia, how is that for clothing?

They began to walk back to the big house, or their "own" house, or wherever they found people.

Katherine remarked, We did too, you know. Women wore bustles, to pretend they had huge bottoms. And they tied their middles to have their breasts show more.

Solomon, And, at one time, men wore elaborate covers for their genitals over their pants. Saw that in a museum somewhere. In the Middle Ages, I think. A *cod piece* — odd name!

Until we became puritan. How did that happen?

That filtered down, didn't it? Sometimes things move down in society, sometimes up. Dialect and expressions tend to float up, from the lowest castes up. Puritanism moved down to "the masses." it seems.

Katherine, No, I don't think the masses, or the lowest classes were puritan. It was just that such a big chunk of society was middle class, always striving to be higher. The masses were not the majority any more. The poor still had many children, born in and out of wedlock. Oh, that damned language! What stupid, inhuman ideas we had, I always rebelled against the many prejudices our so-called civilization had.

Solomon, And now we come full circle. That is why I want so much to see that those who survive don't fall into the same trap.

Katherine, And from what they say, I see the people of that land where Yosef lives in the wild, strong in their own way, not tainted by television and all the rest. They were able to escape the trap somehow. How?

Yes, I wonder how Yosef—and Tilly—can remain so untainted, and yet they had a European education. How do they do it?

Well, aren't we saying the same thing? Let's stick with those people!

The both laughed.

Not long after the Sranan people had washed ashore one of the lookouts had “found” a goat, which was more or less secretly slaughtered, cooked and eaten. That may have been at least one of the reasons why they had moved to the big house, larger, but not that much larger than the house “the Africans” had chosen. Usually the Africans included the two American women, and not counting Max, who was assumed to have decided to live on the other side.

When, however, a goat appeared on the menu every other day, or so, word got out of course. Saba got nervous. Those goats belong to someone. Who? Of course he didn’t know. But, surely, someone must “own” those goats? Unless they are wild.

Yosef was asked to dispense justice. The Africans were included in the deliberations: by now they had shared the every second or third day goat. Yosef sat in a straight chair with arms, the community sat or lounged where they could. Tilly translated.

Yosef said little, he let the community talk. When there was a silence, he might pose a simple question, to get the conversation going again. How do people know that a certain goat “belongs” to someone? Are the goats marked in any way? Or, Are goats known to wander everywhere, or are they tied up, any sign of where a piece of rope could have been? Are goats territorial?

In the end, the consensus was that a few goats could not make much of a difference, because Saba said that in the old days the island had “lots of goats” wandering everywhere.

Yosef formalized the consensus, and added that he and a few others would go to the other side, where the people lived who reportedly owned, or at least raised goats.

Katherine saw her chance; asked to be included in the cross island expedition. They left the next day, with some excellent barbecued goat meat, and an abundance of fruit. And, of course, water — although the island perhaps had springs and small streams (very small) the westerners were hesitant to drink water that was not clean looking.

Even before they reached the village, “Saba’s family,” they had seen goats and goat herders: a young boy with a long stick, and an older boy with a bigger stick. As they came closer, it was obvious that the goats only seemed to be running loose, in fact they were tied with a long chain to pins stuck in the ground. That strongly suggested that the goats they had eaten were indeed wild.

Max was deliriously happy to see them, sticking to Guinée. He confessed that the two girls who had hung on his arms on his visit to their side of the island, were getting much too possessive for his taste. As he expressed himself, “a little goes a long way, double little is more little.” He wanted to return with them.

Guinée laughed, Of course, you can live where you want.

Max only said, And Africa; are we going back there?

The people on the other side of the island were shy, They were not used to six people descending on them. Did they expect to be entertained? Fed?

They had made little gardens, spread rather haphazardly around the hillside. Because of the soil, they explained. Most of it is rock, there are a limited number of places with enough soil to grow vegetables like corn. That seemed their only starch, they did not grow cassava, which was the staple in much of that part of the world. Too much work, they said, when Tilly asked.

The visitors drifted apart. Katherine sought out the pregnant women, who were hiding. She talked to the youngest, with the help of Saba, who translated. This woman, she say, no vomit, no

pain. Katherine could see that she looked radiantly healthy.

The older woman (Saba thought she was about thirty, or twenty-five?) did not want to come out of her little hut. Saba declared. She shy.

Katherine asked Saba to ask some questions through the closed door, but he refused. Not polite, no can do..

Katherine persisted, Can you at least find out what they plan to do when it is time for the baby to be born?

He looked at her strangely, Do? What woman do, they do. They know. How can I ask?

Katherine made a mental note that, although Saba spoke his most British English with her, now he alternated between the local speech and English.

Meanwhile Yosef had gotten together with some of the men. No, no one here had lost any goats. They did not have too many, they kept them for meat. And, Oh yes, there are lots of goats on this island. The goats they had now, had been wild when they caught them. Better catch them young, they added. They grow fast! Their main concern was that they needed more chain. The goats ate rope, until they had found some long chains. Might there be some more of those long metal chains on the other side, where the visitors lived?

Evidently, they had no desire to travel beyond the dry, rocky coast where they were relatively comfortable. They were not Saba's family, of course. Perhaps someone might be related to him. They had smiled, Saba had many children on this island! Who knows where they are, or even who they are? . This had been a fishing village "before."

Solomon had found someone who spoke excellent English, who in turn introduced him to two men who said they had boats. They went to see them. A sailboat, small, the kind a young boy might have owned. The other was one of the old fishing boats, a wide sloop, with a mast rigged precariously, but the sail had "melted" the owner said.

Melted?

Yes, maybe a little coal had fallen on a corner and it had burned quickly and fiercely, melting to ashes that blew away.

Ah, a nylon sail! Or, some other artificial fiber.

The two boats were hidden under some dense trees and bushes that grew on one side of the little cove, below the village.

They did not stay long. Saba said they would return another way. There were paved roads, although we may have to climb around stalled wrecks of cars and buses, he said. Sight see, he laughed!

Solomon walked with Yosef.

Max loped far ahead. Tilly, Katherine, Guinée and Alive followed Yosef and Solomon.

Solomon was thinking out loud. Yosef decided to let him ramble. His lecture said in three or four different ways, that there might be decisions the village, and perhaps all of them, had to make about how they wanted to control their communities.

Solomon noticed, of course, that Yosef was not responding. *Maybe busy with his own thoughts, he thought. No, perhaps he's not interested? But he is a leader, he should...* Don't you think, he said?

Yosef *had* to say something. By nature he was a silent and even secretive man. He said with dignity, but very clearly, My friend, we never had ambitions to convince others of our virtues. Our neighbors, several tribes of Indians, as you call them, have their own way of surviving in their

environment. Isn't that what is important? Before western thinkers and agitators came up with all kinds of ideas about how all societies "ought to" be, people all over the world lived in their own ways. They survived, or perhaps not. Some peoples survived for millennia. We live within the laws of nature. That's enough for us.

Solomon, took his time to reflect on that. You're right, he said. People all over the world lived their own way, but... for instance, slavery. Many peoples knew slavery, either internal or external. Don't you think...?

But before he could finish his sentence, Yosef interrupted, No, there is not much to "think" about slavery! Societies that mistreated slaves never survived. And, as we discovered recently, a world society that grossly abused, plundered, destroyed, changed their environment, cannot survive either.

Solomon quietly said, You have a long perspective. That is one thing, I will admit, that westerners had lost. They had a very short view. May I ask you a question. Katherine and I have been wondering about this. From what you and Tilly, and others have told us, we get the impression that your tribe, your people, have escaped being sucked in by the temptations of the west. How did you do that?

Yosef laughed. Excellent question, I've been waiting for someone to ask me. We too have thought about that, of course. We have a small population, compared to almost every other human group, ethnic, religious, or national. So, we know each other, or, at least we know *of* each other. We do not restrict anyone's movements. If someone, or a few people, wanted to go to town, they're free to do so. When they come back they may have acquired some "things" that were new and wonderful, but things cost money. Our society is not based on money. Of course, some of us have used money. We, as a group, had an income from leases and other arrangements with various governments, and private corporations. The Council of Granman dealt with that. What I think are the two most important aspects of our successful isolation was that we knew what that other world, your world, was like. And we are very aware of our roots, runaway slaves, Even though that was three hundred plus years ago, we remember. Our stories keep that alive. *Never slavery again!* Slavery in whatever form it is presented we reject. That includes working "for" a person or a government, or a business. We too have had some of the new sicknesses. We too, of course, have been affected, but not as much as the people in the towns. You don't miss electricity if you've never had it. Or telephones, or newspapers, television.

But you and Tilly lived in Europe! Surely you must have experienced the difference between living in a modern world (Yosef interrupted, "modern?") Don't you miss the intellectual stimulation, the art, the concerts, the stage, books, and all that? Solomon seemed to have run out of steam. Not much of that left, he added with a grin.

True. For many years. And both of us always knew that we would return to the forest. I hope we can convince you, Solomon, to at least visit us on your way to Africa. To us, Africa is almost a holy word.

Yes, but one more question. You had to adjust, didn't you?

When Tilly and I were in Europe—not at the same time—we made efforts to be part of your world. We read, of course, we went to conferences, we met many interesting and intelligent people. But it was always evident to us that their way of living was only possible on the backs of slaves, workers—and consumers, who are enslaved in a different manner. You know how we think about any form of slavery! I cannot say I miss anything at home. We tell stories that are every bit as

fascinating as books, because they are real, we know the people the story is about. We have our friendships, our duties, in short, our community! That is something westerners lost also.

CHAPTER SIX

On the way back, one of the lookouts came running up. A ship! We saw a ship, from the south. Maybe even two. Too far to tell what kind of ship it was, but the one I saw most clearly had smoke coming out!

Yosef asked whether the man had warned the others who were still on that side of the island.

Oh yes, most of them went to the southern part of the island, and in the hills, to get a closer look.

From where you saw them, were they coming here, to this island? Could you tell?

We're not sure. Probably too soon to tell. If they come on the other side of the island they might sight the village. On this side it looks pretty uninhabited from the sea, I would think.

The others had caught up, and had heard most of the discussion (Tilly translating, which she did without thinking).

In a moment of silence, Solomon said, How do your people deal with strangers, perhaps violent strangers!

Both Yosef and Tilly turned to look at Solomon.

Oh, first we'll hide. We're very good at that, Then, if we must, we'll fight. Yosef said with a broad smile!

When they reached the houses everyone worked to make it appear as if no people had lived in it for some time. Katherine knew some good hiding places further up the hill. Alive and Guinée found a car that had a drop of gasoline (petrol, benzine) in it. With much hilarity Guinée started it up, and drove it down the road that led to the houses, jumped out just before it crashed into a tree, strewing wreckage all over the road. Alive looked at Guinée admiringly, Yes, that looks very convincing! Hope it cools down before *the invaders* come!

A few hours later it appeared that the boat (there was only one) was indeed smoking, but it looked more like a fire than the smoke of an engine. It did not move much at all, and did not seem to come any closer.

Lookouts in several different points of the top of the island kept a sharp watch, but at the end of the day, they drifted back to the houses where food was being prepared, leaving only the usual two lookouts. Later that evening they would be relieved with two fresh watchers. The moon was almost full in an almost clear sky, so the view of the ocean was good.

At the evening meal Yosef took Solomon aside, Tomorrow, if there is no boat coming, we should make an expedition to the airport and check out what your plane looks like.

Solomon said, surprised, Why? The plane is wrecked, we left it because there was no way we could get it on the runway, to even look at the damage.

Yes, you told me. But now we have more manpower, we may be able to right the plane, and

take a close look.

You have plans for the plane, Solomon asked? His eyes lit up when they talked about the plane.

Perhaps, Yosef was cautious. One of my men found a considerable tank with what looks like airplane fuel. Untouched. If we could get the plane in the air to fly even to Trinidad, which is not far, we are that much closer to Sranan. Perhaps we could get someone from my country to come pick us all up from Trinidad. We were there on our way here, the island is a disaster, but the small airport, *not* the international airport, was untouched when we were there.

And from your mysterious country, *Sranan*, Solomon said, it is not far to Africa, right?

Yosef, pensively, My geography is rusty. Where in Africa? I know that we are not far from that point of South America that sticks out in the Atlantic, and that point is not far from the indent in Africa. I remember looking at maps and thinking those two continents obviously fit into each other.

He had come alive in the last few minutes. The village is right in that big indent in Africa, straight across from the bulge of South America. Maybe a few hours flying.

Yosef turned to him, and said, And have you talked with the Anansi?

Solomon's face shut up, No, he said curtly.

Katherine, who had come closer, added, Not because she hasn't tried to get through your wall! You are stubborn, Solomon.

The plane, of course, was as they had last seen it. Tipped over, one wheel off the concrete runway. The door stood open, also as they had left it.

Yosef walked around it a few times. Looked at the runway. Can we get a beam under that wheel and lift it?

Guinée and Max looked closer, tested the soil, which was solid rock under a thin layer of sand.

Maybe a steel beam, Guinée said. Where are we going to find a steel beam?

Any idea how much the plane weighs, asked Yosef?

All of a sudden, Max looked up, I think there is a book inside with all the specs. Can someone help me up, I'll look.

Guinée and Yosef easily lifted Max up. When he came back he smiled his broadest smile, showing them a thick book of finely printed text, with hundreds of pictures, schematics, tables.

The whole works, Max said. It even has a diagram of the fuselage, and what's under the skin. He carefully closed the door, after checking that there was an outside sunken handle to open the door again.

Guinée and Katherine walked back to the big house to get some more muscle to the airport. Katherine stayed, to help cooking for the large work crew.

Max and Solomon poured over the book. The total weight of the plane was less than they had imagined. Of course, after all, it had to fly! Guinée was impressed with the strong skeleton underneath the outer skin. Maybe it is not as bad, as we thought, he said?

When most of the Sranan men arrived, a team of searchers was sent out to look for something that could be used as a lever, a big wooden beam? or, preferable, some kind of long steel beam. Maybe look on construction sites? Or, Guinée called after them, a big car jack, or a jack for heavy trucks.

Meanwhile, Katherine, Tilly, Alive and the two friends who had so miraculously recovered from their mysterious illness, prepared a feast with a newly slaughtered goat, some greens they had found, a heap of mangoes, and a bunch of very ripe bananas.

Dinner was served late, when the work party came back. They had found two car jacks, another kind of jack that must have been used for raising a house perhaps. And there were other pieces they might use first thing tomorrow.

Everyone, except the lookouts, went to the airport early morning. Two men had found a beam that Guinée thought would be very useful, and some other stout iron poles, solid steel.

At the airport, Guinée and one of the Sranan men created a sort of ramp, and with the use of the two car jacks and lots of people power, the wheel of the plane smoothly lifted and was carefully planted on the runway.

Everybody cheered! Hard work, but worth it.

Only Solomon was quiet.

Yosef turned to him, Solomon, you all right?

Solomon did not respond.

Yosef moved closer, touched his shoulder, looked in his face, Ah, he said, he is talking with Anansi!

How can you tell, Alive asked?

Because I know the old woman, she does not give up. She has tried to talk to him and he has not wanted to hear her. She must have broken through.

Solomon smiled.

Katherine was concerned. Is he all right?

Oh yes, he will be fine, just leave him “meditate,” let’s say, for now.

Max, Guinée, and one of the Sranan men, who said he was a mechanic, went all over the plane, looking for visible tears in the skin, any evidence of a break anywhere. After looking all around, checking whether the wheels were aligned properly, the three helped each other up to open and then enter the door. Everything was untouched.

Max checked the instruments.

Even the batteries still work, he yelled out of the cockpit window he had slid back. He pushed the button that let down the steps. That worked. Max was tempted to try the engines, but thought it wiser to first push the plane and see how she would roll on the runway. Pushed with people power! It took great effort to overcome the first resistance, then the plane rolled smoothly, Max could even steer with the nose wheel. Soon they had it rolling. There were other tests he could do, but they needed fuel to turn on the engines.

Yosef and his men had found the depot with a large tank of what looked and smelled like airplane fuel. But how to move it to the plane? Saba, who had been mostly an observer, said he knew where there was a hose cart. It was strong, four wheels. But it was in the mountains, they would have to bring it down to the depot and then up to the airport.

Suddenly Yosef said, Saba, think back a few years, when planes came and went at this airport. There must have been some fuel around here, somewhere. Where could it have been? Usually they make those underground. Or, maybe you can remember when they built this runway? They must have done some digging. Where did they dig?

Oh yes, Saba remembered. The digging provided great excitement on the island. Before tourists had always come with the ferry, now they would be able to come by plane. *A better sort of tourists*, the newspaper had shouted! Oh yes, he remembered the big machines. They had to blast rock out of the side of the mountain! Ah yes, that was a *big* project. For a while he had lived in the little house above the airport. Or, not “lived in” exactly, but he had been the butler to the boss man and his wife of one of the companies that were hired to build the airport.

Suddenly he yelled, I remember! There is airplane fuel in a tank above the airport, up there, he waved up the side of the mountain. And there was a pipe line or something going down. Because, I remember that the boss wife said she wanted to see it, and the boss told her too dangerous for woman. They had a big fight. Of course she win, and the next day they climb up there. They come back she was still bossing the boss, You think that is steep? That is a morning walk, man! Nothing to it. Only one question, How are these people going to get the fuel to that tank? The boss he smile, like he know big secret, they are cutting a road up there, from the other side, where the harbor is!

So the fuel would run by gravity. Clever idea, when you build in the side of a mountain.

And safe, too, Saba said. Boss, he proud of the safe of that tank. Enough far from planes, but easy to bring the fuel down.

So, where does it come out down here, Yosef asked?

Saba was deep in thought, eyes closed in concentration. Suddenly, his eyes wide open, he walked determinedly to the side of the airport building. In there, he said.

He pointed to a door. Locked. But it did not take much man power to open the door. Inside was a four-wheel hose cart, the hose rolled up flat, but attached to a heavy copper wheel, set into the cemented rock face.

They carefully rolled the cart closer to the plane, which had been rolled almost in front of the building. Someone carefully opened the big valve, and what certainly smelled like airplane fuel was flowing into the reserve tank underneath the cabin. The main fuel tanks were in the wings. Max said he wanted to be sure this stuff was good, before he filled the main tanks.

Solomon snapped out of his inner space, looking at Katherine who had sat down next to him, on a bench inside the station building.

You talked with her, Katherine said softly?

Mostly she talked to me. She is a determined woman. Powerful.

He did not say more. Katherine wanted to know what they had communicated to each other, what did Solomon think? But she knew she had to leave him to work it out himself first. Every day she realized again that she had chosen a “difficult” mate so late in both their lives. But worth it, she told herself.

After a long time, Solomon said, I’m hungry. No, thirsty. Do you think there is anything to drink here?

Alive and some of the others went back to find food and drink. When they came back with baskets filled with bottles of various fluids, they all ate as if they had not had a meal for a week. Everyone needed a rest.

Come, Katherine, lets take a little walk, Solomon offered his arm. I need to move. They, pointing at all the men around the plane, can do what they need to do without me! You want to know what the woman said to me, he asked?

If you want to talk about it... You'll tell me when you're ready.

I'm ready now. She talked me into at least visiting her before going on to Africa. She shared with me some things about the people she has chosen to "guide" — is that a word? She said the people we have met here have a healthy society. She understands my desire to help survivors of the Chaos. She convinced me that I am too impatient. No, I'm putting words to what were not really words. In any case, it seems a good idea to go there first.

Katherine smiled, You know, I was beginning to make an adjustment to staying here, on the island. Not a bad place to be. Did she say anything about how we are supposed to get to Sranan?

The plane, of course. She thinks that we can find enough fuel to fly to Trinidad, or even some places in Venezuela. Her people know. Once we are on the mainland, they can walk. They'll come and get us, he told Katherine.

But, we are too many for the plane now. How many can go in the plane, six, seven, not counting Max?

Solomon said airily, We can make several trips, ferry people to the mainland of South America, wherever we can land, and fuel up again. Depends how much fuel there is here. Trinidad is very close. We think Sranan is only an hour from there, maybe an hour from here. Not far at all by plane.

I am tired of adventure, Solomon! No, I feel out of place as the only white woman, the only white person, in this world. I'm ashamed of myself saying that, but I don't know how else... These people certainly look healthy, and I like them a lot. But I feel so *white* among all of you! Wistfully she added, I should have stayed up north.

Once we find fuel—and if the plane can be made to fly!—we can fly you back there, if you want. You want that? He sounded doubtful. Katherine did not make demands, but he felt she trusted him, seemed to like him. He knew well enough that she had joined him in part because she liked him, but also because she wanted to leave the group in the woods. They were comfortable together, and the sex was surprisingly wonderful! His mind worked best with abstract concepts, not people's feelings, uncertainties, hopes and fears. Good to know his body still worked well!

Solomon turned his most serious face to her, Katherine, let's explore this strange new world together. We seem harmonious, despite our comical appearance as a couple: a little dark man and a large white woman...

Katherine smiled gently, but did not answer.

It took the group several more days to fill the fuel tanks of the plane, test the plane on the ground, with engines on, without engines. The wheel seemed all right, the fuselage felt fine. The wings did not creak. They could not find visible faults.

All we need, Max said, is to test fly. Everybody off the runway, I am going to taxi to the other end, take off, circle around, test the plane, and come back down.

Nobody said a word. Yosef slowly nodded. Yes, that was the obvious thing to do.

Max was ecstatic! The plane performed perfectly. He felt sure now that they could begin to ferry people to Trinidad, or to Venezuela, to Sranan. And then, Africa. For a moment he was aware that the word, Africa, was not a decision, but simply a thought he had had before. But now he was flying, he felt free as he had felt as a boy, running all day through the veld. Not thinking, just being in his body. Things would sort themselves out.

That evening over yet another feast created around a roasted goat, they talked about who should go in the first flight, who could wait. They agreed that someone should go to the other side, to talk to Saba's family. At least give them a choice. If nobody from the village wanted to leave that was their choice, of course.

Max had not found any useful aerial maps of this part of the world, but they had plenty of tourist maps, and from what Max had seen on his test flight, the islands formed a path straight to the mainland, and from there, the Sranan people said, you could just follow the coast for less than an hour, and they would be home. Several of them had knowledge of the almost hidden runways in the interior. But, they all agreed, once on the continent, they could walk.

Next day, late afternoon, people began to get restless, little groups went back to the Big House, as it was now called, Max would not leave the plane. He insisted he would be fine, if someone could bring him something to snack on. And water, of course. Guinée and Alive promised to bring him back a meal, and, if he did not mind, they would stay here as well.

On the way back, Solomon suddenly turned to Katherine: You remember what we talked about? Have you thought about going back to the woods?

Yes, dear. I've thought about it. I do not want to leave you, and, anyway, they're no longer there.

You talked with someone?

Yes, I talked with Brown! Very briefly, and it was very vague. But from what I understood, they all left to go north. I had the impression they were going to join other people.

So, we go to this Sranan first, and meet with the old woman, and...

And then, Katherine finished the sentence, we shall see.

Suddenly there was no question that they would all leave the island. Even Saba would leave, to return to his mysterious mother's mother. The talk, that evening, was who would go on the first plane, and who would wait for the second trip. A few people claimed priorities, most of them did not care one way or another. They joked about the rigors of their trip down, and now to get a plane ride back was like a miracle.

Yosef took no part in the discussions, except very occasionally when he mumbled something when asked a direct question. And so it sorted itself out, without much disagreement.

Tillie would go on the first flight, with Solomon, Katherine, Saba and three of the Sranan people, including the mechanic.

Yosef would go on the second flight with the rest.

Tillie whispered in Katherine's ear, I think he is sweet on the singer!

Saba pleaded for the village on the other side. He traded places with one of the women from Sranan (not the singer!), so that he could go to the other side. And, if needed, Max could make three trips. Yosef said he would go to the other side with Saba. Maybe some others could join as well.

The unmistakable sound of Mirelly, the singer, came from another room in the house, Can I come? I'm not used to walking very much, but I better get my breath working again. That ocean voyage was not what the posters used to promise!

Everyone smiled, or giggled, Yosef called back, Have no fear, we'll carry you!

Realistically, the plane could easily fly from here to Sranan and back on less than half of what the plane could carry in fuel. And there was more fuel in the tank above the airport. They might even find fuel in one of the air strips in Sranan, or Venezuela. Suddenly, there were so many possibilities!

When everything was arranged, and Tillie had translated the important points of the discussion, Solomon asked, But shouldn't Yosef go on the first flight?

Yosef began to answer in Sranan tongo, then in English: My friend, we felt Tillie would be a better escort for you, she is a much better interpreter than I am. And she knows Anansi as well as I do. As *any* of us do!

Should we bring food, Katherine asked? Then she made a gesture of disgust, *trust me to feel responsible for feeding these people who can take much better care of themselves than I could*. To give it a more acceptable twist, Katherine confessed that she had found a small tin of coffee. She could make coffee in the morning for who wanted it.

Tillie was the only one who took her up on that offer. My people, she said, are not used to coffee, although perhaps it grows where we live. Some of us like cocoa, which does grow in Sranan.

The next morning was clear and bright, with a slight breeze. The weather looked perfect. The whole group went to the airport, where Max, Guinée and Alive were busy getting the plane ready. Nobody had much in the way of baggage, farewells were said, tears were shed.

The door of the plane was closed, Max revved the engines, ready for taxiing to the end of the runway.

He leaned out of the cockpit and yelled: Until tomorrow, or the day after. I'll be back!
And under his breath, *Strange, to fly without good maps!*